

# **If We're Not Married by Thirty**

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## Prologue

*Saturday, 6 June 2009*

The sounds of 'Agadoo' drift round the corner of the marquee and I let out an involuntary groan. When I get married, I'm going to dictate the set list to the DJ. Or maybe I won't even have a DJ. Maybe I'll elope. Yes, that's a better idea. Then I won't have to put anyone through the pain of wearing a ridiculous bridesmaid dress or having their hair sprayed with so much hairspray that they fear it may never move on its own again.

I wrestle with the top of my dress that was tight at the start, not to mention the canapés, three-course meal and countless drinks I've downed since the wedding began. Yes, I'd definitely not put anyone else through this pain.

'Hey, I wondered where you'd got to. You're missing our mothers pushing imaginary pineapples and shaking trees,' says Danny.

I cautiously look around to check that he's alone, and breathe a sigh of relief when I realise he is.

'Oh my God. They're so embarrassing. I told Kerry that she shouldn't do Pimm's as the welcome drink.'

'Doesn't she remember what happened at my mum's fiftieth?'

'I know,' I say incredulously. 'That's what I said. But she and Jim had snuck off somewhere early on and missed our mothers getting up to mischief.'

My sister thought I was exaggerating when I told her Mum was dancing on tables at her best friend's birthday party. Let's hope the tables in the marquee are more sturdy than the ones at Hazel's house. I've never seen plastic buckle like that before.

'Are you coming back in? I bet it'll be "the Macarena" next. Or maybe "Oops Upside Your Head".'

I shudder at the thought.

'Come on,' I say, holding my hand out for him to pull me up. 'I'm desperate for a drink. There's a pub next door. Do you fancy coming for a quick pint?'

'I'm pretty sure there's alcohol in the marquee. Besides, it's your sister's wedding and you're a bridesmaid.'

'And I've fulfilled all my bridesmaid duties. I kept her sober until after the ceremony. I've ensured that she has a change of clothes and a toothbrush in her hotel room and I've held her dress up inside the toilet cubicle at least twice so she could pee. I think I've earned a cheeky pint before she needs the loo again.'

Reluctantly, he takes my hand and yanks me up.

'We'll come back soon. Just a quick drink,' I say winking.

We walk across the rock-hard grass towards the fence. It takes me a few strides to realise that I still have hold of Danny's hand. I blush a little as I let go and hope he won't see my glowing cheeks by the light of the moon.

'Lydia, where are we going?'

'Here, there's a hole.'

I push at one of the wooden posts of the fence and it swings open.

Danny gives me a look.

'Jim plays cricket here and Kerry and I come to watch, but it goes on for so long that at some point we usually sneak off for a drink. Only,' I say, getting stuck in the gap, 'I hadn't quite factored this dress into the equation.'

It might not be as big as Kerry's wedding dress, but it's poufy enough to get me stuck between the fence panels.

Danny very helpfully gives me a little shove, and I find myself in a tiny courtyard at the back of the pub. I'm met with glares from those sitting around the one wooden table that makes up the tiny beer garden.

Danny flies through the fence after me, almost knocking me over.

'Oh, sorry,' he says, brushing himself down.

'Come on,' I say, dragging him in the back door.

The inside of the pub is lit up like Blackpool Illuminations, or at least that's what it feels like. My eyes have been used to the moonlit sky and the pub's neon fairy lights around the bar and flashing fruit machines are practically blinding me.

I try to ignore the watchful eyes of the locals who are giving me funny looks and I can't work out if it's because of my dusty-pink bridesmaid dress or the tiara in my hair. Whatever it is, I don't care. I order a pint of Foster's. Thankfully there are no older female relatives to tut and call me unladylike.

'Let's go round the corner,' I say, sipping as I walk. We find ourselves on an old sofa at the back of the bar area. We're

far away from the stares of the locals and noise of the fruit machines. I sit down and, for the first time today, I let myself relax. Who knew going to your sister's wedding could be so exhausting? Of course it's not just been today; the run-up's been going on for months. I'm lucky I've been away at uni and missed most of it.

'This is better,' says Danny. 'I mean, not saying Kerry's wedding isn't fun or anything, but I'm more of a pub man.'

'Me too. I was thinking earlier that I'd hate a big wedding like that.'

'Really? I thought you'd love it. Aren't you the one who wants to become some big party planner?'

'Yes, but I want to be behind the scenes. I wouldn't want to be centre of all that attention. Have you seen how many times Kerry's had to pose for photos? What? Why are you looking at me like that?' I say, as Danny's got this weird eye thing going on.

'Nothing, it just surprises me, that's all.'

