

Zara  
Stoneley

*The*  
**HOLIDAY  
SWAP**



Zara Stoneley

**The Holiday Swap: The perfect  
feel good romance for fans of the  
Christmas movie The Holiday**

«HarperCollins»

## **Stoneley Z.**

The Holiday Swap: The perfect feel good romance for fans of the Christmas movie The Holiday / Z. Stoneley — «HarperCollins»,

‘Fun, flirty and fabulously festive’ Cathy Bramley  
Two women, two very different lives – one perfect solution to escape festive heartbreak! Tucked away in the idyllic English countryside, Daisy Fischer’s cosy little cottage has always been her safe haven. But when her completely dependable boyfriend issues her an ultimatum, Daisy realises there’s a whole world out there she’s missing out on. Florence Cortes’s life couldn’t be better – gorgeous apartment right on the beach, fabulous job and dreamy boyfriend, or so she thought. Suddenly, Flo’s life isn’t so perfect after all. When the girls house swap for the holidays, it’s not long before Daisy is being distracted by sun, sea and sexy Javier while Flo finds herself snowbound for Christmas with only handsome neighbour Hugo and a house full of animals to keep her company. Love actually does seem to be all around this Christmas, but in the places Flo and Daisy least expect to find it... What readers are saying about The Holiday Swap... ‘The perfect antidote to the winter blues... a sweet, funny and compelling tale that makes you wonder exactly what your life would be like if you just had the nerve to try and change it’ – Debbie Johnson, bestselling author of Christmas at the Comfort Food Cafe ‘Humor, heartbreak and plenty of ho, ho, ho! I loved The Holiday Swap!’ Mandy Baggot ‘Warm, happy, perfect to curl up with and guaranteed to make you smile!’ Kitty Loves Books ‘Heartwarming... will make Christmas feel extra magical’ The Reading Shed ‘One of those books that you should read curled up on the sofa with a mug of hot chocolate’ Michelle Ryles, Top 1000 Amazon reviewer ‘The perfect holiday read’ Jane Hunt Writer Book Reviews

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# The Holiday Swap

## ZARA STONELEY



A division of HarperCollinsPublishers

[www.harpercollins.co.uk](http://www.harpercollins.co.uk)

HarperImpulse an imprint of

HarperCollinsPublishers

1 London Bridge Street

London SE1 9GF

[www.harpercollins.co.uk](http://www.harpercollins.co.uk)

First published in Great Britain by HarperImpulse 2016

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Cover layout design by HarperCollinsPublishers

Cover design by Alex Alden

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A catalogue record for this book

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Ebook Edition © September 2016 ISBN: 9780008201722

Version 2016-08-17

## PRAISE FOR ZARA STONELEY'S BOOKS

*'A great treat for readers who love their books jam-packed with sexy men and horses'*

Bestselling author Fiona Walker

*'Fans of Fiona Walker will love this book'*

That Thing She Reads

*'A delightful romp stuffed with fun, frolics and romance'*

BestChickLit.com

*'Stable Mates is up there with Riders and Rivals'*

Comet Babes Books

*'Move over Mr Grey, the Tippermere boys are in town! Highly recommended'*

Brook Cottage Books

*'A seductive fascinating novel. Mucking out the horses just got sexy'*

Chicks That Read

This book is for you – whether your dreams are small, or mighty visions, believe in them.

*'The moment you doubt whether you can fly, you cease for ever to be able to do it.'*

— J.M. Barrie, Peter Pan

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## **PART 1**

## Chapter 1 – Daisy. Cheshire

Daisy Fischer wound the baling twine round her finger twice, effectively attaching herself to the gate, before she realised what she was doing, and stopped.

She had to be losing her mind.

Jimmy, her long-term, on-off boyfriend, could not have asked her what she thought he just had. Could he?

She sneaked a sideways glance at him under her fringe, hoping he wouldn't spot her peeking.

Jimmy was swinging the spade he was holding effortlessly from side to side, showing off his best rugged-man-in-the-country look. Over the years she'd known him he had relaxed into his role a bit; there was the first hint of middle-aged spread spilling over the waistband of his jeans (quite noticeable from this angle), but the forearm on display was still muscular. He was grinning, showing off the dimple she loved.

And he was staring at her bum. Which simplified matters. He didn't look like he'd just asked her marry him. He looked, well, like Jimmy always looked.

Daisy straightened up, pushing her dark hair behind her ears. She really had to say something, because it was getting to the point of rude if she didn't. And her back was starting to ache.

He winked. The cheeky wink that had every girl in Tippermere fluttering her eyelashes, even though Jimmy really was more than a little bit too old for most of them. Her mum thought he was too old (and too much of a flirt) for her, but what was eight years between friends?

So what the hell did she say now? If she spoke before thinking this through, one or both of them was going to look pretty silly, and more than a little bit embarrassed. Experience told her it was more likely to be her.

He just could *not* have said it.

'Sorry, what was that? I was just trying to...' The scorch of heat on her cheeks had to give her away, but he didn't let on. But how the hell had he shifted from asking if she fancied a pint to *the question*?

'I think you need to lighten up a bit, Dais.'

Maybe he hadn't meant it. Or hadn't said it. It had been a bit of an embarrassed mumble anyway.

'I only said I needed to sort this out before I could go to the pub.' Which she had, immediately after he'd said '*fancy a pint?*', and before he'd said the other bit.

She fished in her pocket for a second piece of baling twine, just to be on the safe side. Safe side as in securing the gate, but also as in buying some more time.

'But there's always something with you, isn't there? People our age should be out getting pissed, not spending the night tying up gates then watching a sloppy film.'

'I like sloppy films,' this was better, much safer ground. And she liked tying up gates and messing with horses. She gave the gate a gentle tug. It opened a few inches. Bugger. 'You know I've got to fix this. If Barney goes wandering into Hugo's food store again he'll throw a real wobbler. You know what he was like last time.' The last time that Barney, her very naughty (his previous owner had referred to it as 'character') Welsh Cob had escaped from his field he'd managed to break the feed-room door open. Hugo's feed room door. After eating the entire contents of a bag of very nice carrots, he'd tipped a tub of half-soaked sugar beet all over the floor and trampled it in. Well, the bits he hadn't eaten.

He'd then wiped his messy nose across the row of pristine stable rugs.

A strange puce-coloured Hugo, with his normally immaculate blond hair stuck up in a very *There's Something About Mary* way, had arrived at her door, Barney in tow.

Even though she'd spent a good two hours clearing up the mess, Hugo still hadn't forgiven her and was gently simmering; she preferred his frosty look, or his macho sneer, to his anger.

‘Your food store.’ Jimmy frowned. He was even less keen on Hugo than Daisy was. ‘Hugo’s a pompous git.’

‘Well he’s renting it, and I need the cash.’ Inheriting Mere End cottage had been a dream come true. With its rambling cottage garden, and room for her dog and horse, it was perfect. But perfect came with a price, and she’d soon worked out that her dog-grooming business wasn’t quite as lucrative as it needed to be. When Hugo had knocked on her door asking if he could continue the rental agreement he’d had with the previous owner – an old woman her mother had helped out – she’d jumped at the opportunity. Some days, though, she wished she had a tenant who was slightly more on her wavelength.

‘I’ll go and talk to Angie then, if you’re going to be boring.’

Giggling Angie, the barmaid, brought new meaning to the name mini-skirt, micro more like, thought Daisy as she added another strand of baling twine. But she supposed you could carry off that look when you were eighteen. And had a waist, and never-ending slim brown legs that were regularly waxed and suntanned.

Whereas Daisy’s waist had gone a bit fuzzy and soft-focus, and her legs were pale and, well let’s face it, also a bit fuzzy (but in a different way) inside her jodhpurs.

She tutted at him and folded her arms. ‘You should leave Angie alone. Her mum’s worried about an older man,’ she looked at him pointedly, ‘leading her astray.’ She could have added, like mine was, but didn’t.

‘If she’s old enough to work behind a bar, then she’s old enough to be led astray.’

‘Jimmy!’

He laughed, an easy, infectious laugh that brought a grin to her own face.

He was cute. But marriage?

‘I remember when you were that age, gorgeous.’ Leaning forward, he kissed her. The scratch of dark stubble rubbed against her cheek, and Daisy looked straight into his eyes –wondering when things like that stopped making the inside of your stomach squirm and just turned into ‘nice’.

Or a rash.

‘You were gorgeous, and you’re still as sexy. Come on, scrub up and come for a drink. We need to talk.’

Talk? Oh bugger, he *had* said what she thought he had. Jimmy didn’t do ‘talking’. The last time he’d wanted to talk to her was when he needed to borrow some cash to repair his ancient tractor.

How the hell was she going to avoid giving him a straight answer when he was staring at her over the froth of his pint?

‘Maybe I should get some wire. What do you think?’

‘I think,’ he prised her hands away from the gate post and reaching into her pocket pulled out the last remaining piece of baling twine, ‘I’ve got a chain and padlock that will do a much better job, and,’ he shook his head at the horse, who had ambled over to see if there was any food on offer, ‘if he can get out of that he deserves as many carrots as he can nick. Go on, you get inside and shower while I sort out Houdini.’

Barney stamped his foot and shook his whole body vigorously, then lowered his head to peer at Jimmy.

‘Yeah, you know when you’ve met your match, don’t you, mate?’

‘Think you can outwit a horse now do you, Jimbo?’

Daisy and Jimmy both turned to find Hugo watching them.

It wasn’t that he was nasty, or that she hated him, he just always seemed slightly superior. Even his drawl was perfect upper-class insolence. As was the ever-present cigarette dangling from his fingers (she’d told him it was a bad habit and very unfashionable and he’d just laughed and asked her when she’d become such a health-and-fashion expert – he had a point).

Hugo's horses never escaped, he never fell in troughs, and he always looked immaculate. 'Dashing' was how her mother had described him (over the moon that he was going to be Daisy's neighbour – so nice to have a bit of class about, you don't know what you're getting these days), which was why, she supposed, there was a never-ending trail of women in and out of his bed. There always had been, despite the fact he seemed arrogant and aloof to her, and just all too much, but he obviously appealed to some women. Well, quite a lot of women. When they were teenagers he'd been the pin-up at the state school, as well as the private one he attended. Hugo had always had it easy, had the pick of everything.

And he made her feel a bit of a klutz. She'd found 'brusque and couldn't care less' was the most efficient attitude to deal with him. Which didn't come naturally at all.

'I tried to tie the gate up.'

He raised what she could only describe as a sarcastic eyebrow, if there was such a thing. 'So I see. I never knew baling twine could be such an asset. You really do put the rest of us to shame when it comes to recycling, don't you?'

She ignored him. 'But Jimmy is putting a chain on. Did you want help with something?' Polite but firm.

'Not really.' Oh God, that drawl could be annoying. There was a hint of 'not that you could help with' sneer lingering in the background. 'I just had the bill for the food stuff he destroyed, plus the cleaning bill for the rugs. I'll leave it in the house, shall I?'

'Sure. Sorry about that. I'll knock it off the rent.'

'Cash would be handy.'

'I bet it bloody would.' Jimmy shook his head. 'We'll knock it off the rent, like Dais said.'

Daisy tried not to visibly cringe. It was lovely to have Jimmy doing his macho-territory thing, but it wasn't his rent to knock it off. She smiled. 'I'll get showered then, shall I?' And ushered Hugo off down the path. No way was she leaving the pair of them together to lock horns.

## Chapter 2 – Daisy. White elephants

‘Bloody hell, I needed that.’ Jimmy wiped the froth from his mouth with the back of his hand, put his pint glass down on the table and raised an eyebrow at Daisy before scrummaging about in his pockets. ‘There you go.’

It was a box. An enormous, blue, scary box. Well, it was tiny, actually. As in ring-size tiny. But inescapable. It was that white elephant in the room. Daisy understood now why they called it that. You couldn’t actually *not* look at it.

Her stomach lurched. Not the fluttery feeling of anticipation that she sometimes felt when Jimmy started to slowly unbutton her shirt and his fingertips brushed her skin, it was more like the feeling of fear when Barney took off with her and she was wondering how the hell she was going to stop him before they ploughed through a group of unsuspecting picnickers. That heart-in-the-mouth moment before she knew for sure if he was going to slam the brakes on, spin round, or launch his huge body into the air and go for it.

It hadn’t been her imagination, or dodgy hearing because her bobble hat was pulled down over her ears. He had said the words that had made her nearly amputate her fingertips with a liberal wrapping of plastic twine.

*We should get hitched.*

She took a gulp of lager and glanced round, hoping nobody was looking at them, but knowing that she was probably just about to hit the number one slot for gossip-worthy news.

‘How about it then, Daisy, are you up to the job of making an honest man of me?’

His Adam’s apple bobbed nervously and there was a sheen of anxious perspiration across his brow. Not a look she associated with the solid, dependable, and slightly cocky man she more often than not shared a bed with. She wanted to throw her arms round him, reassure him, and scream with delight, like they did in the films. But it wasn’t happening. All she could force out was a wobbly mad-woman laugh.

‘Come on.’ His grin was all lopsided. Why, oh why couldn’t she grab the box? ‘You’re making me nervous here, put me out of my misery.’ He lifted the lid, encouraging a positive response.

‘Oh Jimmy.’ She put one finger out, not quite daring to touch the diamond that she should have been desperate to see. ‘It’s lovely, you’re lovely, wonderful.’ Oh God, she was sounding like a bad greetings card, and she was going to cry. It suddenly hit her, and her stomach lurched as she looked at the ring, the words that had automatically tumbled out of her mouth summed it up. That was the thing. She thought he was ‘lovely’, which maybe wasn’t quite the same as being madly in love in an ‘I want to marry you kind of way’. ‘It’s just a shock. I didn’t expect...’

‘To be honest,’ the look had turned to bashful Retriever now, ‘I know we’ve always kept it casual.’

Yeah, thought Daisy. At the start, Jimmy had always been the one to say it was daft to get too involved; he didn’t like commitment of any kind. Not even the kind that meant he’d agree to accompany her to the wedding of one of her best mates. And, to be honest, she realised now that it suited her; it had worked. She’d soon moved on from that crazy-crush elation because the cheeky Jimmy had noticed her as a teenager (which was rather a long time ago now) to the realisation that maybe they weren’t a match made in heaven. They were comfortable. In a few years’ time maybe they’d be *too* comfortable. Oh God, surely when you agreed to marry a man, your toes should still be curling up and your skin prickling all over when he kissed you?

