

Chapter 1

'Are they here already?' Ella asked Lou as they pushed open the front door.

'Dunno,' Lou said. 'Hang on. Can't get the bastard key out.'

Ella glanced back at her friend as she stepped into the hallway. 'Smells better than halls, anyway.'

'Paint,' Lou said. 'Fuck. Me.' Lou turned the key so the deadbolt slid out and in again. 'Can you have a go at this? It's jammed.'

'There's no post on the floor,' Ella said, stepping up to the door and grabbing the key. 'So either the landlord's been in or they're already here.' She waggled the key gently and it slid out. 'Done.'

'Shit, how did you do that?' Lou said, leaving her suitcase in the hall and heading for the kitchen. 'We'll have to get some lube for it. Can't have that every time we come in.'

'Lube,' Ella said, smiling as she followed Lou. The hall was at least one source of the fresh paint smell – it was newly magnolia. When they'd come to look at the place, the walls had been a dingy, stained, grey.

Lou threw a grin back over her shoulder. 'You know what I mean. That spray stuff.'

‘WD40,’ Ella said. ‘Please tell me you don’t use it as lube.’

Lou laughed. ‘Not yet. But the semester is young.’

‘It’s natural, I think. I read a thing about it once.’

‘It worries me that you ever read a thing about WD40, but that is good to know.’

‘Kitchen,’ Ella said, opening the first door on the right.

‘I remember,’ Lou said.

The kitchen was bright and white and clean and the rows of empty bottles that had adorned the shelf above the picture rail had been cleared away since the two of them had come to view the house.

‘Aw,’ Ella said. ‘That was one of my favourite things.’

‘Just means we have to start our own collection,’ Lou said. ‘Challenge accepted.’

‘What happened to “I’m not going to drink as much” this year?’ Ella walked around the kitchen, sliding open drawers and peeking into cupboards. Everything was empty and clean. There was actual liner paper in the drawers. Liner paper!

‘“As much”,’ Lou said. ‘Not “nothing”. I’m still young. I’m still at uni. I’m still human.’ Lou opened the fridge, which was also clean. And empty. ‘Need to do a big shop,’ she said. She closed the door and looked at Ella, who seemed to be examining the buttons on the washing machine.

‘Do you know which room you want?’ Lou asked her as she started up the stairs.

‘Don’t really mind.’ Ella shrugged, following.

‘Bollocks you don’t.’ Lou grinned, stopping on the first landing and pushing open a couple of doors. ‘We’re here first so we get the two big rooms. Result.’



Ella followed Lou up the next flight of stairs to the main living space. 'Is that fair? I mean, it's completely random that we got here first.'

Lou looked down at Ella. 'Bagsy rules apply, everyone knows that.'

The top floor of the house was the reason they'd chosen it. And the reason there was going to be five of them sharing instead of four as originally planned. It was all one huge living space with glass doors leading out onto a roof terrace.

'So they're definitely not here,' Ella said, following Lou over to the two huge sofas, arranged in an L-shape in front of the TV. 'Should I text them?'

Lou laughed, flopping down on the sofa nearest the window. 'Why? They'll get here when they get here. You're not their mum.'

'Actually, I haven't even got Paige's number,' Ella said, sitting on the other sofa and immediately turning round to look at the rest of the room.

'Yeah, we'd best make sure we've all got each other's numbers when they do get here,' Lou said. 'Fucking nightmare last year getting locked out and having to track people down.'

'We should put a list on the fridge,' Ella said.

Lou grinned at her. 'Right next to the cleaning rota, yeah.'

'It just makes sense! I know you think I'm a dick.'

'I don't think you're a dick,' Lou said. 'I just think you're old before your time. We're. Here. To. Have. Fun.'

'I'm. Here. To. Get. An. Edu—'

'Yeah, yeah, that too. We passed last year, didn't we? Don't worry so much.'

Ella had passed, but she hadn't done as well as she'd wanted to. At school everyone had kept calling her a big fish in a small pond and telling her how she was going to wow them at uni, but she hadn't wowed anyone. She hadn't wowed anyone at all.