I like the fact that after all these years of knowing him I can still surprise him.

'So, you're holding up well despite the amount of booze you've consumed,' I say, changing the subject.

'Am I ever going to live my mum's party down?'

'No,' I say, laughing at the memory of him being a pathetic but sweet drunk. Danny is always so confident and self-assured, so it was nice to see him less than perfect for once. 'You were so funny rambling away.'

'I just wish you'd tell me what I was rambling about.'

‘And what, ruin all my fun?’ I say, sinking into the couch. To be honest, Danny was pretty incoherent that night. But I’m not going to let him know that.

‘Bloody Pimm’s. I had the worst hangover the next day.’

‘Probably like the one I’m going to have tomorrow.’

‘So was I talking on one particular topic or . . .?’

‘Stop fishing, Whittaker. I’m never going to tell.’

He goes a bit pale and I wonder what he has to hide.

‘So,’ says Danny finally giving up. ‘Are you going to tell me why you’re hiding from the wedding?’

I try not to laugh at the foam moustache on his upper lip.

‘I’m not hiding. I was getting some air, and now I’m getting a pint.’

‘Uh-huh, both of which you could have done at the wedding. I was looking for you for ages.’

‘It’s been a frantic few days; I just wanted to be by myself. And the pint, well, I got fed up with all the tutting from my aunts.’

‘Hmm, so you said,’ he says, raising an eyebrow. He knows I’m lying.

I hate the fact that he knows me so well. Mine and Danny’s friendship is a by-product of our mothers being best friends and us spending a lot of time together when we were growing up. We’ve both been away at university so we haven’t seen a lot of each other over the last few years, but he still knows when I’m keeping something back.

‘What’s the real reason? Is it the wedding? Aren’t you happy for Kerry? I thought that you got on well with Jim.’

'I do. Jim's great and I'm so happy for them – honestly, I am – it's just ...' I say sounding so insincere. I don't mean to. I'm genuinely happy for them and I'm not even the tiniest bit jealous of my sister as she truly deserves every happiness.

'It's just what?' asks Danny, when I don't reply.

'I guess I'm sad because I'm nowhere near that, you know?'

'What? Nowhere near marriage? We're only twenty-one.'

'I'm actually still only twenty. I've got another two months until my 21st,' I say, thinking that makes me sound even more pathetic. 'I definitely don't want to get married yet; I know I'm way too young. I just worry that it's never going to happen.'

'Lydia, you're being ridiculous. Of course you're going to get married.'

'But it's not only the marriage thing; it's the whole love thing too. I mean, I've never even been in love. Look at Kerry and Jim. They met at sixth form and have already been together for a decade. Then there're my uni friends. All of them have had their first love already. And, OK, some of them might have been with total knob heads, but at least they've had that whole giddy-in-your-belly-butterflies thing going on. I've never had that. I just want to know what it's like.'

'What? That rumble feeling in your belly? There's this Indian round the corner from my old flat that I'm pretty sure would leave you feeling the same way.'

I pull a very attractive face to tell him how much I don't appreciate the sarcasm. 'I'm being serious,' I say. 'I want to know what it's like to have someone who loves me. Someone who would do anything for me.' I pick up my pint and start drinking until



I realise I'm in danger of downing it. 'I mean, have you ever been in love?' I ask.

Danny looks at me as if he's shocked I've asked him such a personal question. Of course he is. In all the years that I've known him I've never talked to him about stuff like this, despite us being so close. Our friendship might have been forced upon us, but being roughly the same age, we always stuck together. From the times when our older siblings were throwing rotten apples at us from their tree house, to the time when we saw in the millennium together, huddled in his bedroom terrified of the computer downstairs that we thought was about to go nuts with the millennium bug. We might talk – or, more accurately, argue – about politics and other things that we don't really understand, but we never talk about love or sex or feelings, aka personal stuff.

The look in his eyes, however, says it all. Of course he's been in love. Everyone at our age has; everyone except me.

Fran? Camilla? Jane? I wonder which of his many girlfriends he'd fallen for.

'You see, I've been missing out. Well, obviously I haven't been missing out on *everything*,' I say, in a rush. I don't want him thinking that I'm saving myself for 'the one'. 'I have had a very good time at uni, if you know what I mean.'

Danny's giving me a look as if to tell me to stop talking. He clearly knows what I mean.

My cheeks are actually burning and I can only imagine how red they must have gone.

'I don't even know why you're worrying about this,' he says. 'Of course you're going to find someone.'

'But what if I don't?' I look down at my pint only to realise I've finished it.

'You will.'