But she still liked him, loved him in a best-buddy way. Now she felt two steps behind him, when he was finally saying he was ready to commit it all seemed a bit surreal. A bit too late – if he’d said this a couple of years ago she might well have leapt into his arms and a life of washing his clothes and wandering down to the local every night.

‘It was my old man that put me up to this, actually.’ He really was looking sheepish, and something inside Daisy rose up in suspicion.

‘Your dad?’ Since when did his father turn Cupid? Romantic proposals were *so* not the image she had of his dad. Not that this was turning out to be particularly romantic, so far.

‘He asked when I was going to get my finger out and give him some grandkids; told me to get on with it while he was still young enough to kick a football.’

‘Let’s get this straight. It was your dad’s idea? Your dad told you to ask me?’

‘Well, yeah, but then I got to thinking. I mean, why not? We love each other.’

This was going from bad to worse. She had thought maybe they did. But now he’d made her actually think about it, she was wavering. She loved him in the way she loved Mabel, Barney, her best mate Anna, her parents, her chickens (well at least her favourite chicken)... but did she *love* him? As in big heart, forever together. He was cute, he was kind. He chopped wood like a trouper. He knew just the right way to rub her aching feet. He hardly complained at all when she watched ‘Love Actually’ for the twenty-third time. He still loved her even when she was wearing a fleece with holes in and didn’t have any make-up on.

They had matching Christmas jumpers. He loved Mabel.

So why was she messing about? It could be perfect. Was it just some stupid unrealistic romantic notion that she wanted to be swept off her feet – not be asked the question in the middle of a field as she wrapped twine round a gatepost, almost like it was an afterthought.

She’d been watching too many rom-coms, read too many happy-ever-afters. This was real life. In real life you were happy, compatible, had known each other since you were knee-high to a grasshopper, as Grandad used to say.

In fact, this probably was how Grandad and Grandma had made the decision.

They were comfortable. Like two old slippers rubbing together.

Oh Gawd, she didn’t want to be an old slipper. Not yet.

The groan started to come out of her mouth and she did her best to change it into a non-committal squeak of what could have been mild interest. Or a pig sound.

Jimmy was not deterred. ‘I can just give my place up, daft me wasting money on rent. I’ll move in with you, and we might even be able to afford to tell Hugo to piss off.’

She didn’t want to tell Hugo to piss off, even though he could be irritating. She wasn’t really sure she was ready to let Jimmy move into the little cottage, her little cottage.

They seemed to be skipping from infatuation (on her part), to slippers-and-pipe comfortable, without doing the madly-in-love bit in the middle.

Surely there should be one of those, even for her?

‘I can help, you know, mend fences to keep that Houdini horse in,’ he gave a reassuring smile, ‘I know how hard it is for you to keep on top of that place, and I’m not always there, but I can be. So, what do you say? February wedding before I get busy on the fields?’

February! He was giving her deadlines now. She spluttered up the mouthful of lager. ‘There’s no need to rush into this is there?’ And gave a weak smile.

He could move in. Live there. With her. Instead of just spending the odd night at hers, losing odd socks under the bed, leaving the loo seat up, and emptying the milk carton, he could do it all the time. With all his socks. His socks would be happy – paired off. They could fall asleep in front of the TV together (him and her, not the socks) every night. She could cook his dinner while he mended things. They could do couple-things.

All the time.

Forever. Never set foot outside of Tippermere, never meet anybody new. Live on roast dinners and apple pie for the rest of their lives. Okay she was pushing it a bit there. They could go to the restaurants in Kitterly Heath, or rather she could. Jimmy was quite happy doing the same thing day

in day out. He didn't want to explore, he didn't want excitement, oh God, he just didn't have any of the dreams she did.

She perched on the edge of her seat. That was it. She'd got it, he didn't share her dreams, he was happy with what he'd got and deep inside she thought, hoped, that one day she'd find a little bit more.

She really did feel queasy now. No way could she say that, it would be more shocking than the proposal, and it had only just occurred to her. And she'd sound deranged if she said it. He'd set off some weird kind of chain reaction inside her.

But he was nice. And maybe nobody would share her mad dreams, well not a man. Maybe this was all there was. She slumped back.

'Go on then, say it.' The pint glass stopped, halfway up to his mouth as he realised that her open mouth wasn't signalling a delighted yes. 'Daisy? Say something, please, I'm beginning to feel a bit of a dick.' His gaze darted round, furtively checking out for listeners-in.

'It's just,' putting her hands under her thighs and shuffling down so nobody could see her didn't seem to be helping, 'I'm not quite ready to be thinking about grandkids for your dad, and...' It was one thing him feeling a bit of a dick, she was beginning to feel a real cow.

'Oh. Silly me.' The glass went down with a clunk and he snapped the box shut, and then it was engulfed by his large hand. He stared at the table and his whole body seemed to close down, block her out.

She could prise his fingers open. Declare undying love. Give up on everything but him.

'Jimmy, I'm sorry, I didn't mean...' Daisy put her hand over his; the rough, weathered hand she was so fond of. If she was clear in her own head what she meant, this would be easier to explain. 'You've just caught me... you mean a lot to me, you know that.' Lame, that was so lame.

'Sure,' the box disappeared back into the inner packet of his waxed jacket, 'want another beer?'

'I just need a bit of time to get used to the idea. I'm in shock.'

'You shouldn't need a bit of time, Dais.'

'I didn't expect...' If she'd had a warning, then she would have talked herself round.

He gave a weary sigh, then stood up. 'I thought you'd be pleased. It's what women want, isn't it?'

She'd ignore the bit where he'd just lumped her in with half the population. 'It's just, well, sometimes I think I haven't actually lived, you know done things.' There were ways to say this without sounding loopy. 'I, we, shouldn't settle down yet. I'm too young.'

'Young? Lots of people get married younger than us; look at my brother Andy.'

Oh yes, randy Andy, who was intent on giving the Tippermere population a boost single-handed.

'And what do you mean you haven't done things? Like what? You do lots of stuff. It's that Anna, isn't it?'

'What is that supposed to mean, it's Anna?'

'Well you're always chatting to her.' He towered over her, beginning to look belligerent. 'She's told you I'm not good enough for you.'

'That's just not fair, Jimmy and you know it. I like Anna, she's my friend, but I can make my own mind up about what's right for me.' Anna did think she could do better. Younger. More exciting. 'And she's never said you're not good enough for me.' Well, she had never actually said it in so many words.

'Well, she's the one that's told you you've not lived.'

'Well, actually it was you that just said I needed to lighten up, have a bit of fun.' But he did actually have a point about Anna. She had told Daisy more than once that she needed to get a life (as in one that didn't centre round a grumpy horse, her naughty dog Mabel, and Jimmy), but it wasn't Anna's voice in her head. In fact it wasn't a voice at all, it was her heart pounding so hard it was echoing in her ears, something deep inside screaming out *Help!*

Jimmy's mouth twisted stubbornly. 'I meant *we* needed to get out more.'

'You mean come to the pub more often.'

‘There’s nothing wrong with coming here for a pint now and then, or isn’t it good enough for you now?’

‘I didn’t say there was anything wrong. But maybe you’re right,’ switching it back to him had to help, concentrate on the positive Mum always said, ‘I do need to lighten up and get out more. I mean I used to have all these dreams about walking barefoot on some beach in Greece, or riding in the Canadian Rockies, or ...’

‘Or swimming with dolphins. Yeah, yeah, just like in those daft magazines you read. Daisy, that’s all crap, real people like us don’t do stuff like that, you just read about it.’

‘Anna does.’

He scowled. ‘People like us don’t go hang-gliding, or jumping off cliffs or whatever it is. We’re happy as we are.’ He paused, the killer pause. ‘I bet your parents never did stuff like that.’

Bull’s-eye. She didn’t want to be like her parents, even though she loved them. They’d spent their lives tied to a farm; milking cows and cutting crops. Making hay between showers. ‘No, but *I* want to.’ What had he unleashed? An hour ago, before he’d asked her to marry him, she’d thought she’d been more than happy with Mabel and Barney, with him. With mucking out stables, hacking down the lanes, shampooing and clipping dogs, with being Daisy.

Now she was insisting she wanted to jump off cliffs. Which she didn’t want to do at all. Ever. She hated standing on the edge of anything, even a high wall. And the dolphin thing was a no-no. It had taken a very patient teacher and a lot of swimming lessons before she’d been able to splash her way across the width of the local swimming baths still clutching a float, mewling like a drowning kitten.

‘Right.’ He folded his arms, confidence returning. ‘Tell you what then, you spend December doing whatever these things are.’

‘December!’

He ignored the interruption. ‘I’ll wait, then we can announce it at Christmas. Go on, you get on with it, go and do things. Then you can come back home, eh?’

He could have added ‘when you’ve come to your senses’, but he didn’t. She could see it in his eyes though.

‘But I can’t do much in December, it’s too cold, and I’ve no time to plan, I—’

‘Daisy, be fair.’ He looked her in the eye, an earnest frown on his normally happy face. ‘You can’t just expect me to hang around for ever while you *think* about doing stuff. If it’s that important to you, then get on and do it. Unless it’s just an excuse, and what you’re really trying to do is tell me to sod off?’ He cocked his head on one side, and the normal twinkle wasn’t in his eyes.

‘Of course I’m not, Jimmy, we have a great time, it’s just...’

‘I’ll get that drink.’

They had another beer. He dropped her off home.

‘Do you really, really want to get married?’

‘I’ve asked you now, Dais. I can’t exactly un-ask, can I?’

Daisy crashed onto the sofa and didn’t object when her Irish Wolfhound Mabel climbed onto to her lap. ‘Why did he have to ask?’

Mabel didn’t answer, just flopped sideways so that her back legs dangled over the edge. Whatever happened, it meant things had changed between them forever. They couldn’t just go back to how they’d been.

‘Oh Mabel, what am I going to do?’ The dog wiggled her eyebrows, then rested her hairy chin on her paws and gave a heavy sigh. ‘He’s right. He’s blown it now. You can’t un-ask a question like that, can you?’ And you couldn’t announce an engagement when your fiancée-to-be hadn’t said yes, could you? ‘I need to talk to Anna.’

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Anna kicked her Ugg boots off, pushed Mabel's tail out of the way, and plonked herself down on the sofa – stretching her feet out towards the fire. Still clutching her bottle of wine. 'Come on then, spill.'

Wriggling her way out from underneath the front end of Mabel, Daisy wondered what on earth she was supposed to add. Her text to Anna had said it all, and rather succinctly, she'd thought. *Jimmy proposed, what the hell do I do now?*

'There isn't exactly anything else to spill. I'll get some wine glasses and a corkscrew.'

'So you are sure he actually meant to propose, Daisy? He wasn't just mucking around?'

'He had a ring.'

'Wow, I didn't know he could be that organised. Did it fit? Did it have a huge diamond?'

'I didn't try it on, that would have been weird.' She daren't even touch it.

'A ring is kind of, er, conclusive. Shit.'

'I didn't think he wanted to get married.' Jimmy didn't do surprises, and he didn't do organised. He was just Jimmy.

'But you love him, don't you?'

'I thought I did.' Daisy looked glumly at Anna. This was what people waited their whole lives for, wasn't it? Falling in love, being proposed to. Nest-building. Having children. Growing old together. Oh bugger, she'd just written off her whole life.

'I take it from the look on your face that you've worked out you don't.'

'Well, I am very fond of him.' Yuk, what kind of a word was 'fond'?

'Daisy! You either do love the man or you don't.'

'It's not that simple. I mean I do, really, really like him. We get on.' Which was enough for some people. She loved him, they were compatible, had reasonable sex (even if the headboard didn't bang as much these days), they shared a sense of humour, they got on. She loved him like she loved Mabel and Barney (but obviously it was platonic with them).

She'd always just assumed they'd carry on together. As they were. Without a ring. With separate homes. Have fun. It wasn't that she was expecting some man to sweep her off her feet; sexual frisson seemed to have largely passed her by. Which was fine, but did she really want to deny herself the possibility of ever having it? To give up on the hope of even the smallest fizz?

'What are you thinking about? You've got a weird look on your face.' Anna was peering at her, one eyebrow raised.

No way was she going to say sex, or excitement, or thrills. She'd never hear the last of that. 'Nothing.' She wriggled, pretty unconvincing then, even to her own ears. 'Jimmy is great, but,' she'd moved on to squirming, which was better, 'it's not that I'm not grateful.'

'You're not supposed to be grateful, you idiot, you're supposed to be excited.'

But she wasn't. That was the problem.

She covered her face with her hands. 'I ignored him the first time he asked.'

Anna laughed. 'That is so mean.' Then she frowned. 'And it's not like you at all.'

Daisy peeped through her fingers. 'Well he mumbled, and I was busy tying the gate together and I thought maybe I'd misheard.'

'You hoped you had, you mean. So you made him ask again, twice, and then said no! Oh, poor Jimmy.'

'Shush, I didn't mean it, and I didn't say no. Oh, Anna, the second I saw the ring I just felt... oh God, this sounds awful.'

'Spit it out then.' Anna was looking more intrigued by the second. 'This is better than an episode of EastEnders.'

'If you're not going to take me seriously, then I'm not going to talk about it.'

'I am. Honest, cross my heart.'

‘I just felt,’ if she said it quickly it might not sound as bad as it did in her head, ‘is this it? Is this all there is?’

Anna giggled. ‘Sounds like a song,’ and she started singing.

‘This is my life, Anna.’

‘Another song.’

‘Sod off, it’s not funny. What the fuck am I supposed to do now?’

‘Well, you’re sounding a bit philosophical even for you – *is this all there is?* – roll on death and maggots eating your rotting corpse.’

‘I didn’t mean that, you know I didn’t. It’s just...’ She gazed out of the window into the blackness, but knew that in the morning the beautiful rolling hills that she *did* love would be there.