Ella didn't pick the shittest room (the one next to the kitchen), but she did pick a small one. But it was nice. It had a bed and a desk and a window onto the street and that was all she really needed. Unzipping her case, she pulled out the fabric bag that she'd packed her underwear in. She opened the top drawer of the chest of drawers with some trepidation – the drawers in her room at halls had been absolutely disgusting, fag ends in one, an apple core in another – but this was clean, thank god.

She packed away the few clothes she'd brought with her – she still had to get the rest of her stuff from her parents' house in Cheshire – and then sat down on the bed, looking around the room. She didn't want any distractions this year and if that meant living in a room like a cell, that was fine. It was quiet though, just a bit of street noise from outside, which she should like – the noise in halls had driven her up the wall – but it made her feel a bit sad. A bit lonely. A bit lost.

She took out her phone and whatsapped her brother a photo of the room with the caption 'New home sweet home'. She hadn't expected to hear straight back, but she could see him typing.

'Couldn't find anything smaller?'

She grinned. 'There's a cupboard under the stairs. But there's a boy wizard in it.'

‘Typical. U ok?’

‘Yeah. Ta. Just feel a bit . . . something.’

‘Hate that. Can’t ring, sorry. In an interview.’

‘STOP TEXTING THEN’

Dylan sent a string of laugh/cry emojis and Ella sent back the same number of eyeroll emojis.

‘Call later yeah?’ Dylan sent and Ella nodded at the phone before sending a thumbs up and a heart. She didn’t know if he meant he’d call or she would, but it didn’t really matter. One of them would. She felt better already.

‘Are we allowed to paint the walls?’ Lou asked as soon as Ella walked into her room. She’d taken the biggest one on the first floor. ‘This room is way too beige.’

‘Magnolia,’ Ella said. Same as the hall.

‘Whatever. I’m thinking bright pink? Or, I don’t know, can you do all the walls with blackboard paint? Like the door?’

‘If you can paint it – which I doubt – I bet you can’t paint it pink or black.’

‘Fucksticks. I’ll just have to stick a load of posters up then. How’s your room?’

‘Fine. Small. Plain.’

‘Take the big one!’ Lou said. ‘Seriously. Why do you think one of the others deserves it more than you?’

‘It’s not about deserving it,’ Ella said. ‘I just don’t need a big room.’

‘Well, at least let me do it up.’ She picked up a handful of lacy underwear and then dropped it on the bed again. ‘Put up some fairy lights. Mirror on the ceiling.’

Ella grinned. 'Yeah, that's just what I was thinking.'

'It'd do you good,' Lou said, finally throwing the underwear into a drawer. 'You keep saying you're here for an education.'

'Not about my vagina,' Ella said, crossing the room and looking out of the window. The street outside was quiet. 'They still not here?'

'Don't think so, no. They've got keys though, haven't they? Want to go and get a drink?'

If Ella rested her head on the glass and looked to the right, she could see the beer garden of the nearest bar. But there wasn't anyone sitting out there, because it was drizzling.

'We could go and bring some back . . .' she suggested.

'Morrisons then? Get some food as well. I'm starved.'

When they got back from the supermarket – Ella carrying two bags of food, Lou carrying two bags of booze – they could tell the others had arrived. Every light in the house seemed to be on and 'Sorry' by Justin Bieber was blasting down the stairs.

'Is that Justin fucking Bieber?' Lou said, her face a picture of horror.

'Issey's here,' Ella grinned.

'We should've got them to put that in the contract – no Justin fucking Bieber.'

'To give him his full name.' Ella ran up the stairs.

'Hiya!' Issey yelled, poking her head out of the door. 'Where've you been?'

'Getting provisions,' Lou said from behind Ella.

Issey ran over and hugged them both at the same time, saying, 'What did you get?' too loud into Ella's ear.

‘Food,’ Ella said at the same time as Lou said, ‘Beer. And tequila.’

‘Oh shit. I hate tequila,’ Issey said. ‘Did you get limes and salt?’

‘What’s it to you if you hate tequila?’ Lou asked.

Issey grinned. ‘Isn’t it great? The house? So much better than last year.’

‘Where’s Liane?’ Ella asked, watching Lou take the bottles out of the bag and line them up on the huge wooden dining table.