'But what if I don't?' I whine again. 'I'll be like Bridget Jones at the beginning of the film where she's singing "All By Myself" and I'll be meaning every single word.'

'I haven't seen it, but I'm guessing by the end she's not still single.'

'Well, no, but that's so not the point,' I say, pouting. 'The point is, I could be Bridget Jones. Except I won't be shagging Hugh Grant and I won't end up with Colin Firth. I'll be a spinster forever. Not in love and unloved.'

Danny rolls his eyes at me. 'Weren't you the one who was saying earlier that you didn't want to get married?'

'I don't want a big wedding, but I still want to get married. I guess I just want to know that I'm going to have a husband at some point in the future.'

Danny sighs. 'Look, if it'll stop you crying into your drink, why don't we do one of those pact things? You know, if we're still single at thirty we get married.'

'So you think I'm still going to be single at thirty?'

'No,' says Danny. His messy eyebrows lodging into the bridge of his nose as he scrunches up his face. 'I meant, if you do happen to be single still, and I am too, then we give it a go.'

'When you're thirty or when I'm thirty? You're eight months older than me.'

'You, then.'

'As long as you're not married already.'

‘As long as I’m not married already,’ he says slowly, as if it needs spelling out for me.

‘Oh great, so my only chance is to hope that you’re as much of a loser in love as me?’

Danny shakes his head and I wonder if he’s regretting even mentioning it.

‘Come on, you’re like “Mr Lover Lover,”’ I say in my best Shaggy impression. ‘You’ve always got some girl on the go. There’s no way you’re going to be single. I’m doomed. I’m never going to get married. I’m never going to be kissed in that swoony way. I’ll never know what those rumble feelings in my belly feel like. I’ll—’

WTF? Danny is kissing me. Like, properly kissing me.

Danny who I have known for ever. Danny who’s seen me through every stage of my life – nappies, braces, acne outbreaks. Danny who’s giving me butterflies. Danny who’s actually an amazing kisser.

When eventually he pulls away, I’m left leaning towards him, my lips still puckered, confused by what just happened.

I stare at him as if I’m seeing him for the first time. I’ve had a crush on Danny forever, but I’ve never even thought of acting on it. I always thought that he’d never be interested in me. He’s so smart and funny and sexy, and, oh boy, am I now in trouble.

I’m still too shocked to say anything and I see Danny’s face fall as he thinks I didn’t like it.

‘Hey, no,’ I splutter. ‘That was – where the hell did that come from? It was . . . It was . . .’

My mind is racing through all the possible scenarios. Was it a one off? Will he do it again? Would it be that mind-blowing if we had sex? Are we going to start dating? Is the pact still on?

'It was amazing,' I say finally.

He laughs and he takes my hand in his.

'Is that something you want to do again?' I ask, dipping my toe in the water.

'Like this?' he asks, before he leans over and kisses me once more.

This time he takes hold of my waist and his fingers brush my back. I'm tingling all over with anticipation.

'I'm sorry,' he says, when finally he pulls away again. 'I know this is really bad timing, what with me going travelling for the summer . . .'

'Travelling?' I say. This time it's my turn to scrunch up my face.

'Oh yeah, didn't I tell you? I'm going to South East Asia for a few months before I start my graduate scheme. I leave on Monday.'

'As in *this* Monday?'

'Uh-huh, as in tomorrow's Sunday, then Monday evening I fly out to Thailand,' he says, wincing.

I look at Danny. We've been friends for years, why the bloody hell did he have to kiss me hours before he flies ten thousand miles away? We've been at the most boring family parties where a snog or a fumble would have made it far more entertaining. Why did he have to wait until now?

'Why don't you come with me?' he asks.

‘What?’ I say, not understanding.

‘Come with me, to Thailand,’ he says, his face lighting up.

I start to imagine it, lolling about in the waves with him. It’ll be just like *The Beach*. Although without all the scary stuff that happens at the end. And most importantly I’d get to find out where that kiss was leading. I’m just wondering where I’m going to buy my backpack from when I think back to my temp job.

‘I can’t, I’m heading back up to Newcastle for the summer. One of my lecturers has pulled some strings and got me a job at an events company for the summer.’

‘Are you sure you wouldn’t prefer to come to Asia?’

‘Danny, you’re far too impulsive for your own good. Of course I’d love to come, but I can’t. My lecturer did me a huge favour and I can’t turn down a job.’

I let out a long sigh. ‘So how long are you away for?’

‘Three months.’

‘Well, that’s not so bad,’ I say, thinking that’ll pass quickly when I’m working.

‘And then I start my graduate scheme in London, so maybe once your summer job is finished you could get a job there?’