She had Mabel, she had her horse. It should be enough; she should be satisfied.

‘Spit it out then, Dais.’

‘Well, I haven’t *been* anywhere.’

‘And you haven’t shagged anybody else? Is this what it’s really about?’

Everybody in the village knew that Daisy had never fallen in love with a playground buddy. She’d never sneaked fags or kisses behind the bike shed, she’d just been Daisy. Then Daisy had left school and turned into Daisy and Jimmy.

‘I’m not talking about shagging.’

‘So? Can’t this dog go on the floor?’

‘She’s asleep, don’t be mean. Look, you went on proper holidays when you were a kid, didn’t you?’ Daisy said, slightly accusingly, at Anna, feeling like she wasn’t being taken seriously. ‘All we ever got was a week in a caravan in Tenby, cos Dad had to get back to the cows.’ And the chickens, and the hay-making. She sighed. ‘Not that there’s anything wrong with Tenby. But we were supposed to go to France once, then there was a ferry strike. Dad said what will be will be and never tried again.’

Anna topped up the wine glasses. ‘So you’ve *never* even been to France?’ Daisy shook her head. ‘Or Spain?’

‘Nope.’

‘Greece? Italy?’

‘Now you’re being silly.’

‘Isle of Wight?’

‘You’re making me feel worse now, not better. I thought friends were supposed to help. I did go to Cornwall once.’

‘Well it’s a start, it used to be a separate country didn’t it?’

‘Dad was competing with a prize heifer in the Royal show. We were only there for two days.’

‘Okay, better than nothing I suppose. Just. Won’t Jimmy take you somewhere, you know, if you get married? You could have a blow-out honeymoon.’

‘He’s like Dad, he likes what he knows.’ Daisy sighed. She’d actually always liked that side of him, until it had come to the crunch. She knew where she stood with Jimmy, he was like a comfortable old fleece – the one you always grabbed. ‘He did go to Ibiza with Andy and the gang for a stag do, but that was it, and he kept saying how glad he was to be home.’

‘He is nice though, Jimmy. You do get on.’

‘My whole life is nice, Anna, that’s the problem and I hadn’t really thought about it properly until he asked.’ Had her cornered, more like. ‘But I do love him,’ maybe more in the old-fleece than mad-passion way, ‘and all this.’ She waved expansively to take in the cottage and everything outside. The world as she knew it. ‘But I just sometimes get this feeling that if I’m not careful I’ll miss out on a whole load of stuff.’

‘Like?’

‘I don’t know. Everything. I’m being daft, aren’t I? This should be enough. I should just know he’s the one for me.’

Anne grinned. ‘How should I know? Miss Footloose and Fancy-free, that’s me, but,’ the smile slipped, ‘you know what, girl? Maybe you need to sow some wild oats,’ Daisy rolled her eyes, ‘well not shag around or anything, but get away from Cheshire. I sometimes envy you, you’ve got everything while I’m just dashing round wasting my life, so I’m not going to hand out advice. But maybe you just need to get out there, go somewhere.’ She shrugged. ‘Then you’ll appreciate Jimmy and all this, or,’ she grinned, ‘never come back.’

‘I’d never not come back,’ Daisy protested, ‘it’s my home.’ She peered at Anna over her glass. ‘I could go away though, couldn’t I?’ Actually go somewhere, rather than just think about doing it.

‘You could. And you’ve got a deadline, so we need to come up with a plan, book flights to exotic locations.’

‘Anna!’

‘He’s given you an ultimatum, Dais, and it’s the best thing that could have happened to you. You can’t put it off – you either live a bit, or,’ she paused, and this time did look up, ‘or you give Jimmy an answer now.’

‘You know I’m not going to do that.’ She stared at Anna. She was right. It was her chance to actually do something.

‘If you stay here before you know it Jimmy will have moved in,’ she picked up one of Jimmy’s socks off the chair next to her and wrinkled her nose, then flung it in the air – it hit Mabel on the head, ‘and you’ll be married and have a brood of Jim and Jemima’s.’

‘He said you’ve got until Christmas,’ Anna’s voice softened, which was dangerous, so Daisy concentrated, ‘I know you’re still not sure, and you’ve got to be. This could be the most important decision you’ve ever made in your whole life.’

‘I’ll be fine. I’m perfectly capable of making my own decision.’

Anna sighed. ‘I’m not having a dig, it’s just you’ve kind of settled into middle-aged bliss without doing the bit before. You said yourself that you didn’t want to end up like your mum, giving everything up and becoming a farmer’s wife.’

‘I don’t.’

‘Well at least she had stuff to decide to give up, didn’t she?’

‘I think she had a pretty high-powered job, though she doesn’t say much. She used to fly all over the world.’

‘Exactly, and what have you done, Daisy Fischer? You said yourself that you’ve never been abroad. Let’s face it, you hardly ever get more than fifteen miles from Tippermere.’

‘Okay, I’m hopeless. Can we leave me alone now and talk about the weather?’

‘You’re not hopeless; you just need to take this opportunity.’

‘I am going to. I just need to think, decide what I really want to do, where I want to go.’ No way was she going to let Anna book her a ticket to Bangkok, or wherever she had in mind. But she was going to do this. It was just a case of deciding what ‘this’ was.

‘Now you’re talking. The world is your oyster.’

Not that she’d ever even had an oyster. ‘But who do I go with? I don’t know anybody but you.’

‘Well actually, it would be better if you went with yourself, just you, Daisy. Otherwise you won’t see anything and you certainly won’t meet,’ Anna’s eyes were positively gleaming with fun, ‘anybody. But I’ve got a better idea.’

‘What?’ Daisy really didn’t like that look in her friend’s eye.

‘I’ll tell you tomorrow, when I’ve done some checking. Come on, drink up, I’ve got another bottle of wine in my bag.’

Daisy groaned. Anna knew she was a pushover after two glasses of wine, she’d agree to anything.

## Chapter 3 – Flo. Paris and back again

Florence Cortes liked Barcelona best when the fierce heat of the summer sun had mellowed and the crowds had thinned, not that you could ever call the city quiet. But in the autumn it was still warm enough to laze on the beach at weekends, and even the more popular tourist bars had the odd empty seat in the evening.

She was nursing a very nice glass of red wine, in her favourite El Born bar, when Oli bounced in. Late as usual.

‘Evening, gorgeous.’ Oli kissed her, a broad smile on his full lips. ‘Same for me, please.’ He signalled to the guy behind the bar for a glass of wine before settling down on the stool next to hers. He snuggled in closer, so that their knees touched.

It was like loving a Golden Retriever; hard to be cross when he looked so adorably happy to see you. No, she corrected herself, it was more like loving a cat. A very demanding cat. He might be asking for cuddles right now, but she seemed to be spending an increasingly large chunk of her life trying to please him; he was like a surgeon – he liked having his patients there in the waiting room ready so that he didn’t have to waste any of his own precious time. The fact that she could have written an article for their magazine, or done her nails, instead of sitting in a bar on her own waiting was irrelevant to him.

At times it niggled her, but it was silly to let his little bad habits annoy her – and as everybody was always telling her (including Oli himself), she had the perfect life. A lovely apartment, great job, and Oli. She shook off her irritation; he was the perfect man, even her parents seemed to think so.

‘Sorry I’m late.’ He hadn’t missed the way she’d glanced at her watch. ‘But I’ve been busy.’

‘You’re always busy,’ she tried not to sound cross, he was after all working hard for *them*, both of them, ‘what deal have you been sealing today, Oli?’

‘One just for you.’ He grinned. ‘You’re going to love this. Hang on, I need a leak but I’ll be back in a sec.’ He tapped his mobile phone. ‘No peeking. I’m expecting the confirmation any second now.’ He rolled his eyes theatrically. ‘The things I do for you.’

Flo was staring at his mobile, which for once wasn’t attached to him, and then it pinged. Just like that.

She wouldn’t normally dare touch his precious phone (in fact, as it was seldom out in the wild on its own, chance would have been a fine thing), but it *was* for her, wasn’t it? He’d just said so. She hesitated for a nanosecond – to give him time to get back from the toilet, which he didn’t – then grabbed it.

Oli had always been pretty spontaneous in the early days of their relationship. In the very early days he’d once knocked on her door with a rose between his teeth and tickets for a gig in his hand, and he’d surprised her with a brand new Vespa scooter when it wasn’t even her birthday, but things had got a bit more predictable lately. But that was what happened in relationships, wasn’t it?

Or maybe not.

She scanned the email. Then read it again slightly more carefully just to be sure. Then a third time (it was a very short email) and the bubble of excitement burst out just as Oli got back from his visit to the gents.

‘What are you doing with my phone?’

‘Oh My God,’ she laughed out loud, ignoring the edge to his voice, ‘Oli. Really?’

His eyes narrowed. ‘What’s that you’re looking at, Flo?’ He put a hand over hers to steady his phone – which she was waving about in front of his face as she jumped up and down – so he could read what was on the screen.

‘Christ, what are you doing?’ He paused. ‘Oh that.’ The nervous twitch and flat tone wasn’t quite what she’d expected. Nor was the way his grip tightened on her wrist as he tried to tug the phone

from her grasp, while she was busy attempting to re-read the message. Just to make sure it really did say what she thought. ‘Oh for heaven’s sake, Florence, give me the bloody phone.’

Flo froze. Oh shit. Now he was cross (that cat thing again), she’d spoiled his surprise, and he so liked to do things his way. Or not at all. ‘Oh no, I’m sorry, you wanted to tell me your—’

He shrugged, pulled at the phone again in what was getting to be a bit of a tug of war. ‘This is you all over, isn’t it? Why do you always have to interfere and spoil things?’

‘I wasn’t interfering, the message just came in, and I thought, you said you were expecting... Oli, I’m sorry, honest.’ She never normally got a chance to be remotely nose-y, he was far too good at being in control. ‘I didn’t mean to spoil... it’s just such a wonderful surprise and now I’ve ruined it.’ Even for control-freak Oli it was a bit of an over-reaction. Flo stared at him, wondering if any moment now he was going to storm out and cancel the whole thing.

There was a moment when he just stood and stared at her, then his normal quirky grin reappeared. ‘It’s fine, never mind. I know you always wanted to go to Paris, so I thought what the hell.’

‘You remembered.’ She shrieked, then relinquished control of the phone, as he’d confirmed exactly what he’d done himself, and grabbed him. ‘You remembered, oh Oli, you are amazing. I am *so* lucky’

‘Of course I remembered.’ His expression was a mixture of satisfaction and slight annoyance that she’d doubted him. ‘I always remember important facts like that. You said it was one of the most romantic places on earth.’

‘No, well yes, but I meant you remembered our anniversary. Oh Oli, I do love you.’ And if she hadn’t been quite as excited, and convinced that he really, really did love her, she might have noticed there and then that he hadn’t reacted to the word ‘anniversary’ at all. ‘And going on the train; that is so romantic.’

He wriggled free of her grip and straightened his top. ‘I thought flying was overrated. This way we’re doing it in style, making it part of the trip. Flying first class would have been a bit of a cliché and you can pack your own hamper and bubbly. It’ll save us some cash too, no point throwing it away.’

Flo didn’t actually mind being clichéd, or being wined and dined in style, but she was being picky and ungrateful. And this was all fabulous, and SO romantic, and this way they’d have some spare money to go out on their actual anniversary. Oh God, maybe he had something special planned. Like a ring. For her third finger. She tried not to grin like a simpleton. One step at a time, she mustn’t just expect it – that would spoil the actual surprise.

Oli patted her stool, expecting her to behave and sit down again.

‘I’m sorry, I...’

‘Forget it.’ He pocketed his mobile. ‘But you know I don’t like people messing with my phone.’

She could have said she wasn’t just ‘people’, but that might have seemed churlish, and at least he seemed to have got over it now.

‘Blew the budget really a bit as it was, but we’re worth it.’ He grinned, his good humour fully restored. ‘Paris is bloody expensive you know.’

‘But *so* romantic.’ Flo sighed. She loved all of France, but Paris really was the most spectacular, romantic spot on earth. And this time she’d be with the man she loved, not her parents, or on a school trip with a bunch of teenage boys who thought culture was seeing who could spit their chewing gum out furthest.

She and Oli had been together five years; it was the anniversary of that first date, he was going to propose. She knew it. And where better?

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Two days later, with a carefully prepared picnic, and a chilled bottle of bubbly, they caught the train out of Barcelona, heading towards ten days of bliss.

Packing had been pretty straightforward. A sexy going-out dress, for ‘the event’ because he wouldn’t have gone to all this trouble just for a break, sexy underwear (there was a theme going on

here, but after all, Paris *was* the city of love – and hopefully passion), high heels (more on the sexy theme), and some boots she knew she could walk in (for those romantic excursions on the Seine and the art galleries, where they would stroll hand in hand).

Flo didn't care that the moment they'd sat down Oli fished out his headphones and disappeared into his own little world as he messed about with his phone (no doubt answering work messages), she was happy flicking through the pages of the guide book, gazing in awe at the photographs and working out just where she wanted to go (though Oli, no doubt, would have planned everything anyway – he was good like that – he liked an itinerary).

The next day, Friday, after croissants and coffee served in their room (no point in squandering money on a café, is there?), he spread out a city map on the bed and pointed out a route around the area that he'd carefully marked in red ink.

'I thought we'd do this today. You don't mind going on ahead though, do you, darling? Bit of a muzzy head, too much champagne yesterday.' Oli grinned apologetically.

'Oh no, do you need anything?'

'I'll be fine, honest,' he glanced at his phone and gave an exaggerated sigh as yet another message came in, 'I don't want to spoil your fun.' He tapped out a reply and Flo shook her head.

'A few days' break from work would do you good. It's no wonder you've got a headache. Can't you just let people leave a message, like you told me to do?'

'One of us has to keep things ticking over, darling, and I want you to enjoy the break. I promise not to do much.' He smiled, then pressed a hand to his temple and grimaced. 'You go and explore, I'll meet you for lunch. Look,' he pointed at the map, where he'd put a star, 'the guy at reception said this place is excellent value.'