‘Sleeping,’ Issey said. ‘She’s hungover.’

‘Doubt she’s sleeping through this,’ Lou said. ‘Sorry’ had ended and ‘Baby’ had started. ‘Do you have to?’

‘You knew my feelings about Biebs before you invited me to move in,’ Issey said. ‘We come as a pair.’

‘You wish,’ Ella said.

Issey grinned. ‘Yeah, I do. Sexy little monkey.’

‘Jesus,’ Lou said. ‘There’d better be a bottle opener downstairs.’

When Lou came back up, Liane was with her, looking rumpled and confused, but still gorgeous, her short afro tied under a red scarf.

‘Where were you last night?’ Ella asked her, hugging her gently, Liane nuzzling her head into Ella’s neck as she always did.

‘Leaving do at work. Didn’t get home ’til five. We were only meant to be going to bingo.’

‘I love your job,’ Issey said, throwing herself back onto the long sofa, and propping her feet up on the arm. ‘Those old ladies really know how to party.’

‘They’re a bunch of bastards,’ Liane said, lifting Issey’s legs up so she could sit down and then putting them back over her own. ‘I told them not to let me drink too much cos I was moving in today. But they were buying me Long Island Iced Teas all night and then we did shots.’

‘Shots,’ Lou said, coming back in holding four shot glasses in one hand and a bottle opener in the other, a family bag of Doritos tucked down the front of her shirt.

Ella shook her head, laughing and frowning at the same time. ‘That sounds like a very bad idea.’

‘Oh, come on!’ Lou sat down at the scratched wooden dining table and tipped her head back, her long silver hair falling back over her shoulders. ‘It’s our first night together! We need to do something to mark it.’ She patted the pockets of her dungarees. ‘But I need a fag first.’ She stood up, stretched her arms over her head and walked out onto the roof terrace, leaving the door open.

‘Where’s the other one?’ Issey said from the sofa. ‘What’s she called?’

‘Paige,’ Liane said. ‘She said she might be late. And we should wait for her if we’re going to do shots. It should be all of us.’

‘I’ve never done shots,’ Issey said.

‘WHAT?’ Liane screeched, before grabbing her head in both hands and muttering, ‘Oh my god.’

‘Never?’ Ella said, sitting down on the armchair next to the TV.

Issey shook her head. ‘My dad made me promise. Before I came away. No drugs, no sex, no shots.’

‘You’ve had sex though,’ Liane said, her head tipped back against the sofa, eyes closed. ‘I’ve heard you having sex.’

Issey laughed. ‘Yeah. S’why it seemed even more important to not do the other two.’

‘You smoked weed with me at the end of last term,’ Lou called from the terrace.

‘That was one time.’

‘May as well go for a hat-trick,’ Ella said.

Issey snorted. ‘Yeah, I guess.’ She shuffled back up the sofa, her legs sliding out from under Liane’s. ‘Sorry, dad.’

Chapter 2

Paige couldn't get the door to open.

'SHIT,' she said through gritted teeth, kicking the bottom of the door, hard.

'Need a hand there, girl?' someone said from behind her.

'Fuck off,' she said, without turning round.

'Charming.'

Paige leaned forward and rested her head against the door. She'd just wanted to get here, move in, go to sleep and not have to speak to anyone. Was that too much to ask? Instead she'd had to drive her dad to his girlfriend's house because he was still over the limit from last night. Then she'd had to get a cab she couldn't afford to the station, where the train was delayed and the coffee shop was closed for refurbishment when it was only the thought of one of their white chocolate brownies that had got her that far. And then on the Liverpool train she'd had to stand up and listen to a bunch of old fellas arguing about football and politics and calling each other pussies. She'd wanted to lean over and tell them that word was decidedly not an insult because there was nothing stronger than a pussy, but she hadn't been able to make herself do it.

Instead she'd posted a selfie on Instagram and hashtagged it #pussypower. By the time she'd got off the train, it already had ninety-two likes.

She'd had to walk from the station to the house, dragging her suitcase behind her even though one of the wheels was wobbling and it kept hitting her in the back of the legs. She snorted as she passed a 'Gentlemen's Club' and then a ridiculous looking barber shop, all chrome and blue lights. It was like the eighties here. She loved it even when she hated it.