Thoughts of the kiss linger in my mind and for a moment I’m tempted.

‘There’s talk that the temp job could lead into something permanent. I don’t want to make any promises I can’t keep.’

‘So you’d be in Newcastle and I’d be in London?’

‘I guess there’s always long distance,’ I say, unenthusiastically. I’ve never known anyone to successfully have a long-distance relationship.

'There is, but my graduate scheme is going to be relentless. Apparently, I'm going to be working ridiculous hours.'

'Which would make a long-distance relationship a tad tricky,' I say sighing. 'You bloody arsehole, Danny Whittaker. Why the hell did you go and kiss me like that? Why flipping now?'

'I'm sorry. You were going on about not being kissed and not being loved, and all that talk of marriage.'

'Bloody weddings,' I say, half laughing. 'It brings out the horn in people. Look at Monica and Chandler.'

Danny's face is blank.

'Come on. You're telling me still, after all these years, despite all the repeats on E4, you haven't watched *Friends*?'

He shrugs his shoulders and gives me a look. A look which suddenly makes me want to jump his bones. That kiss has changed everything . . .

'What are we going to do?' I practically whisper.

'I don't think there's much we can do. I'm going travelling and then I'll be in London and you'll be in Newcastle.'

I nod. 'Bastard timing.'

'But hey, we'll always have our pact, right? Maybe I'll kiss you again in nine years when we get hitched.'

'Don't laugh about that,' I say, prodding my finger into his chest. 'I'm going to need that pact. So if you could just stay single until then.'

He laughs and I feel my heart burning a little, which is ridiculous as up until ten minutes ago this was Danny, and now he's *Daaaaaaaaaanny*. It's like I could cope with my crush when I thought it was unrequited, but now that there's a hint that he likes me too, it's become unbearable.

I look at my empty glass suddenly needing more to drink. 'Same again?' I ask.

'We should get back to the wedding. People will be wondering where you are.'

He's right. I snuck out of the marquee well over an hour ago. I'm sure that Kerry's bladder is almost at bursting point given the rate she was drinking her vodkas earlier.

'I guess we should.'

I squeeze his hand and he squeezes mine back.

'Are you staying over at the hotel?' I say, a fleeting thought popping into my mind.

'I'm sharing a room with Stuart. How about you?'

'My cousin, Clara.'

We groan again. Destiny is not on our side.

Reluctantly we stand up and weave our way through the pub and back to the little fence.

I'm pleased the courtyard's empty and I turn back to face Danny.

'You can't kiss me at the wedding,' I say, firmly – more to myself than to him. 'If either of our mothers saw, you know what they'd be like. We'd never hear the end of it.'

He nods his head.

I can't resist him now, though, and I lean up and kiss him. I grab hold of his suit jacket and he wraps his arm around me. I hear the whizz of fireworks going off round my ears. Fucking hell. First butterflies. Now fireworks. He's like the don of kissing.

'Fireworks,' mutters Danny as he pulls away.

'You felt them too,' I say, as a massive bang goes off and I look up to the sky to see twinkling red lights.

I close my eyes, feeling like such an idiot. Of course they are actual fireworks. My sister planned them for ten-thirty.

'I felt it too,' he whispers against my ear, before he pulls out of the embrace and gently drops my hand. 'We'll always have our pact. It's only nine years away.'

'Nine years' time,' I say, and we both laugh, although the laughter doesn't reach our eyes.

He pushes the fence panel and holds it open for me to squeeze through before he follows me. We stand there looking at the marquee, neither of us making a move towards it. I look at him trying to convince myself that he's just the same old Danny he's always been. I need to forget how that kiss made me feel if things are going to go back to how they were before. Only I wonder if they ever can.



# Chapter One

*My mum told me on the phone tonight that it's Kerry and Jim's first wedding anniversary. This time last year, huh? Who'd have thought I'd be living in a tiny apartment in Tokyo with a toilet that squirts warm water and you'd hobnobbing with celebs at your fancy job in London. Don't think that just because we live in different time zones I won't be invoking the pact, only another eight years to go . . .*

Email; Danny to Lydia, June 2010

## 23rd December 2018

I'm scanning Instagram, as I always do in my break, wondering why I do it to myself. I mean, I love looking at all the beautiful photos, yet it always leaves me feeling a little bit empty. Why is my version of real life nowhere near as glossy?

With only two sleeps till Christmas nearly every photo on my feed is themed appropriately with copious amounts of glitter and sparkle and there's always a perfectly decorated Christmas tree in the background.