Flo was not happy. She'd only got a short way down the street when the first spots of rain fell from the sky, and she realised she'd left her umbrella in the hotel room. It wouldn't have mattered if she'd been at home, but no way did she want to look a bedraggled rat when she met Oli for lunch. He'd obviously asked the hotel for a recommendation, which meant the restaurant could be somewhere special, which meant... Well, she really didn't want to count her chickens, but it was their anniversary, and what if he was leading up to...? Flo grinned and a man walking the other way grinned back, but she didn't care. She was in Paris, the city of romance, and her boyfriend was about to propose, and she needed an umbrella because she wanted to look sleek and sophisticated, not frizzy beach-babe.

She ran up the stairs rather than take the lift; she might as well make an early start on being trim. I mean, Oli had probably already planned the wedding, had a date in mind. In fact, she wouldn't put it past him to have booked a place.

As she opened the door of their room, a gentle waft of air blew through from doors they'd left ajar, bringing with it the hustle and bustle of the Paris streets below, and Flo took a deep breath and smiled. What did they say? Heaven on earth? This place really was blissful. Oh God, maybe he'd brought her here because he wanted to hold the actual wedding ceremony in Paris?

'You're fucking gorgeous you know, darling.'

Her grin broadened as she stepped further into the room. 'So are—' The words died on her lips as she glanced at the empty bed. She frowned. It was Oli's voice, but he wasn't there. She peered in the bathroom, he wasn't there either. Sticking her head out of the doors that led to the balcony, she risked getting her hair wet as a very feminine (and definitely not Oli) giggle reached her ears.

His voice was clearer out here, as were the muffled oo's and ah's.

Flo leaned out further, desperately trying to see into the next room. Then she froze.

'You bastard.' The words choked in her throat. 'You total utter bastard.' This time they came out full throttle.

Marching back through their room and out of the door, Flo careered into the corridor, just as Oli popped out of the next room like a rabbit out of a bloody magician's hat.

'That's Sarah, and she's—'

‘Hang on, Flo, let me explain.’

‘She’s naked, on a bed, and you,’ Flo glared pointedly at his crotch, which was now encased in underwear, ‘were fucking naked with her.’

He winced. ‘Keep your voice down. Do you have to talk like that, you know I don’t—’

‘Do I have to talk like that?’ For a moment she was speechless, but it didn’t last more than a couple of seconds. There were so many words trying to burst out of her it was just a case of getting them in a straight line, and the right order. ‘Do you have to fuck another woman like that?’

‘I wasn’t actually fu—’

‘You, Oliver, are the only man I know who could split straws over whether you were actually doing it or not. You were naked. You were flesh on flesh. Like this.’ She flapped the palms of her hands together, ‘I’m surprised you’ve not got friction burns.’

‘If you’d let me explain, instead of flying off the handle.’

‘Explain? Explain? What is Sarah bloody Rogers doing here, in Paris, in the next fucking room? You, you, you fuckwit.’

Oli raised an eyebrow. ‘Look, you don’t normally swear.’

‘You don’t normally sleep around, or at least I didn’t think you did.’

He didn’t say anything, just made a move towards their room, so Flo reversed and planted herself firmly in the doorway. ‘Did you ask for adjoining doors so you could just pop between us naked and not waste a precious second of your time?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. I didn’t bloody know they’d put her in the next room, did I? Be reasonable.’

Flo stared. ‘Did you really just say that?’

‘It was pure coincidence, if I’d have known...’

That was when she slammed the door and emptied every bottle she could find in the mini-fridge into his underwear drawer, and gave it a good jiggle. Shaken not stirred.

‘Flo, Flo, be reasonable.’ Oli banged on the door, hissing through the keyhole. ‘Calm down, you’re over-reacting and making a fool of yourself.’

‘I’m making a fool of myself? I’m not the one in my pants in a hotel corridor. I should have known you were up to something. That’s what all those late sessions working have been about, isn’t it? All the *editorial* work you’ve been doing.’ She’d been stupid. Accepted all his excuses at face value, trying to keep the status quo when deep down she’d known it wasn’t acceptable.

‘Flo, open this door, I’m standing here in my underwear.’

She added the olives and peanuts to the mix in the drawer, and hoped his gritty and oily extremities would cause him and the lovely Sarah a fair bit of discomfort for days to come. ‘I’ll give you friction!’

‘Flo, I didn’t even know she’d be in the same hotel.’

‘Oh, so that makes everything better. Tons better. How considerate.’

He’d urged her to shop that morning, which had seemed perfectly acceptable. Oli wasn’t really one to window shop, the odd breaks that they had enjoyed together had been ‘activity’ or ‘visiting ancient monuments’ but this holiday had, he’d said tucking her hair behind her ear, been for her.

How sweet. How considerate. What a load of bollocks.

Flo went back to the knicker drawer, pulled it out and emptied the entire contents into the one that held his t-shirts. The bastard. How could he do it?

He’d even bought her a red rose last night. The one she’d thought might be accompanied by a little jewellery box and a bent knee.

‘Flo, be fair, just let me talk to you.’

She opened the door a crack, aware that she now looked like a complete mad woman, her hair all over the place and her face, no doubt, bright pink.

‘What?’

‘It’s been all work and no play lately, I thought a break in your favourite place would be nice.’

‘Did you mean you remembered it was *my* favourite place, or hers?’ She paused as the realisation hit. ‘I’m not even supposed to be here, am I? That train ticket was for her.’

‘Flo, it was you that grabbed my phone.’

‘So all this is *my* fault? You’re blaming *me* for being here.’ Flo narrowed her eyes. ‘So,’ she put one hand on her hip, ‘what was it you’d organised for me?’

He looked blank.

‘When we were in the bar you said you’d arranged something,’ she paused, ‘something for me, that I’d love.’

‘Well, I arranged for you to talk to a guy who’s opening a new trendy fusion bar in Barcelona, so you could do a piece for the magazine. The guy is a genius, he—’

‘You bastard.’

Oli had a pained expression on his face. ‘It’s going to be an in-place, you’ve no idea how hard it was to get that interview.’

‘You’ve no idea how hard I want to hit you right now.’

He ignored her, put a hand on the door jamb, confident he’d be able to talk his way back inside.

‘Look it’s not you, it’s me.’

‘You loser.’ She stared open-mouthed. ‘That is the crappiest line ever, but you’re right. It is you. You really are the biggest dick on earth, aren’t you?’ Throwing all her weight at the door, Flo managed to slam it shut. There really was nothing else she could do. Then she threw all of her clothes into her case, and half of his out of the window. The half that hadn’t been caught up in the pre-dinner drinks-and-snacks saga.

It was quite a spectacular sight. A Parisian street, she decided had probably never seen so many Calvin Klein knickers, Armani shirts and designer jeans hooked in trees. The best bit, she decided, was seeing his pretentious Panama hat land in what he’d termed ‘cat-shit alley’ after treading in something unsavoury just after they’d arrived.

She stared for a moment, out of breath from all her exertions, then clutched the balcony rail and closed her eyes. She needed a drink, but she’d gone and thrown every last bit of alcohol in with his remaining clothes, and she wasn’t quite desperate enough to suck it out. Yet. Even her chocolate fix was in there.

Ringling reception, she very calmly reported a fire in room 406, and then waited until she heard Oli loudly declaring there was no such thing, and a member of staff insisting they had to check, before slipping out of room 405 and running down the stairs. She was out of the hotel, up the street, past the underwear-festooned trees, and round the corner before she stopped to draw breath.

It was when she realised she’d left the umbrella behind that she started to cry.

## Chapter 4 – Flo. Heading home

No way was she going to sit on a train, decided Flo. The last thing she wanted to be reminded of was the journey out here, when they had shared a romantic buffet laden with champagne, and all things nice, including some chocolates to die for. When her head had been in the clouds and she'd been wondering what kind of ring he'd chosen, and whether he'd go down on one knee.

Bastard.

Instead she headed for the airport, determined to make use of the company card one last time. Oh God, she gulped down the lump in her throat. Their whole lives were meshed together, two halves of a zip. And now it was stuck, with Sarah Rogers caught in the teeth. And when she finally got past that fluffy obstruction and undid it to the bottom she'd be well and truly stuffed.

No job, no man, no apartment if she didn't work out the job bit. Fuck.

That was what happened when you relied on somebody. When you set up a business with them. When you loved them.

A little whimper escaped, despite the fact she was biting her lip. She had to get a grip. And had to get back to Barcelona as quickly, and unromantically, as she could.

Unfortunately it seemed the rest of the world, well Paris, didn't appreciate how quickly she needed to exit. And how little she wanted to queue up behind loved-up couples.

'Our next flight goes out in four hours, and it is full I'm afraid. Would you like to come back later and see if there are any no-shows?' The woman behind the airline desk flashed a professional you've-got-no-hope smile.

'No-shows sounds fantastic. I'll wait.' First in the queue sounded better.

'We won't know until boarding.'

'Not a problem.' What else did she have to do with her time?

'Some people check in very late.'

Flo gritted her teeth and tried to keep the smile plastered to her face. 'It's fine.' She could plan revenge. Or work out how she'd ever been desperate enough to let herself get into this situation. How had she not seen it coming?

Two strong cups of coffee and a rumbling tummy later she knew she had do something before she exploded or dissolved. It was touch and go either way. She had a sudden yearning for Tippermere, the village she'd grown up in. Normality.

Since her Spanish mother had decided to leave the UK and move back to Spain, and she'd followed, she'd spent her time in various places before finally settling for what had to look like an idyllic lifestyle. She had Oli, her own company (well the shared magazine with Oli), and the trendiest part of Barcelona to live in. But sometimes, she had to admit, it felt lonely.

Sometimes she yearned to put her wellies on and trudge through fields, to curl up in front of the fire with a mug of milk and a pile of cookies. Sometimes she just missed her childhood friends.

She flicked through the Facebook posts of her friends, Anna (who posted lots) and Daisy (who obviously had a far too busy real-life and didn't post often at all). Pictures of them sharing a bottle of wine in the local pub, laughing, having fun. She felt a twinge of jealousy and a soft ache in her stomach that brought her to the verge of tears. She wanted to be there, to rush back – but she had to make a go of it here. It had been her choice. Life in Barcelona *should* be wonderful (everybody said so); she hadn't even wanted to admit to herself until now that sometimes it was hard. That sometimes beneath all the perfect stuff there was a gaping hole, something missing.

Now she felt like toddler-Flo who wanted her comfort-blanket back.

Right now she needed a friend. An easy-going, non-judgemental friend – which Anna had always been given her dating and fashion disasters, which she was more than happy to own up to publicly. Unlike her, who just pretended everything was fabulous.

She sighed as she stared at the picture of a laughing Anna, and then, before she could change her mind, she opened Skype.

‘Wow, what a coincidence. I was going to call you.’ Anna’s familiar face, slightly pixilated, beamed at her from the too-small screen of her phone, and she felt even more like crying. The beam dropped a few kilowatts. ‘Are you okay, Flo?’

‘Not really.’ She wanted a hug. She closed her eyes for a moment, took a deep breath and opened them. Blurted it out before she changed her mind. ‘It’s all a farce.’

‘Sorry?’ Anna leaned in closer to the camera, her frown was clearly visible even over the dodgy internet connection.

‘My life. Oli. Everything.’

‘But you’re getting engaged, you’re going to ... Hang on, you’re actually in Paris,’ she paused, ‘aren’t you?’

‘I am, I’m at the airport.’ Don’t cry.

‘Oh, and Oli...’

‘Is still in the hotel room, with another woman.’ She spat that bit out. Anger was better; anger she could cope with. ‘Oh God, I’ve been a complete idiot, Anna.’ Getting pathetic again, but she couldn’t help it. Anna’s look of sympathy made it worse. ‘I’ve been so caught up in the idea of this perfect relationship and my wonderful life.’ A sob caught at the back of her throat and she swallowed it down. ‘He even got a new scooter.’

‘Sorry?’ Anna looked confused.

‘A more powerful one so he could get around quicker, go further. I couldn’t see the point, and he said we didn’t have much money, but he said we had to project the right image.’ It was all about image with Oli. They were both kidding themselves big time. ‘He got it so he could whizz up the coast and shag her, then be back before his beer went flat and I’ve only just realised.’

‘Ah.’

‘I’ve wasted five years of my life on that inconsiderate, pompous, self-centred idiot. He wouldn’t even let me have a dog, and I listened to him.’

‘Sorry, there’s a lot of interference, he wouldn’t let you have what?’

‘A dog.’

‘Oh, you did say dog.’

The dog had been a sticking point, and was now symbolic of all the other things she realised he hadn’t wanted her to have. ‘And it is just so boring working on the stuff he wants me to do for the magazine.’

‘I thought you loved the magazine? Writing was always your dream job.’

She studied her fingernails. How could you have your dream job and mess it up? ‘I do, it was, but he just leaves the really tedious stuff for me. He does the interviews, and travels around to get the gossip and I end up sorting the adverts out and doing ‘how to pack your suitcase’ features. Have you any idea how hard it is to come up with a new angle for packing a suitcase?’

‘Er, no. I just tend to throw stuff in.’

‘Exactly, and if I have to write one more recipe for tasty tapas for tourists I’m going to scream.’

Anna giggled and Flo looked up. ‘You’re right, it’s a joke. I’m a joke, my whole life...’

‘Oh don’t be daft, Flo. Me and Daisy love reading your updates, your life is much more exciting than ours. You’re just in shock.’

‘I miss Tippermere, and you guys.’

‘Believe me, you don’t miss Tippermere. But I can go with the second part.’ Her face suddenly went serious. ‘I am sorry, Flo, he’s a shit. I can’t believe he could do that.’

‘I think I can believe it.’ Flo couldn’t look her friend straight in the eye, instead she concentrated on the keyboard of her mobile phone. ‘The warning signs have been there.’ She sighed. ‘I’ve just been ignoring them. Keeping up appearances.’

‘You couldn’t know he was going to do that.’

If she’d stopped her determined efforts to live the perfect life, to convince herself and everybody else that things were great, then maybe she could have. ‘Sorry to dump on you.’

‘That’s what friends are for.’

‘I’ll be fine when I get home.’ And throw the rest of his belongings off the rooftop terrace. ‘You said you were going to ring me?’

‘It’ll wait until you get home. What time’s your flight?’