She took a step back and looked up at the three-storey house she'd be calling home for at least the next year. Lights were on in almost every window so at least she knew her housemates were in. She looked around for a bell and when she didn't see one, knocked first on the door and then on the nearest window. So much for her plan of sneaking in without actually having to talk to anyone.

She was considering giving up and going to sit in a coffee shop for half an hour when the door jerked open and a tiny girl wearing satin football shorts and a loose vest stood there grinning at her. Paige half recognised her from uni, but at uni she couldn't usually see her nipples.

'Are you Paige?' the girl said, her eyebrows shooting up her forehead. 'We were starting to think you weren't coming.'

'Yeah,' Paige said. 'Sorry. I got held up.' She didn't know why she was apologising.

'Come in,' the girl said, leaning forward to grab Paige's bag and giving Paige a clear view down her top. 'We're about to do shots.'

'Great,' Paige said.

* * *

'You've already met Issey,' Liane said, pointing at the girl who'd answered the door.

'Yeah, but I don't think I said,' Issey said. She was sitting cross-legged on the sofa now, a bottle of beer in one hand, her phone in the other. 'I'm Issey.'

'That's Ella, and Lou's outside having yet another fag,' Liane told her.

'Paige,' Paige said. 'I've seen you around,' she said to Lou.

'Yeah,' Lou said from the terrace door. 'You do look familiar. What are you studying?'

'English and Cultural Studies,' Paige said. 'You?'

'Just English,' Lou said, frowning. Seconds later, she clicked her fingers. 'You go to Bleachers!'

Paige smiled. 'Yeah. Not lately. But I have been, yeah. Your hair's great, by the way.'

Lou pulled her long silver hair up into a ponytail and let it drop. 'Thanks. I get a discount cos I work there part-time.'

'Yeah?' Paige said. She really could do with getting her hair dyed professionally. She'd been doing it herself for a while now and it was OK, but not the same. There was no way she could afford it, but maybe Lou would do it for mates' rates.

'You'd look good violet,' Lou said.

'I was thinking red. Like, bright Little Mermaid red.'

Lou frowned, peering at Paige. 'I think that might be too harsh. Maybe pink? Cerise?'

'Sounds good to me,' Paige said.

'It'll look super-hot,' Issey said, from the sofa. 'But never mind that now . . . SHOTS!'

‘You’re keen, for someone who’s never done them before,’ Ella said. She was perched on the edge of the coffee table, her elbow on her knee, her chin on her fist.

‘You’ve never done shots?’ Paige asked Issey.

‘Come and sit,’ Lou said, gesturing at the second sofa.

‘Nope,’ Issey said, popping the ‘p’. ‘Shot virgin.’

‘Or do you want to go and settle into your room first?’ Ella asked Paige.

‘No, it’s OK,’ Paige said. ‘Ta.’

If anyone had asked her, up to and including, like, five minutes ago, Paige would have said she had zero interest in doing shots with three girls she barely knew and one she . . . actually, four girls she barely knew. But now that she was here and they were friendly and the living room was cosy and her room was empty . . . well, maybe just the one.

Liane dropped down on the sofa next to Issey, who immediately curled up against her, rubbing her head against her neck like a cat, the way Liane usually did. Paige made herself look away.

‘So it’s shit tequila,’ Lou said. ‘It’s all I could afford. But it’ll get the job done.’

She poured the clear liquid into the glasses and they each held one up in front of their faces.

‘Hey,’ Issey said. ‘Aren’t we doing the slammer thing? With limes and salt or whatever it is.’

‘Oh fuxache,’ Lou groaned. ‘Do we have to?’

‘Shot virgin!’ Issey yelled, lifting her hands over her head. ‘We have to do it right!’

Lou rolled her eyes, but she got up and ran downstairs to the

kitchen, coming back with limes and salt and a roll of paper towels. 'In case you puke.'

'I'm not going to puke,' Issey said, but she looked almost nervous as she arranged the lime and salt on the table in front of her.

'To second year!' Lou said, holding up her glass.

'To our own place!' Liane said.

'To fun!' added Lou and downed her shot.