I study an old school friend's photo. She's surrounded by a large group of girls, their arms draped around one another,

and they're all dressed in knitted Christmas jumpers. I read the hashtags and groan: #besties #LoveMyFriends #blessed #SquadGoals #LivingMyBestLife – I don't know which hashtag offends me the most.

I plump for #LivingMyBestLife; what does that even mean? Who knows, if she hadn't routinely bunked off business studies to fool around with Matthew Cook, she might have ended up as some hugely successful CEO. And by who's yardstick are we measuring this 'best life'? To some, spending an entire Sunday morning watching *Sunday Brunch* rather than going out for actual brunch with real-life people might be sad, but to me there's nothing I love doing more than curling up on the sofa and vegging out after a long week at work.

I quickly google 'How do you know if you're living your best life', wondering if there's a quiz I can do. Bingo! Found one, what a perfect way to spend my break time:

### **Question 1: Do you love your job?**

I poke my head round the corner of the giant lollipop that I'm hiding behind and look out across the sea of guests who are being offered canapés by waiting staff wearing Oompa-Loompa costumes. It makes me smile and reminds me I have the potential to love my job. I just wish I was managing these events, not spending most of my time pushing the paper behind the scenes.

### **Question 2: When was the last time you did something spontaneous?**

Let's see now, last Tuesday I ordered a Chinese from a different takeaway to the one that I usually use. That's got to count for something, right?

**Question 3: Are you happy in your love life?**

What love life? Since I broke up with my long-term boyfriend Ross five months ago, things have been a little quiet in that department – make that non-existent. Next . . .

**Question 4: Have you ever taken a risk and completely changed your life?**

Aha – now this I have done. In my early twenties I moved to London to work at a swanky events company. Unfortunately, it wasn't the best life decision I've ever made. The job was awful, I was flat broke (not that it mattered, as I had no time off to spend money) and to top it all off the guy who had been a huge factor in me taking the job moved to Tokyo before I even got to London . . . I'm not sure that's the best advert for taking a risk.

**Question 5: When was the last time you tried something new?**

Since I broke up with Ross I've tried to do new things as I'm searching for something that's going to put the sparkle back into my life. I've done a taster pottery lesson, played one game of netball and found a Pilates class. The fact that I didn't go to any of them more than once isn't really the point.

**Question 6: When was the last time you ticked something off your bucket list?**

Is it wrong to admit that I don't actually have one? Maybe that's my problem; I don't know what I really want out of life.

I sigh heavily and I put down my phone. I'm clearly not quite living my best life. I broke up with Ross because I had the feeling that it wasn't right and that something was missing from my life, and yet in the five months we've been broken up I've not been able to work out what would make me happy.

It's New Year next week and I'm quite looking forward to seeing the back of 2018. I usually love making New Year's resolutions – but I never stick to them. Perhaps this year I'll think of things to do that'll sort my life out that I will absolutely, 100 per cent, definitely stick to. I mean, I have to, or else I'm going to have to stop using Instagram once and for all.

'Lydia, we need some ice over at the factory gates,' comes a crackle in my earpiece. I guess that time's up on my break.

'I'll be right there,' I say as I push the button on my lapel to make my walkie-talkie work.

I always feel terribly important when I'm wearing the earpiece and in my head I imagine my role to be as important as a secret service agent guarding POTUS, rather than a lowly event co-ordinator usually guarding the alcohol-supply cupboard should guests mount a daredevil raid on it.

I climb out from behind the giant lollipop and straighten myself up as I slip back into work mode. I jump over the river that's supposed to look like chocolate and navigate my way through guests who are already well on their way to being wasted. I smile as I walk past the waitresses dressed as Oompa-Loompas, relieved that I'm dressed in a black top and skirt so I can blend into the background. Or at least I could, if the background wasn't bright pink and orange.

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory might not have been the most obvious choice for a Christmas party theme, but the guests here seem to be lapping it up.

'You're just in time,' whispers Helen as I find her over by the faux factory gates. I see just why she needed ice. There's a man

who looks like he's stepped off the front cover of *GQ* magazine getting dressed up as Willy Wonka in the photo booth. Hmm, if he's Willie Wonka – where are those golden tickets . . .

'I mean,' Helen says, fanning herself with her hand and wafting alcohol at me in the process. At first I don't believe the fumes could be coming from her. There's so much booze in this place that the smell could feasibly be coming from anywhere, but as I edge closer to her, the smell gets stronger. There's no denying it's on her breath.

We don't drink when we're working events. OK, correction, we don't drink *very* much when we're working. We have been known to have the odd little glass of wine or bubbles to get us in the party mood, but we never ever get over the drink-drive limit. Helen must have had quite a lot for me to be able to smell it.