‘Hang on, the woman on the airline desk is waving, maybe that means they’ve got a spare seat.’

‘Oh Flo, you are okay?’

‘Fine.’

‘Call me when you get back to Barcelona. I’ve got an idea.’

Flo pocketed her phone and made her way back to the airline desk, where a smiling girl was already holding a hand out for her passport.

So, that was it. So much for her smug outward journey with alcohol-laden hamper and gorgeous fiancé-to-be. Now she was make-up free, splodgy-pink faced, wild-haired, on the verge of tears and singledom was yelling her name.

She’d been stupidly happy for two days, she thought, as she trudged down the aisle and took her seat next to a dreadlocked teenager who had earphones in and acknowledged her arrival with a twitch of her pierced nose. Two bloody delusional days. Plus five years.

The whole row shook, as with a cheery grin a large lady heaved her over-sized bulk into the seat next to her, jostling her elbows and wriggling her hips until she’d squeezed her ample frame into the restricted space.

Flo made a grab for the plastic safety card and hoped neither of her travel companions would try and talk to her.

She stared at the laminated card telling her how to evacuate in case of emergency and the pictures blurred. How could her life have gone so wrong so quickly? Even her pep talk with Anna hadn’t made it more bearable; in fact it was just making her feel more homesick – and more of a fool. A tear escaped and plopped onto the card, and she angrily squashed the rest with the back of her hand before they could join it. She was *not* going to cry. If she did she might never stop and would arrive back in Barcelona a soggy, pitiful mess.

‘Cheer up, love, it might never happen. Ooh it’s a bit parky with this air-conditioning isn’t it?’ A podgy elbow narrowly missed her good eye – the one that didn’t have the overflow problem. ‘Good job I kept my cardi on. Here, have one of these.’ A tin of boiled sweets was inserted between the evacuation instructions and Flo’s nose.

Flo shook her head, not daring to speak, and bit down on her lip.

‘Go on, there’s plenty,’ the tin was shaken violently, ‘a good suck stops your ears popping.’ She leaned across Flo, nearly squashing her with her generous cardigan-encased bosom, and waved the tin in Miss Dreadlocks’ direction. The girl, her eyes shut, continued to nod her head to the beat of the music being blasted into her ears, oblivious to her surroundings and Flo wished she’d thought of that.

‘Ahh, you don’t like flying. That’s what it is, isn’t it, duck?’ She prised the card from Flo’s fingers and pushed it back into the pocket. ‘I know these planes aren’t everybody’s cup of tea, though I must admit I love them, means you’re on your way somewhere exciting doesn’t it when you get frisked at security.’ She grinned, completely unaware that she’d just removed Flo’s first line of defence. What was she going to do now? Go into the full-on brace position so that nobody could see her face? ‘You don’t want to be looking at that thing, dear, it’ll make you feel worse. If we go down, then who’s going to remember that kind of stuff? They’ll all be diving for the doors and to hell with taking your shoes off and not pulling the toggle things. And chances are it’ll be boom.’ She waved her arms extravagantly and Flo dodged to avoid an elbow.

Flo bit down harder on her lip. How come when you really wanted to chat you ended up sitting next to Mr Monosyllabic, and when human interaction was so far down on your wish list it had fallen off the bottom, you found yourself next to the airborne equivalent of the chatty taxi driver?

‘Now, now love, there’s nothing to be scared of. I know rattling down the runway can be a bit bouncy at times but once we’re in the air it’s all plain sailing, isn’t it? Well, plain flying.’ She chuckled at her own joke and popped a sweet into her mouth.

‘I’m not scared.’ The words juddered their way out of Flo’s mouth before she clamped her teeth back over the wobbly lip. The pain in her chest had grown; in fact her whole body was aching. Maybe she should feign death, or once the plane had taken off she could lock herself in the toilet and say the catch had jammed.

The sweet tin was shoved into an oversize handbag. ‘Well, whatever it is, there’s no use crying over spilt milk, is there? I’m sure it’ll all seem better in the...’

Flo burst into tears. She couldn’t help herself, she’d held it together at the airport but just couldn’t hold it in a second longer.

‘Oh goodness.’ The sweets came out again, followed by a man-size tissue. ‘Now, now, don’t you be getting all upset. Don’t tell me...’ Flo hadn’t been about to.

‘Sorry, I, I’ve had a bit of a shock.’ The realisation that your life was a disaster didn’t exactly lead to happy-dancing. ‘I’ll be fine, thank you.’

Flo’s travel companion finished wrestling the enormous handbag under the seat and sat up red-faced, ‘I’m Carol by the way,’ then beamed at Flo.

‘Florence, Flo.’ Just saying her name seemed normal, and for a moment she forgot about *him*.

‘Now would you believe it, Flo, we’re about to take off. How about I tell you all about my hols to take your mind off it?’

Flo nodded and after blowing her nose a few times, taking a few deep breaths and letting Carol’s words drift over her she started to feel more like her normal self.

By the time Flo had heard all about Carol’s fun in Paris they were airborne, and the drinks trolley was jangling its way down the aisle.

‘I think we need a little drinky to cheer us up, don’t we?’ She patted Flo’s knee and, ignoring her protests, proceeded to order a mountain of snacks and drinks. ‘Here you are, love,’ she emptied the contents of a bottle into the plastic cup and added a splash of Coke, ‘I got you a couple of bottles of Bacardi. They’re only tiny little things, aren’t they? Cheers, me dears, drink up!’

Flo drank up and blinked, feeling surprisingly light-headed, which could have been to do with the altitude, or the fact that she really couldn’t put the drink away as fast as Carol.

‘Oh, now look at this.’ Carol had moved onto her magazine, and Flo squinted and tried to concentrate on something other than her disastrous life. ‘He’s a looker, isn’t he?’

Flo nodded dumbly at the photograph of George Clooney. Yes, like Oli. He was a looker alright, and a talker.

‘Makes it too easy for them, doesn’t it?’ Carol turned the page round so she could examine the picture more closely. ‘If they haven’t got looks then they have to work at it, makes them nicer, that’s what my mother always said. And those lookers go to seed, you know. Then what have you got left?’

‘George Clooney hasn’t gone to seed.’

‘Well there has to be the odd exception.’

‘Nor has Harrison Ford,’ chipped in dreadlocks girl, who had removed her earphones at some point, ‘he looked hot in *Star Wars*.’

‘They’re not real life though, are they, duck? You don’t know what work goes into making them look like that. Worse than women they are, all titivated up.’

Flo sighed. Maybe Oli hadn’t been real life, and the idea of him losing his looks and going to seed cheered her up a bit.

‘Oh look, we’re nearly there. I’m quite looking forward to this, like my mam always said, a change of scene works wonders.’

Flo stared out of the window. A change of scene, a complete change of scene, was probably just what she needed right now. She just had to work out what it looked like.

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As the airplane touched down at Barcelona airport, Flo didn’t feel quite so tearful. The two double Bacardi and Cokes, plus the glass of Prosecco had taken her from the ‘he’s a bastard and I want to cry’ stage, to the much healthier ‘I’m better off without him (maybe) and I hope him and his hussy burn in hell’ stage. After swaying in the aisle of the plane for twenty minutes waiting to disembark, spending ten minutes in a queue for passport control and an impossibly long time (impossibly because her bladder was about to burst) waiting in line for the toilets, her alcoholic haze had lifted and all she wanted to do was go home, get so drunk she couldn’t see straight, and cry.

## **Chapter 5 - Daisy and Anna. Barcelona**

Daisy was wrestling with a wet and very randy Dalmatian, and trying to ignore her hangover, when Anna reappeared the day after ‘the proposal’ – practically bouncing with her news.

‘God, Daisy, what are you doing to that dog?’

‘It’s more a question of what it’s trying to do to me. He wants to bonk everything with a pulse. Just hold him round the neck and look stern can you?’

‘Like a Dalamatrix?’

‘Very funny.’ She grabbed the shower head while the dog was actually still, and soon had him soaked to the skin and lathered up. There were days when she really thought her dog-grooming business should cater for nothing bigger than a poodle, and nothing with balls.

‘Anyway,’ Anna hung on as the dog made a bid for freedom, ‘I came to tell you it’s all sorted. Your big adventure is on; you’re visiting Florence!’

‘I am?’ She stopped mid-lather, which was handy. If she’d still had the shower head in her hand, then Anna might well have been soaked.

‘You are.’

It sounded rather final. ‘Don’t I get a say in this?’

Anna relaxed her hold on the dog in surprise and it was halfway out of the bath, and she was drenched, by the time Daisy made a grab for its collar. ‘Well yeah, of course. I just thought you’d like the idea...’

‘Florence, that’s in Italy, isn’t it? I thought it was expensive there,’ she sighed, ‘you know I’m broke.’ Anna giggled and got a firm hold on the dog again, relief flooding her face. But Daisy hardly noticed. ‘I’d been thinking maybe I should go to France first on the ferry. You know, a little village.’ With cute cafés where she could settle down with a book. ‘And beaches.’

‘Daisy?’

The more she’d thought about going away, the more she wanted to do it. But she was afraid of different, too different. Maybe she needed to think this through – it was fine thinking she needed to live a bit, but she’d been thinking of starting off with baby steps.

‘I was thinking somewhere on the coast, and Florence isn’t, is it?’ She’d only just scraped a pass at GCSE Geography.

‘Daisy will you let me finish, you dafty? You’re going to see Flo the person, not the place. Flo, remember?’

Daisy stopped trying to scrub the spots off the dog and looked at Anna in confusion. ‘Flo? But she lives in Barcelona doesn’t she? Or has she moved?’

‘Yep she does, and no she hasn’t. It was you who mentioned Italy, not me.’

Daisy decided it would be a waste of breath correcting her. ‘That’s Spain.’

‘Genius.’ Anna grinned, pleased with herself. ‘Barcelona’s got a beach, and it’s better than being stuck out in the sticks. Anyhow, December is hardly sunbathing weather and it’ll be freezing in France.’

‘Have you actually mentioned this to Flo? I mean, I’ve hardly spoken to her for ages and I thought she had this hectic high-flying lifestyle.’

Totally unlike her own. Totally unlike any other inhabitant of Tippermere. They might have gone to the same primary school, played kiss chase with the same boys and even hit puberty and agonised over their A levels together. But there all similarities had ended abruptly. Daisy had stayed in the village and Flo had swanned off to Barcelona with her Spanish mother, who had decided that she couldn’t cope with the damp English weather any longer.

‘The last Facebook status I read of hers she was going on about this Michelin starred restaurant she’d been to, and how fab the magazine she’d set up with her boyfriend was.’ And she’d hinted at

spring weddings on the beach. Weddings had been the last thing on Daisy's mind (up to a few days ago), and her extent of fine dining with Jimmy was limited to the village pub. Which was very nice, but they didn't tend to have 'foams' or 'amuse-bouches' as far as she could recall – unless you counted pork crackling. 'I know we're still friends, but it just looks so glam, her lifestyle. Are you sure she'd want me gate-crashing?'

'Well, actually, I do speak to her now and again, and I did ask her, and she does want you to go. It's perfect because she said you can stay at her place for as long as you want and—'

'But doesn't her boyfriend mind?' She was pretty sure she'd screwed her face up in a way only animals found attractive, but she was positive Flo had posted pictures of a guy on Facebook: a very attractive, well-groomed, sophisticated kind of guy. So unlike the type you found in Tippermere. 'I'll feel a real gooseberry.'

'That's the "and" bit. She's just split up with him.'

'But I thought they were on the verge of getting married.' Daisy, who had been towelling the dog, stopped.

'So did she, and she caught him with somebody else.'

'You're kidding!' That was nearly as big a shock as Jimmy waving a diamond ring in the air. 'Really?'

'Really, as in shagging her in the next hotel room.'

'Oh no. What a bastard. Oh, poor Flo.'

'So you've got to go. She needs somebody to talk to, take her mind off it.'

'Needs me?' Daisy's stomach gave a flip, which could have been nerves or excitement. She wasn't sure. A trip to Barcelona would be brilliant, and it would be lovely to see Flo again. See how the other half lived.

'Yep. So I told her you can go at the end of next week.'

An involuntary squeal escaped from Daisy's lips. 'Next week? But, I can't...'

'Whatever you were about to say, you can. Jimmy said he'd give you December, so it's perfect. You need to just get on with it, Daisy. You haven't got time to mess about, before you know it Christmas will be here, and then what?'

A family announcement. Wedding dresses. Bridal bouquets. Oh God, that word 'bridal' it just sounded weird when it was applied to you instead of somebody else. She needed to do something, but how on earth could this work? Next week! 'But what about Barney and Mabel? I can't just leave them, and what if the pipes freeze? And...'

'Jimmy can look after the place for a few days, and your menagerie.'

'But I can't ask—'

'Yes, you bloody can ask him, it was his idea you do it, or,' her eyes gleamed, 'if you don't want to ask Jimmy, you can ask Hugo.'

'No!' No way was she going to ask pompous, disapproving Hugo to look after her dog, or wilful horse.

Anna was waiting, grinning, one eyebrow raised questioningly.

'Okay, I'll ask Jimmy, I suppose.' She was feeling guilty even before she'd gone anywhere.

'Good. It's only for a few days, well as many as you like. Daisy, stop feeling guilty.'

'I'm not.'

'You are.'

She was. 'I haven't even got a passport though, so I don't see how I can go that soon.'

'We'll get you one tomorrow. Come on, before you chicken out. Flo needs you right now,' Daisy thought she might be stretching the truth on that one, Flo had always had lots of friends when they were at school, 'and she knows the city and all the in-places to go. Look, it's an ideal opportunity with having somewhere to stay, it won't cost you hardly anything. We can sort a flight dirt cheap and you don't need many spends.'

‘I’m not chickening out, I’m just being practical. I’ve got lots of customers booked in and I can’t just abandon them.’

‘Oh Daisy, I’m not trying to force you if you really don’t want, I just thought... I can always tell Flo... well, I suppose I could go instead.’

‘Don’t you dare tell Flo anything. You don’t think I’m going to let you go off and have all that fun without me, do you?’ She straightened her shoulders. ‘I’m being pathetic, it’s only for a long weekend, I’m sure Jimmy will sort stuff here, after all it was his idea, wasn’t it? And if he really does love me, he won’t mind helping out.’ She grinned. ‘Oh, God, he’ll think I’ve gone crazy.’

‘Well that’ll solve your problem then,’ Anna grinned, ‘he might un-propose.’

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The next day Anna drove her to Liverpool to get a passport (which cost far more than she’d budgeted for), then they looked at flights, which turned out not to be exactly dirt-cheap after all. And now the butterflies were doing loop-the-loops in her stomach. There was no turning back.

She knew she had a stupid grin on her face as she put the kettle on. God she was pathetic to be so excited about a few days in Spain; anybody would think she was five years old.

Anna hung her sodden coat over the kitchen chair. Water dripped off, then ran in rivulets over the quarry tiles of Daisy’s kitchen floor, coming to a stop when they hit Mabel’s rug. ‘I swear if it doesn’t stop raining soon I’ll be coming to Spain too.’

Daisy shrugged. Even the rain wasn’t bothering her that much today, although it had made the motorway trip slightly scary, especially the way Anna drove. ‘The chickens hate it. They’re all huddled together in a sodden heap, refusing to lay.’ They had stared at her accusingly with their beady little eyes, looking very bedraggled and sorry for themselves when she’d checked up on them before they’d headed off.

‘Well at least it won’t be raining in Barcelona.’

‘No, Flo’s probably sitting in the sun.’ Daisy had to admit she was a teeny bit envious of Flo right now. She didn’t have a problem with a bit of rain, but this was turning the paddock into a paddy field – and it was cold, sleety stuff which trickled down the back of your neck. She found it hard to imagine not having *any* rain though.

‘It’ll be fab out there.’

Suddenly noticing the wistful note in Anna’s voice, Daisy stopped thinking about offering her field up to the rice gods, and put her mug down with a clatter. Hot coffee splattered out onto the back of her hand. ‘Bugger.’ She wiped it absent-mindedly down her jeans. ‘Why don’t you come?’

‘But it’s your trip.’ Anna was studying her mug intently.

‘Rubbish! It’s only a few days and I know Flo would love to see you, she was your bestie really, not mine.’

‘I don’t want to gate-crash your adventure.’ She still wasn’t looking up.

‘Anna! How could you possibly think that! Come. Book your ticket!’

‘Now who’s being the bossy one?’ She suddenly grinned and met Daisy’s eye. ‘You wouldn’t think I was awful if I admitted I’d booked a couple of days off work on the off-chance, would you? It’s just I was really hoping you’d say that.’

Daisy squealed and wrapped her arms round her friend. Being adventurous was one thing, doing it with Anna made it much better. ‘Really? You’re terrible, but it’s going to be fantastic, the three little bears back together again.’

Anna rolled her eyes, ‘I can’t believe you still allow your mum to call us that.’ She untangled herself. ‘It will be fab though, the three of us. Won’t it?’

Daisy paused, excitement was great, but what about the practicalities? She picked at a loose thread hanging from the bottom of her jumper and avoided looking at Anna. If she went to Barcelona she’d need clothes; she couldn’t go in these scruffs. But she’d be spending money she should be saving up towards a wedding. Although she doubted Jimmy had even thought about the finances, he was one

of those ‘everything will work out fine’ types, whereas she liked to plan. ‘It’ll be amazing. I do feel a bit guilty though, I am very fond of Jimmy.’

‘I know you are. I’m not trying to interfere in your life, whatever he says, but I’m just scared that if you don’t take this chance you’ll just say yes cos it seems the sensible thing to do.’ Her arm hung heavy round Daisy’s shoulders. ‘Just for once I want you to stop being sensible, be a bit mad and impulsive like me.’ She grinned. ‘Then you can marry him if you’re sure it’s what you really want to do, and you won’t spend the rest of your life on what-ifs. I’ll even be your bridesmaid.’

Daisy rolled her eyes. ‘That’s enough to put anybody off.’ She paused. ‘Come on then, let’s get your plane ticket booked. When is Flo expecting us?’

‘Next Thursday.’ At least Anna had the good grace to look a little sheepish.

‘I’ll need some clothes.’ To hell with the expense, this was one of life’s essentials.

‘We’ll shop tomorrow. Christ, is that the time? I’m supposed to be working in the wine bar in Kitterly Heath tonight. See you at 10 a.m.?’

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A frighteningly short week and a half after he’d proposed, Jimmy dropped Daisy and Anna off at Manchester airport.

It was a sunny December morning. Daisy’s favourite time of the year was actually autumn, when the leaves were a glorious multi-coloured mosaic and the golden sun, low at the end of each day, had lost its harsh stare and instead wrapped everywhere in a friendly- uncle hug. She wasn’t that keen on winter, the novelty of cold mornings and ice-covered troughs wore thin after a few weeks. So going away was good, wasn’t it?

Or not. What on earth was she doing heading to Spain and wall-to-wall sunshine (although a few hours spent with Google one evening had warned of showers) when she could be riding Barney across the fields and spending the evenings with her toes being toasted by the Aga? It was mad, it was crazy, it was so unlike her.

But she was damned well going to do it, even if looking at Jimmy left her feeling like the worst possible girlfriend in the world.

Then she’d come home and know for sure whether she wanted to waltz down the aisle with Jimmy, or not.

‘Stop worrying. It’s only three days, Daisy.’ Jimmy pulled into the ‘drop-off’ zone. ‘I won’t park up, not really into goodbyes. So I’ll say bye here, okay?’

‘Thanks.’ Anna was out of the car and was retrieving her rucksack from the boot almost before the car had stopped moving.

Only three days. Three days to discover the world and experience life seemed a bit of a rum deal, tall order, whatever her dad would call it. But three fabulous days! Oh God, what if it really was as good as it sounded? What if she didn’t want to come back? What if she ended up wanting more? She squashed the thought down and was sure that Jimmy had decided she was scared, not excited. Which was probably for the best. If you’d just proposed to somebody you weren’t going to be pleased if they looked deliriously happy at the prospect of whizzing off to another country without you, were you?

She set her face to serious mode and tried to squash down the giggles that were leaping up and down inside her like a boxful of frogs. ‘You will make sure Barney doesn’t get out, won’t you?’

‘I will.’

‘I got a new sack of carrots, they’re by the back door.’

‘Fine.’

‘And he doesn’t like that New Zealand rug, it rubs his withers.’

‘Daisy I am quite capable of looking after a horse for a few days.’

‘And don’t let Mabel sleep on the bed.’

‘Don’t worry, I won’t let her near it.’

‘I would love you to come.’ Prove to me that our relationship could work, that there is something in there that adds up to a happy-ever-after. That we actually do want the same things in life.

‘I know you would.’ He shrugged. ‘Go on Daisy, do this, this thing that you need to do, then promise me you’ll come home and we can go back to being like we were.’

‘I promise I’ll be back home soon.’ She couldn’t promise they’d go back to how they were because that had already changed. They could either move on to married life, or...

Neither of them mentioned what she was supposed to be coming home to – him, the rest of their lives, setting a date; the words sat like the wallflower at the party, wilting but determined to stick it out until the bitter end. Clinging to hope.

‘Go on. Bigger off. Anna’s waiting.’

She got out of the car, tugged at her suitcase and tried not to grin, because that wouldn’t be fair. She was finally doing it. Finally going.

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As the plane banked to the right and started to make its way along the coast, Daisy was glad that Anna had insisted she sit where she had when they’d checked in for the flight.

‘You need Seat F, the window seat.’

‘Why?’

‘Because that way you will see the whole of Barcelona as we come in to land. It’s dead impressive; you can see everything.’

Of course she would. Anna knew, because Anna had, of course, been to Barcelona before. Everybody had been everywhere apart from her.

‘Oh wow, look Anna, it’s like a grid. All the streets go across or down.’

Anna grinned. ‘Apart from that diagonal one.’ She giggled. ‘It’s called Diagonal.’

‘Funny.’

‘I’m being serious. Honest. And that’s the Torre Agbar,’ Anna, peering over her shoulder, pointed, ‘there, like that gherkin thing in London. And the Sagrada Familia is up there, and that hill is Montjuic. We need to go there.’

‘Do we?’ She had spent the last couple of days wondering if she wanted to do this at all. But she had to. She had to prove to, well to herself, yes definitely to herself, that she wasn’t a dull-as-dishwater failure heading towards a hermit existence before she even hit thirty. And she wanted to. And now, as the plane started to descend towards the runway, it was as though a switch had flipped inside her and she couldn’t stop the smile that was tugging at her mouth.

She was finally doing something.

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‘Come here, we don’t need that.’ Anna grabbed the map from Daisy’s unresisting fingers and crumpled it up with a look of glee. ‘Don’t look so horrified.’ Then dropped it into the bin they were passing with a flourish.

Daisy frowned and was about to complain when the Aerobus they had just stepped off pulled away – and she saw it.

The fountain that she’d seen in the guidebook. Two fountains in fact. ‘Wow.’

‘God, you are so easy to impress.’

‘They’re massive.’ She took a step off the kerb, she just had to see these close up.

‘Hang on,’ Anna grabbed her arm, ‘unless you can tell me how to say “call an ambulance” in Spanish?’

It wasn’t just that the fountains were big; everything was. When the traffic lights changed and Anna let her cross the road into the massive square she found herself spinning on the spot trying to take everything in. Fields were one thing, I mean she expected space in the country – but in a city? Kids were squealing as they chased enormous bubbles, and an... ‘Is that really an Apple store?’ Anna nodded. ‘Wow, Jimmy would have a field day, he’d never come out.’

‘Stop thinking about Jimmy, look,’ Anna took her by the shoulders and turned her round to face the way they’d come, ‘an enormous Corte Ingles – you know handbags, clothes, shoes.’

‘I’ve got a handbag.’ She whirled back round at the sound of flapping wings to see a black leggy dog scoot across the wide-open space, scattering the pigeons. It reminded her of Mabel; Mabel loved chasing birds. She missed the big lolloping dog already, they’d never been apart since she’d got her as a gangly out-of-proportion eight week old pup.

‘Stop thinking about Mabel.’

‘I’m not.’

‘You are, so.’ Anna stuck her tongue out.

‘It’s amazing.’ Changing the subject was always a good idea when Anna got into uber-bossy mode.

‘This is just the start, welcome to the big wide world, Daisy Fischer. Fancy a beer?’

‘I thought we were going to Flo’s? You do know where she lives?’

‘Kind of.’ Anna grinned. ‘Chill, who needs maps? I’ll sort it out, it just looks different to last time I came. Or maybe I’m thinking of Madrid.’ The grin slipped into a frown.

‘Anna!’

Anna laughed.

‘Maybe we should ask somebody?’

‘Rubbish, that’s cheating. Maps are for wimps. Come on, it’s this way I think.’ And before Daisy could object, Anna had straightened her rucksack on her shoulders and was marching back the way they’d just come.

It was only when they got to another square – this time with a large cathedral at one side – that Anna’s confident march slowed down. Which was actually quite a good thing, as Daisy felt she was in a fast-forward film.

‘That isn’t supposed to be there.’

‘Well it doesn’t look like anybody’s moved it for a few hundred years. What do you mean, isn’t supposed to be there? Can we go in?’

Anna frowned. ‘I think we’re going in the wrong direction. We’ll have a beer here while I work it out.’

‘So we can’t go in?’

‘Tomorrow. Beer. Beer and tapas, then my brain will work better.’

Daisy raised an eyebrow. ‘Are you sure you should have binned the map?’

‘I’m just popping to the ladies, then we’ll go and find Flo’s place.’

‘Fine.’ Daisy was only half listening – there was a map on the next table, left by a couple who’d been too busy arguing to remember it, and any second now it was going to get whisked away by a waiter.

Anna turned her back and Daisy made a grab for it.

‘I can’t believe you came without a map!’

Daisy jumped guiltily, in very much the same way that Mabel did when she’d stolen a chicken leg off the table and still had the evidence in her mouth, then looked up. Straight into a pair of grey-blue smiling eyes.

A tall blonde girl, with the kind of tousled beach-babe look that on Daisy would be more ‘I need to wash my hair’ than ‘I need sex’, was looking down at her quizzically, one eyebrow raised. Which was exactly the look she gave Mabel when she caught her in the act, as it were.

‘Wow, Flo, is it really you?’ She scrambled to her feet. ‘What are you doing here? I didn’t think you were meeting us. Gosh, you look fabulous. That hair colour really suits you.’ It did; it looked sophisticated and casual all at once. But it only partly detracted from the dark circles under her eyes, and the slightly haunted look. ‘Are you okay? I can’t believe—’

‘I’m good,’ Flo swatted away the concern, so Daisy bit back all the questions. There was plenty of time to talk later, when she was ready. ‘All the better for seeing you. I reckoned I should come and meet you half way.’

Daisy raised an eyebrow. There were coincidences and...

‘Well actually, Anna just text me from the loo and said you were lost.’

‘We were lost?’ Daisy grinned. ‘She’s terrible. She threw my map away.’

‘I thought it was weird, you’re usually the organised one.’ She grinned. ‘The one with the tidiest pencil case, and you never forgot your homework.’

‘She convinced me she knew where she was going. You know Anna.’

Flo laughed. ‘I know Anna.’

Daisy pulled a chair out. ‘Sit down. Are we having another drink, or heading to yours?’

Flo shrugged and sat down. ‘I’m easy, this is your weekend away. I didn’t know Anna had been before.’

‘Years ago I think, her family went all over. I’m the clueless one. I’m so glad you came to meet us, she hasn’t got any idea where we are. I thought we’d end up turning the rest of the day into a bar crawl, and I really need to shower and get out of these smelly clothes. And to be honest, I’m dying to get these shoes off.’ And ring Jimmy – just to check Mabel was okay and Barney hadn’t escaped.

Flo laughed, it was the same laugh Daisy remembered, but now she had perfect, sophisticated honey-streaked blonde hair to flick back. ‘Ahh. I’m so glad you’re here though, you’re a lifesaver. We can plan loads of exciting stuff, you’ve never been to Barcelona before?’

‘I’ve never left the UK.’

‘Never?’