I look at her a little bit more closely and she's actually swaying along to 'Driving Home for Christmas.' This is not good. Helen's the event manager and she's supposed to be alert during the whole event to do as her title suggests – manage it. She's got to orchestrate the running order as well as insure that the performers, caterers and guests are all in the right place at the right time. Which means reacting to any little problem as well as acting as babysitter to the adults. She needs to be able to think quickly on her feet, like last year when the theme was Winter Wonderland and the CEO of a large multi-national got his tongue stuck to a giant ice sculpture in the most inappropriate place, or the year before that when the aerial acrobat's ribbon snapped and she ended up kicking a man in the head and knocking him out. Whilst on big events like this there might be more staff around to

help, the buck ultimately stops with her. Only right now I can't imagine she'd even know what a buck is.

'Here you go,' says Tracey, the Operations Director (aka our big boss) as she walks up to us with a bucket of ice. 'Is this going to be enough?'

Helen and I stare at the bucket in confusion before it dawns on me that she's on the same radio channel and heard our conversation.

I don't think Helen has made the connection. She wrinkles her face up and opens her mouth to say something and I grab the bucket before she can. I don't want Tracey to realise that Helen's been drinking.

'Um, yes, thanks. It's just to put under the chocolate sculpture in the lobby as it seems to be melting under the lights.'

'Good thinking,' she says. 'Have you seen Willy?'

Helen points, open mouthed, at the GQ model.

'The real Willy? I wanted him to do a photo op before he does the call to dinner and he seems to have gone AWOL.'

'Um, I did see him a while ago in the shrinking space,' I say, thinking that, of all the parties we've thrown, this *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* one seems to be the most surreal.

Tracey gives a little nod of the head in appreciation and clip-claps off in her skyscraper heels.

'Ice?' I say, holding the bucket with a smirk. 'I forgot she was on the radio loop tonight. I guess we better watch what we say.'

Helen and I only work together if it's one of our large events, like this one where we've got almost two thousand guests on site. It means that the two of us get a bit carried away with our

headsets and over the years we've honed a discreet radio code. *I need some ice over here* is code for this guy is so hot I need some ice to cool down. *The hotel has confirmed the reservation* is for people who are getting down and dirty and are in danger of needing a room imminently. *Time for the rubber gloves* means that someone's about to throw up. *Have you seen Mary Poppins* is for when someone's as high as a kite.

It might sound a bit childish, but it helps get us through the night. And when we're managing fifteen nights of work Christmas dos, we need all the help we can get.

I spot a man crouched on all fours bending down towards the chocolate river.

'Excuse me,' I say, pulling him slowly up to standing, 'it's not actually chocolate. But if that's what you're after, we've got a chocolate waterfall near the entrance, or the chocolate liqueur luge by the fairground rides. They taste much better.'

The man nods and staggers off in the opposite direction to where I pointed.

'I can't say I blame him. It does look delicious. This whole place does. It's giving me the right munchies tonight,' says Helen, and I grab her arm as I think she's about to make a lunge for the river herself. The company that supplied it have done too good a job with the clever lighting projected onto water – it really does look like chocolate.

'Have you eaten tonight? Maybe you need something more.'

I don't know what's got into her. It might be our last Christmas party of the year, and the event staff know what they're doing blindfolded by now, but that's no reason to be slacking off.

'I was on my way to get something from the kitchen, when I bumped into Willy Wonka – not that man obviously, but the real one. Well, not the real one, as the old guy died, didn't he? And Johnny Depp's not here. But the Willy Wanker from here. Oops! Willy Wanker – ha! That so would have been a better character name for him –'

'You were on your way to get food when you saw the guy who's acting as Willy,' I say trying to follow the babble and keep her on track.

'Right. Willy W-O-N-K-A,' she says, enunciating it carefully and suppressing her giggles, 'was drinking this cocktail. Of course I told him that he shouldn't be drinking on the job.'

'Of course,' I say, wondering if that was before or after she'd drunk the rest. I just hope that he's in a better state than Helen, who's turned away from me and is licking one of the fake giant candy canes. I don't want to point out that she's probably not the first person to have done that this party season.

'They look so real, don't they?' she says, as if she's surprised that they're not, despite the fact that she was the one who came up with the concept and sourced the props.

'I know, they're so impressive. It's going to be a hard theme to top next year. What do you reckon Tracey'll pick?'

I'm trying to keep her talking to gauge how drunk she is.

'Maybe *Fifty Shades of Grey*.'

She's turned back to stare at the GQ model again and I can tell exactly what's on her mind.