‘Nope, never. And I’ve got three days to discover my wild side.’

Flo’s smiled broadened. ‘You’re kidding, Daisy? I never realised! You should have come before.’

It hung between them, the unspoken force that was Oli. Flo had always been too busy to see old friends, or so it had seemed. Daisy shrugged. ‘To be honest, I never thought I was that bothered until now.’ She hadn’t, not until Jimmy had changed everything.

‘A bit of a tall order to uncover your wild side in a long weekend, although you have got Anna and me to help.’

‘Anna said I’d find it in Ravel, she said that’s the plan for this afternoon.’

‘She did, did she?’

‘She was winding me up?’

‘Well I don’t want to be funny, but it wouldn’t be my first choice, some areas of El Raval are still like the worst part of the city. You know, one of those places where you double-lock the doors and put your spare money in your bra.’

‘You’re kidding? But the bit she showed me in my book looked nice, and,’ Daisy’s stomach was started to do a shimmy, so much for the big adventure, she was getting the wobbles before she’d started, ‘it can’t be that bad. Can it?’

‘Well,’ Flo frowned, ‘it isn’t terrible, terrible, if you know what I mean?’

So not double-terrible, just one.

‘But honestly? It really isn’t a place for a travel virgin. I think we’ll re-plan Anna’s itinerary.’

‘Please, or I’m going to be getting the next bus back to the airport, maybe I never was meant to travel outside Cheshire.’

‘More like you were never meant to let Anna make the decisions. You’ll love it here, I promise.’

‘What’s this about not letting me do things? I’m fab at decisions, wow it is so good to see you again, we’ve missed you.’ Anna wrapped Flo in a bear hug and then plopped down in her chair. ‘So what’s up, and where,’ she glared at the map that Daisy was clutching to her chest like a firstborn, ‘did you get that from?’

‘I found it.’ She glared back, sending a ‘don’t mess with my map’ message. ‘Flo says El Raval is a dump, it’s pants.’

‘I didn’t exactly—’

‘Terrible, but not terrible, terrible.’ That was probably like Barney getting out of the field, but not invading Hugo’s food store. Or was Flo’s ‘terrible’ these days more on the scale of chipped nail varnish, and her double-terrible like breaking a nail? She looked pretty chilled though, so terrible could mean...

‘We’ll survive it.’

Oh God, she hated Anna’s optimism and positive outlook at times. She didn’t want to ‘survive’, she’d signed up for a city break, not the Bear Grylls’ survival academy. ‘No we won’t Anna, we’re not going there. You’re out-voted.’

‘Stop frowning Daisy, you two are such spoilsports. It’s an adventure, I want to go to places I’ve never been.’ She turned to Flo. ‘So were me and map-girl heading in the right direction?’

Flo, looked bemused. ‘Sure, if you were heading to my place, but if you were supposed to be exploring El Raval you’re going in completely the wrong direction, it’s kind of straight across in that direction, until you hit La Rambla, then keep going on the other side.’

Anna grinned, completely unperturbed.

‘You could come back to my place now to dump your bags if you like, then spend the afternoon exploring your dodgy spots on your own. Meet up later for drinks?’

Daisy lifted her face to the sun. It would be fine. Calm. ‘I don’t do dodgy.’

‘We’ll have another beer first, then decide.’ Anna wriggled her way deeper into the seat and looked at Daisy. ‘I’m not moving until you’ve chilled a bit. However many drinks it takes, and I’m starving, can we eat?’

With her mouth wrapped inelegantly round a very large baguette, Daisy began to feel much more confident. For one brief moment she’d wondered if Anna coming with her had been such a good idea after all, but they’d have fun. The three of them had always had a good time together. ‘So what’s on the agenda for tonight?’

‘Well, if you fancy it I’ll take you to this fab little bar? Only, of course, if you want to. I don’t want to tell you what to do – it’s your weekend.’

‘Well if you don’t decide, somebody else will.’ Daisy grinned in Anna’s direction. ‘Won’t you?’

‘Somebody has to. But fine by me.’

‘Here, give me the map and I’ll show you where you are and where my place is. It’ll help you get your bearings.’ She looked at the map. Daisy put it on the table reluctantly, as far away from Anna as she could. ‘We’re right here in this square, here’s my place,’ she put a cross on the map, ‘then tonight, after you’ve done your exploring, I’ll meet you here,’ she circled a spot on the map, ‘it’s called El Xampanyet, it’s by the Museu Picasso, which is right here, you can’t miss it.’ Daisy wondered if she’d be able to decipher all these lines later.

‘Just ask anybody, or there are plenty of signs.’ Flo added, no doubt reading her dubious look. ‘It’s a great bar, tapas, cava okay?’

‘Fab.’ She reclaimed her map. ‘But are you sure you’re not doing anything else? I mean we can manage if you’re busy.’

‘Nothing.’ There was a flicker of expression that Daisy couldn’t quite pin down, but looked a bit like she felt. Wobbly. ‘It’s fab you’re both here, I can’t wait to catch up on the gossip.’ She smiled, but it was one of those not-quite-happy, not-quite-sad smiles. ‘I get dead jealous of you pair together having all that fun.’

‘Jealous?’ Daisy stared at her hard. ‘You have got to be kidding. You’ve got all this,’ she waved an expansive hand, ‘it’s amazing.’

‘Yeah, amazing.’ Flo sighed. ‘It is, I know, I’m lucky. Shall we make a move, go back to my place so you can freshen up?’

‘Sure.’ Flo, Daisy decided was definitely below par, she’d always been so bubbly and positive. ‘Come on Anna, let’s go before we’re plastered. Then *I’ll* pick a place to explore, I’ve got a map.’ She grinned and waved it, rather unwisely, in the air, just out of Anna’s reach.

## **Chapter 6 – Flo. Another kind of proposal**

Flo stared at her reflection in the bathroom mirror and thought, not for the first time, how bloody amazing decent make-up could be. It almost looked natural – like she was a normal, pre-non-proposal-Paris happy person.

She peered a bit closer, until her nose nearly hit the glass. Well, obviously it didn't actually work miracles, her eyes were still puffed up so that she looked like one of those poppy-out-eyed goldfish, but it was a vast improvement – her face had been rescued from the totally yuk broken-heart look. Now she just looked like she'd had a bad night, or been punched. Which she had, well the bad-night bit, the punch was purely mental. It just felt physical. She rested her forehead against the glass.

Bugger Oli. She had to get a grip. He was a completely useless, two-timing wanker who didn't deserve another second of her life.

She needed to block his phone number, shred his photos. Oh God, there were so many happy, laughing-couple photos, and the ones when he was looking into her eyes like some dashing prince about to...

STOP.

Flo scrunched her fingers into fists and counted to ten. Then looked down at her make-up bag. She could do this. She could be single again and bloody enjoy it.

The make-up had been a gift from a local business that she'd run a spread on. For their magazine. Their joint magazine. Oh stuff him and his stupid magazine. Concentrate on concealer, foundation. She would obliterate him from her life, wipe every trace away, including the bloody dark smudges under her eyes. And they were because of the copious amounts of alcohol. Nothing to do with him and the fact she couldn't stop crying.

She'd thrown all the expensive products into the bathroom drawer and laughingly wondered who the hell needed stuff like that.

Now she knew.

People that went out with cheating creeps.

Most of the time Flo stuck with a quick flick of eye-liner, a coat of mascara and smear of lip-salve, but she'd just discovered there were times that demanded something more drastic. Like right now.

The red-eye look wasn't quite so in-your-face when your blusher and lipstick were several shades darker, and the concealer had almost obliterated the dark smudges under her eyes. She could probably explain everything away as a bad dose of hay-fever. Except it was winter. Hangover, they'd accept a hangover as a good enough reason.

Flo wasn't sure that she really wanted to go out. But no way was she staying in and thinking about Oli.

When she'd got back from Paris she'd felt wiped out, and crashed into an alcohol-and grief-induced coma. And it didn't seem to get easier as the days went on, even knowing that her friends were coming to stay – and take her mind off him. Off the whole fiasco.

Today, despite a bracing walk along the beach, shopping therapy and a quick chat to Anna and Daisy, she was still fidgeting inside. She needed to do something that didn't involve throwing things he'd bought her at the walls.

And going out with old friends was far better than an evening with Spanish friends. As in 'their' friends. That was the trouble with being a couple, wasn't it? Who had custody of the friends? At some point she'd have to face the inevitable questions from the Oli-appreciation fan-club – which all her mates seemed to belong to – but right now, with the memory of Oli's bare bum partly covered by another woman's hand still fresh in her mind, she'd rather try and think about something else.

She wasn't quite sure what had got into her when she'd practically insisted Daisy and Anna come out to Barcelona, it wasn't like her at all. But maybe that was how she'd get through this – by being less like her normal self. No hanging about waiting for him to turn up to meet her, no dropping everything to answer his calls, no working until midnight to meet his deadlines. Maybe it would help. Maybe it was time to do what she wanted, and not just try and please some self-satisfied idiot.

Flo stared at her image in the mirror. That's what she'd just wasted the last few years of her life on. The reality hit her. Oli had been the centre of her universe, she'd actually morphed from the girl she used to be into the woman he demanded. She hadn't stopped to think about it until now, but he'd gradually got under her skin, and, because she loved him she'd wanted to please him. Like some pathetic lap dog.

Which reminded her. She'd always wanted a dog, and he'd said no. Think about the mess, he'd said, and we'd be 'tied down' – yeah, she should have spotted that one for what it was.

She could get a dog now. And read in bed, listen to heavy rock, watch weepy films. Get totally rat-arsed on cheap wine.

He'd controlled her right up until the end. She'd been the worst kind of fool, trying to keep up a pretence of being the happiest person in the world, of living the perfect life, and she'd been so determined to succeed she'd ignored the warning signs that were hammering like a battering ram against her defences. Well Oli wasn't going to do it for a second longer.

She just hoped that spending a weekend with her childhood friends wasn't going to make her even more homesick than she already was.

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'Are you absolutely positive this is where Flo meant, and she said seven o'clock?' Daisy stared at the firmly closed shutters, and the crowd of people which had been steadily growing in the five minutes they'd been standing there.

The route Flo had marked on the map had been easy to follow, but she was now beginning to wonder if Anna had sabotaged it. Despite the fact she'd even taken it to the loo with her.

'You're the map-reader.' Anna grinned. 'I wish they'd bloody hurry up and open the place though, I'm starving.'

'Hey, you made it!' Daisy glanced up to see the welcome sight of a smiling Flo.

'Fab, you found it.'

'We did, but we were just beginning to wonder if we'd come to the wrong place.'

'Or you'd stood us up.' Added Anna.

Daisy rolled her eyes and Flo laughed. 'Get ready for the scramble.' She nodded at the shutter behind them, which was slowly moving upwards. The crowd of people fidgeted and edged forward. The shutter stopped three feet up. They relaxed. It lifted a bit more, people edged closer and Daisy began to wonder just what kind of place Flo had brought them to.

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The moment the shutter was lifted, Flo dived forward. She swung round to check that Anna and Daisy had followed, then put one hand out in a ta-dah gesture and waited for the reaction.

'Wow.' Daisy stared, her brown eyes opening wide, and Flo grinned in satisfaction as she spun round on the spot, taking in the blue ceramic-tiled walls, marble tables and the artefacts that fought for space on the little shelves running along each wall.

Anna giggled, unimpressed. 'She did that in Placa Catalunya, she's going to go home all wound up and need spinning back the other way. Daisy, stop it and sit down. Wow, look at those tapas, can we try all of them?'

Daisy sat. Craning her neck as she shifted on the narrow bench and tried to read the plaques on the wall above. 'This place is incredible, it's lovely, so cute. I want to live here.'

Flo grinned. She'd always loved the way Daisy just came out with what was in her head. 'It's amazing, isn't it? I love it, even though it's always cram-packed with tourists.' She looked

apologetically at Anna and Daisy, ‘sorry, but you know what I mean. The owner won’t let anybody change it though, the local Barcelonese love the house cava and traditional tapas, and as far as he’s concerned the visitors can like it or lump it.’ She grinned. ‘Most of them like it.’

‘I do, it’s lovely.’ Daisy nearly slipped off her seat as she twisted round again.

‘You are acting the complete tourist.’ Anna shook her head disapprovingly, but was laughing.

‘I don’t care, I am a tourist and I’ve never, ever been anywhere like this before.’

‘Wait ‘til you try the cava. It’s compulsory, I won’t let you drink anything else.’

A litre of the house speciality, bubbly, and three coupe glasses were soon on the table, along with tapas. Flo pointed. ‘Pan con tomate, obligatory round here, and anchovies.’

‘Anchovies?’ Anna shuddered and pulled a face.

‘You can’t come to Barcelona and not eat anchovies. Trust me, they’re the best with this cava.’

‘I trust you.’ Daisy forked one up, looking at it suspiciously. ‘I think.’

‘Good!’

‘Although I do remember you trying to get me to eat a mud-and-worm sandwich once.’

‘You’ve got a memory like an elephant, Daisy.’ Flo grinned, ‘It’s so good to see you guys again, I know I keep saying it, but it is. I’ve got to meet somebody about work tomorrow afternoon, but how about I give you a grand tour in the morning?’

‘Are you sure? I mean you don’t have stuff you have to do? We can just get on one of those tour buses.’

‘Don’t be daft Daisy, no way are you doing that. I need the company to be honest,’ Flo took a deep breath. There was something refreshing about talking to old friends, no pretence required, ‘I’ve just had the shittiest holiday you can imagine,’ she glanced at Anna, ‘and you’d be doing me a favour, give me something to think about and stop me drinking every bottle of wine in the apartment.’

Daisy was staring at her. ‘Oh I’m so sorry, Flo, you don’t deserve it. I’ve always wanted your life, you just look the most together person, you always did, not the type to experience shit holidays or turn to drink. That’s my job.’

‘No, it’s mine.’ Anna poked her own chest proudly. ‘I’m the one that has shit relationships, I hold a special certificate in it.’

Daisy and Flo both laughed.

‘Well, I always look like I’ve been dragged through a hedge backwards, and haven’t got a clue.’