'We could have chains hanging from the ceilings, and whips and riding crops as props.'



‘Hmm, perhaps,’ I say realising she’s further gone than I thought.

Kylie’s version of ‘Santa Baby’ starts playing through the speakers, proving to me once again that Christmas music is the only part that doesn’t gel with the party theme. I’m about to say this to Helen, when I realise that she’s got her leg draped around one of the giant candy canes and she’s about to swing round it like it’s a stripper pole.

‘Helen,’ I say, catching her after the candy cane begins to bend. Of all the things I risk assessed it for, having a woman try to hang off it with her thighs hadn’t been one of them.

The real Willy Wonka breezes past us on stilts, ushering the guests to the dining room. He’s swaying slightly and it’s hard to know whether that’s just because he’s so high up or whether he’s been affected by the cocktails too. I’m hoping it’s the former as right now I’ve got enough to deal with looking after Helen.

‘I guess that’s our cue to check everyone’s in position,’ I say to her loudly, in an attempt to remind her that she’s supposed to be working. She just smiles blindly back at me. ‘Do you want to take the acrobats and I’ll take the catering staff?’

She nods, but not before she thrusts her phone at me and tells me to take a photo. She slips her arm round the GQ model and grabs one of the photo booth props. Of course she picks the giant #LivingMyBestLife sign.

I take a photo of them grinning wildly and drag her away from the man, nudging her in the direction of the acrobats. I watch her walk away – she’s doing an over-the-top swagger as

if she's trying very hard to walk normally. I can only hope she sobers up.

I needn't have worried about the caterers; as this is the last party of the season it's the fifteenth time they've done this menu, so they've got it down pat. They've just started clearing the main-course plates and I've got time to find Helen. I hurry along, weaving my way through the giant candy statues, wondering if she'll be back to her normal self.

As soon as I go out of the back of the tent I get my answer: a big fat giant resounding no. She's currently waving the acrobats' long ribbons whilst spinning around and trying to make them fly out.

'Helen,' I say, rushing over and holding her up as her body tries to move in time with her spinning head.

'Lydia, are there two of you or am I just seeing double?'

She laughs as if it's the funniest thing she's heard, and I know then that we're in trouble. She was slurring a little before, but now it's unmistakeable.

'Are you OK, Helen?'

'Totally, totally fine.'

She is definitely not fine. What am I going to do?

The radio crackles in our ears. 'We have a situation with the chocolate river,' comes Tracey's voice.

I see Helen going to press the button on her lapel and I make a lunge for it and knock her onto her bottom.

'What are you doing?' she says, giggling.

'I'll get the chocolate river. You stay here and play with your ribbons.'

Her face lights up and she starts spinning around again, reminding me of a dog chasing its own tail.

I slide back through the door to the main tent and see a waiter carrying coffee.

'Hey, Angus,' I say, waving him over, 'can you give me a really strong cup of that, please?'

'Sure,' he says, pouring me one. 'Long night?'

'Something like that. Thanks.'

I quickly deliver it to Helen and tell her in no uncertain terms to stay put and make sure it's all drunk by the time I get back.

I practically run to the chocolate river where I find Tracey standing over it, a pint glass in her hand.

'Everything OK?' I ask, slightly red-faced and out of breath.

'I think someone's been sick in it.'

I look at it and there are definite lumps. My stomach lurches at the thought.

'And you want help clearing it?' I say, looking at the pint glass that she's handing to me. I'm assuming she wants it to be scooped out.

'I'd do it, but I've just had my nails done for Christmas.'

I look down at my own glossy maroon talons. I hadn't planned to redo them before Christmas either, but I guess they're not as intricate as Tracey's, which have little snowmen painted on them.

I approach the chocolate river and have a quick check to make sure there are no guests around.

'Let me know if anyone comes,' I say, finding a switch behind a fake hill. I flick it and the chocolate river looks like normal water again. I'm relieved to see that the sick is in fact just a selection of Dolly Mixtures that someone's dropped in there. I scoop them out with the pint glass and pop it on a nearby return station for the catering team to deal with.

'Sorry about that, Lydia,' says Tracey as I flip the switch back on, 'we probably could have left them there. I just didn't want anyone to see the lumps and feel queasy.'

Now she tells me.

'Where are they up to with the dinner?' she asks.

'They're just starting to serve coffees and the desserts with follow shortly,' I say, hoping that Helen's drunk hers.

She looks at her watch and nods approvingly. 'Everything's running like clockwork. Excellent. Looks like you and Helen are doing a great job as per usual.'

I can't help glowing with pride that she included me in that too, even though this is Helen's baby. It's nice to be appreciated. Before this job I worked for an events company in London for six months whose ethos was the polar opposite of here. It was a culture which thrived on snarking, shouting and belittling. So whenever I get a work compliment I appreciate it all the more.

'I'll probably be heading off soon,' she says.

Spurred on by the compliment I figure that I should ask her about my latest idea. I've been trying, unsuccessfully, to make the transition from events coordinator to events manager for the

last year and I've come up with a plan. And who knows, if it goes right, I might be able to be #LivingMyBestLife in no time.

'Um, Tracey, I was just wondering if you'd had a chance to look into the proms proposal I sent over?' I'm holding my breath in anticipation.

'Ah, yes, as a matter of fact I did. I think it could be quite a lucrative new market. Thank you for suggesting it.'

'Great. So should I look into it in the New Year?'

'Actually, I thought I'd put Helen onto it. Hopefully, we'll have enough time to get some ideas in the planning before schools and colleges book them up.'

My heart sinks. I'm about to accept it and skulk away when I stop myself.

'Actually, Tracey, I had hoped that this would be my project and that I'd get to plan the events from start to finish. I've got some ideas for packages and . . .'

'Lydia, don't get me wrong, you're a fantastic events coordinator and we could not be more grateful for the work that you do in the support role. There is nobody that does an event risk assessment as well as you. Which is why I don't think we should add to your responsibilities.'

'But I could always research proms on top of my current workload.'

'I have no doubt that you could. It's just that Helen is such an experienced manager and she's the one who always has the creative ideas – the crazy ones, the kooky ones. Perhaps, with her being younger than you, she's got a bit more lust for life. You know? She'll tap right into that youth market.'

'Um, Helen's five years older than me,' I say, desperately trying not to take it personally that my boss has basically just called me boring.

'Is she? Well, look at her,' says Tracey, pointing. I follow her finger and gasp in horror. Helen is currently in the bright purple zorbl ball rolling around a pen doing her best Violet Beauregarde impression. 'Have you been in the zorbl ball, Lydia?'

I look over at it before looking back down at my pencil skirt. I mentally risk assess zorbling in this outfit: 1) risk of flashing my pants; 2) greater risk of splitting my skirt; and 3) knowing how uncoordinated I am there's a high risk I'd probably roll right over the pen boundary and knock the giant candy canes over like skittles.

I don't point out that the only reason that Helen is in it is that she's drunk as a skunk.

'You're a great asset to the team, Lydia, but I think it's important to stick to what we're good at.'

She gives me a firm look as if to indicate that the subject is now well and truly closed.

I start to feel tears welling up behind my eyes and I try and blink them back, wishing that I hadn't put quite so many layers of mascara on tonight.

'Oh dear, I think there's something going on over in that bed,' she says, nodding towards the double bed where people can pretend that they're Willy Wonka's grandparents sleeping top to toe. Only the two people in it seem to be recreating quite a different scene. Something you definitely wouldn't expect to find in children's fiction. I glance over at Helen, who's

still zorbing around and decide she'll be OK where she is for another few minutes.

'I'll sort it out,' I say, relieved to have a reason to leave before I start sobbing in front of my boss.

I slump off blinking back the tears. It's not that I mind my job. I'm good at what I do and I enjoy it, which I know is the important thing, but I'm desperate for a promotion. I'd worked so hard to think of a new revenue stream and now Tracey's giving it to Helen because I'm too boring.

I almost take a glass of champagne from a passing waitress, figuring that if you can't beat them, join them, but then I remember that someone's got to be the responsible one. And I guess, as per usual, that'll be me.

'Um, excuse me,' I say, as I gingerly approach the bed, trying not to notice that only one of them has now got their head out of the cover, 'would you like me to call you a taxi so that you can go to a hotel? The dinner's about to end and there are going to be a lot of people heading this way – including your bosses, I imagine.'

A woman's head pops out from the other end of the bed and she gets out without saying a word. She pats down her dress and slides into the heels that she'd left by the side of the bed. She doesn't even acknowledge me as she pulls out a make-up compact and reapplies her lipply as she goes.

'Amy,' calls the guy as she totters off to the toilets. 'Her name was Amy, wasn't it? Or was it Emma?'

I hear a crash over on the other side of the room and I leave lover boy and head off to the zorbing. Helen's knocked over one

of the chocolate trees. From the looks of it, no one was hurt and thankfully Tracey's nowhere to be seen.

I sigh as I cross the room. Boring Lydia to the rescue. Thank goodness this is my last day at work before the holidays, as at this rate I'm going to need a couple of weeks at home to get over it.