It was Anna who laughed this time. ‘You usually *have* been dragged through a hedge, Daisy.’ She grinned at Flo. ‘She’s even worse than she used to be. She spends most of her time these days covered in dog hair or being dumped by her horse into water troughs.’

‘That was only once.’ Daisy objected.

‘Or trampled by him when he’s spotted a monster in the hedge.’

‘He’s easily scared.’

‘Scared my arse, he’s massive.’

Daisy shifted her gaze from Anna to Flo. ‘She doesn’t get horses.’ She rifled through the picture gallery on her phone and waved the resulting picture of an out-of-focus hairy horse at Flo. ‘I miss him.’ Flo wasn’t sure she got horses either, and ordered another bottle of cava.

Daisy, who had been staring at her horse photographs, put her phone down. ‘That’s why I decided to escape from Tippermere for a bit really, because of a man, although I did, of course, want to see you.’ She added the last bit hastily.

‘Oh no, not you too.’ Flo glanced at Anna. ‘You never said, you just said Daisy needed to have a change of scene, live a little. Nasty split?’ She’d sensed that Daisy was acting a bit out of character, and now it made sense.

‘No, Jimmy asked me to marry him.’

‘Jimmy?’ Flo stopped, mid-pour, and put the cava bottle down. That wasn’t what she’d been expecting. ‘Jimmy as in dimples-and-dirty-boots Jimmy?’

Daisy nodded.

‘I didn’t know it was that serious.’

‘Nor did Daisy.’ Anna grinned.

‘And he asked you to,’ she stumbled over the word, ‘marry him?’ The lump that had been resting just below her collarbone for the last week popped straight into her throat and made her eyes water. ‘I thought,’ she swallowed hard, and tried to ignore the burn at the back of her eyes, ‘I thought Oli was going to ask, you know, if I wanted to... and... oh, how could I ever have thought he was taking me on a lovely romantic break?’ It came out as an undignified wail.

‘Oh shit.’ Daisy put her hands up to her mouth. ‘I’m sorry, that was so thoughtless, I thought you knew, I’m sorry.’

She swallowed hard. ‘It’s not your problem I thought he was going to propose.’ Now she’d started she couldn’t stop. She emptied her glass and bubbles shot up her nose and choked her. She spluttered, which was far more undignified than the noise she’d made. Anna shoved a napkin at her. By the time she’d mopped up and sneezed, and snuffled a bit, and was looking back at the two shocked faces, it didn’t seem quite as bad. They weren’t used to seeing her crumble.

‘It was supposed to be a romantic break for him and bloody Sarah.’ She sipped from her overflowing glass, and then took a deep, calming breath. She could do this. She could explain and just not care.

‘It just never occurred to me...’ She speared an anchovy slightly more brutally than it deserved. ‘He didn’t even have the decency to wait until after the weekend, or the holiday. He could have put her off, but oh no, the bastard decided to kill two birds with one stone. Why take just your girlfriend on holiday, when you can invite the other woman along as well. My dear, darling nearly-fiancé, work partner, whole life, had decided not to let me ruin his plans.’

‘Two for the price of one.’ Anna shook her head.

‘Bog off.’ Daisy nodded.

‘Sorry?’

‘Buy one get one free, BOGOF.’ Daisy bit her lip. ‘Seems appropriate in the circumstances, that’s what you need to tell him to do.’

‘I know. I have.’ She sighed, looked at Daisy, then wiped her nose on the back of her hand. ‘So what’s the problem with Jimmy and you?’

‘Jimmy’s the problem.’ Anna cut in.

Daisy swilled her glass round. ‘I feel terrible now I know what’s happened to you.’

‘No, tell. I need to stop thinking about it, him, he doesn’t deserve having this much of my time spent on him.’

‘Well, that’s it,’ she shrugged her slim shoulders, ‘Jimmy proposed.’ She looked as glum as Flo had seen her.

‘But?’

‘She doesn’t love him.’ Anna nudged Daisy in the ribs. ‘Do you?’

Daisy screwed up her mouth. ‘It was completely out of the blue, I never expected it. His dad put him up to it.’

‘He’s completely boring,’ Anna continued, ‘and she’ll end up spending the rest of her life darning his socks and growing vegetables.’

‘I always thought he was nice, quite sexy, really, for his age, and I do remember his dimples.’ Flo took another gulp of cava, ‘but you can’t marry him if you don’t love him, can you?’ She propped her chin on her hands, and it promptly slipped off, which had to be down to too much cava and not enough tapas. She sat up, trying to look sober. ‘I thought I loved Oli, but you know what? He’s a complete control freak, as well as a selfish arse.’ She gazed at Anna. ‘I’d quite like to grow vegetables.’

‘Why?’ Anna frowned. ‘If God had wanted us to grow our own peas he wouldn’t have invented Tesco’s would he?’

‘I think he did want us to grow peas.’ Daisy said. ‘That’s why he gave us soil and stuff. But by your logic he wanted us to darn socks too, or he wouldn’t have put holes in them.’

‘My mum used to grow stuff when I was little, in England.’ Flo was not to be deterred.

‘That’s all people do in Tippermere,’ interjected Anna. ‘Grow stuff, ride horses and gossip. I am so glad I moved out and got a proper job.’

‘I’m not. I remember the smell of the tomatoes, all green and fresh.’ Flo waved the empty bottle of cava and waited for a refill, wondering just how many bottles they’d had. ‘And sprouts, she grew those as well, tiny ones for Christmas. Oh God, Christmas. I love Christmas and I’ll have to do all the stuff we normally do together on my own, go round the lights, shop,’ she put her head in her hands, ‘do the romantic Christmas special for our magazine. Shit, and I just know I’ll bump into him with her, doing all *our* stuff.’

‘You know what you two need to do?’ Anna leaned forward, elbows on the small marble table.

‘Drink more cava, by the crate.’ Flo watched as the waiter topped up their glasses.

‘Nope. You,’ Anna pointed at Flo, ‘need to get away from that selfish twat, and your job, for the rest of the month. That way you won’t bump into him. You need to grow stuff, do your own thing. And you,’ she swivelled on her stool to look at Daisy, and pointed with her other hand, ‘need to stay out here away from Jimmy. If you go back you’ll just end up saying yes.’

‘You can’t grow stuff in December.’ Daisy downed the contents of her glass. ‘This is so easy to drink; it’s just like pop. And I’m not that weak-willed thank you.’

‘Flo can finish off growing *your* sprouts,’

‘I don’t have sprouts.’

‘Oh whatever, while you do the whole going-round-the-lights thing here.’

‘What?’

‘You can both swap.’ Anna crossed her hands over and grinned. ‘I’m amazing, go on, say it. It’s the perfect solution, and it only took three bottles of cava.’

‘Four. But I don’t speak Spanish. How can I stay here on my own? It’s different being here with Flo.’

‘Most people don’t speak Spanish here.’ Flo grinned. ‘They speak Catalan. They throw in some French words, like *merci*, but without the French accent.’

‘Really?’ That made no sense at all.

‘Really.’ Flo looked at her best friends. ‘I like that idea, Anna, you’re amazing, I’d even go as far as to say a genius.’ This could work. This could really work. She could escape for a couple of weeks. By the time she came back everybody would know and there wouldn’t be all that embarrassing explanation stuff that made her cry, and she’d be over him. Completely. ‘Oh wow, yes,’ she laughed, wondering if she was drunk or delirious, ‘Anna, that does sound an amazing idea. Tell me we can do it, please Daisy? I’ve always wanted to go back and do the works. You know, a cosy cottage and build a snowman, toast marshmallows. Do all the stuff we used to do.’

‘Er, well, I’ll have to check with Jimmy.’

Anna rolled her eyes. ‘Jimmy’s given you until Christmas, you nitwit. Just do it.’

‘But he needs me there, and somebody needs to look after everything.’

‘Don’t you get it? Flo looks after your place, everything, and you look after hers. And stuff Jimmy, he’s perfectly capable of looking after himself. Right, while we’re on the subject of stuffing, can we have some of those stuffed pepper things?’

## Chapter 7 – Daisy. The morning after

‘Go away.’ Daisy rolled over and buried her head under the pillow, trying to escape Mabel’s prodding.

‘That’s not very nice when I’ve been out for croissants. Come on, get out of bed, you lazy bug.’ Anna grabbed the pillow and Daisy scrunched her eyes up against the sunlight that flooded the room. Something was wrong. It shouldn’t be this light; Anna shouldn’t be there.

Then she remembered. She was in Barcelona. She had shared a bed with Anna (who didn’t snore and snuffle and make little growly noises in her sleep), not Mabel (who did). She had drunk a gallon of cava last night, and it was trying to explode out of her head.

‘Hurry up.’ Anna, sounding disgustingly bouncy, had retreated and was standing in the doorway. ‘Croissants, coffee, come on. We’ve got to plan what we’re doing today.’

‘I was planning on sleeping.’

‘We’ve only got two days, come on.’ Anna nudged her foot.

Daisy suddenly felt wide awake (but with a thumping head) as last night flooded back (along with a hint of anchovy, which wasn’t quite as welcome). ‘You might have but,’ she smiled, it hurt her head but still felt good, ‘I’m staying.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Swap, house swap, holiday swap. You know, Flo goes to my place and I stay here.’

‘But that was a joke, we were drunk.’ Anna frowned and looked like she was waiting for Daisy to laugh. She didn’t.

‘Well I’ve been thinking about it, and it sounds brilliant.’

‘But you can’t...’

‘That’s what I thought at first.’ Daisy sat up and pulled the sheet up to her chin. ‘I’ve got things to do back home. It’s not that easy to sort, but if I can do it I’m going to.’

‘But you’ll be on your own. It won’t be like all of us being here.’

‘I know. But I’m a big girl now, Anna,’ she smiled, trying to soften the blow, ‘I can make my own decisions.’ She giggled like a naughty schoolgirl – not such a big girl then.

‘But you can’t afford it, and what about the animals? And work? December is a really busy time for you, everybody wants their dog looking pretty for Christmas, that’s what you said before we came here.’

‘God knows why, they’re only going to get muddy. But, that’s the beauty of this, isn’t it? Flo looks after the animals, and the house. Though I don’t think I’ll mention that randy Dalmatian to her.’

‘Exactly. She can’t do your job.’

‘True.’ Daisy shuffled about, wondering where Anna’s positivity had gone. When they’d fallen into bed and the room had started to spin, thinking about this had been a good distraction. ‘But Tiggy can, I’ve asked her before and she’s said no problem. She can use my grooming table and scissors, or whatever stuff she wants, and it did used to be her job before she decided to paint again.’

‘Oh. But it isn’t exactly fair on Flo, lumbering her with Barney and Mabel, is it? And you just get this beautiful place.’

Daisy frowned. ‘This was your idea.’

‘We were drunk, and I just got carried away. Thinking about it now though, it isn’t ideal, and you don’t actually have to stay here, do you? I thought you wanted to do other stuff like ride in the Canadian Rockies.’

‘You know I can’t afford that. Oh Anna, you might have thought of it after a few drinks, but it’s a fantastic idea, it makes sense. And she does know about the animals.’

‘Yes, but you didn’t exactly describe Mabel.’

‘I said I had a big dog. Look, stop worrying, I’m sure Jimmy and,’ she paused, ‘Hugo will help her out if she needs it. What’s the matter? I thought this was what you wanted me to do?’ Daisy stared at Anna in frustration. She’d expected her to be excited about the whole thing. Supportive.

‘I just didn’t expect...’

‘Exactly. And I didn’t expect Jimmy to propose, did I? If I go home now I’ll just get stuck back in and forget all about my dreams. And I love it here.’ She hugged her knees to her chest. ‘I’ve got to do this, Anna, for Jimmy’s sake as well as my own. And like you said, I’m helping Flo out, she needs to put as many miles between her and that dickhead as she can this Christmas. I mean, can you imagine if that happened to you and you had to spend the whole holiday hoping you didn’t bump into him and his new shag?’

Anna frowned. ‘You’re using emotional blackmail now.’

‘All’s fair. But it’s true, consider it a favour to Flo if you really won’t admit you want me to do it. Oh, come on, am I wrong?’

Anna sighed. ‘No, you aren’t wrong. You’re right.’

‘I’m right!’ Daisy squealed and, jumping up, did a jig on the bed, which creaked alarmingly, so she sat down quick. ‘I don’t think I want to end up like Mum, giving up her dreams and looking after old ladies and cows, but I won’t know if I don’t try, will I?’

‘You won’t.’ With a grin that was only a tiny bit strained, Anna wrapped her arms round Daisy and squeezed her so hard she squeaked. ‘I knew you’d do it and prove Jimmy wrong.’

‘Prove Jimmy wrong?’ Daisy wriggled.

Anna released her stranglehold and looked sheepish. ‘He said a weekend was more than enough for you, and could I bugger off out of your life and lead somebody else astray.’ She lifted her chin. ‘That’s partly what made me suggest it last night, but I honestly thought it was a mad idea. I never thought you’d actually want to do it. Don’t look at me like that! Oh, okay, I’m jealous. I admit it, it will be weird, you doing this on your own.’

‘I know, and I don’t want to sound selfish, but this is about me, Anna. For the first time in as long as I can remember I’m doing something I really, really want to do.’

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A shower, one glass of orange juice, two croissants and three cups of coffee (they were only tiny) later, Daisy felt slightly less as though an alien had infested her head, and more than a little bit giddy. What had seemed a slightly dubious idea last night in the bar, sounded absolutely brilliant in the sober light of day. Which seemed the wrong way round. It was like a crazy wonderful dream had come true, but she wasn’t quite sure how. And even when she said it out loud, in real words, to a person, it still sounded like a good idea.

She glanced at Flo, who was grinning like she agreed, and it was just Anna who didn’t look quite so enthusiastic. Which could have been because she wasn’t one of the people doing it.

‘What do you think, Flo? I mean, I know we were all drunk last night...’

‘Honestly? We have to do this swap thing. It’ll be amazing. Stop looking at us like that, Anna! What have we got to lose? We can both be home for Christmas Day, but have a fab time before. I won’t have to risk bumping into Oli-the-arsehole,’ she looked at Daisy, ‘and you won’t have Jimmy waving a ring in your face.’

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