The others followed, wincing or gasping or laughing. Issey tipped hers back, sucked the lime, licked the salt of the back of her hand and said, 'Fuck me!'

'Good?' Lou asked.

Issey placed the shot glass on the top of her head, her posture perfect. 'Another?'

'Boyfriend?' Lou asked Paige when she was three shots down. She was sitting on the floor between Issey's legs and Issey was attempting to braid her hair. 'Girlfriend?'

Paige shook her head. 'No one.'

'Really?' Issey said. 'But you're gorgeous.'

Paige dipped her head, her hair falling down over her face. It was ridiculous: if someone posted that on one of her Instagram photos, she'd happily reply 'Thanks, babe!' but IRL? Nope.

'She might not be interested, Iz,' Liane said. 'Not everyone's sex crazed like you.'

'I'm not sex crazed,' Issey said. She was lying down now, with her head on Liane's lap. 'I just like boys. Lots and lots of boys.'

'I blame the parents,' Liane said.

Issey laughed. 'Yep.'

‘They’re strict?’ Paige asked. She’d only had the one shot – she didn’t really like tequila – but she was on her second beer.

‘Yup,’ Issey said. ‘My dad’s Greek. And I’m the youngest of five girls. So I was always totally babied and over-protected. So I came to uni and –’

‘Went wild,’ Lou finished.

Issey laughed. ‘Not wild. Not that wild. But wild for me. Wild enough that if my dad knew he’d, you know, die.’

‘My dad doesn’t care what I do,’ Paige said.

‘I’m sure that’s not true,’ Ella said instantly.

‘He doesn’t even know what uni I’m at.’ Paige put the beer bottle down on the coffee table and lined it up with the others, turning them so all the labels were facing her.

‘What?’ Ella said. ‘He must do!’

Paige shook her head. ‘He knows I’m at uni, obviously. But I kept waiting for him to ask where and he never did. So I just didn’t tell him.’

‘And your mum?’ Ella asked. She’d moved onto the sofa next to Lou and she hooked her arm through Lou’s, cuddling against her.

‘Dead,’ Paige said.

‘Fuck,’ Ella said. ‘I’m so sorry.’

‘I didn’t know that,’ Liane said, reaching out one perfect leg and poking Paige in the arm with her toes.

Paige shrugged. ‘It’s never come up.’

‘Ella’s family is perfect,’ Lou said. ‘So it upsets her when other people’s aren’t.’

‘Hey!’ Ella said. ‘That’s not fair.’ She started to sit up, pulling her arm away.

Lou pulled it back. 'Come on. I'm only joking. But you have to admit your family is like something out of a TV show.'

'So's mine,' Paige said. '*Eastenders*.'

Issey gave one of her honks of laughter that made everyone jump. 'You're funny!' She pointed her beer bottle at Paige. 'I didn't think you were going to be funny!'

'Why not?' Paige asked.

'Because you're so . . .' Issey dipped her head, looked up under her fringe, pouted. She was even pushing her small boobs together with her inner arms.

'Jesus Christ,' Paige said. 'Seriously?'

Liane was crying with laughter. 'Oh my god, Issey! You literally only just met her!'

'I know!' Issey said. 'What's wrong with that? Look at her!'

Liane wiped her eyes with the back of her hands, smearing some mascara onto her cheekbone. She stared seriously across the room at Paige. 'She's just gorgeous,' she said. 'That doesn't mean she's not funny. I thought I told you she was funny.'

'That's what I'm saying!' Issey said. 'I said she's funny!' She clambered up off the sofa, pushing Liane's legs off hers. And you didn't say she was funny, you said she was in the shit and we should help her out.'

She half staggered out of the room, bumping into the small table at the end of the sofa and sending all the glasses rattling. 'Just going to the loo,' she told them.

'Sorry about her,' Liane told Paige. 'She's pissed.'

'S'OK,' Paige said. 'I'm glad you asked me anyway.'

It wasn't like she hadn't known. It wasn't as if she'd thought Liane was into her or anything. She'd known Liane had only

asked her because Liane was a good person and so one day, after their seminar, when they'd walked to the library together – Liane to meet her friends in the cafe, Paige to stay warm, study, and pretend she'd eaten her lunch already – Paige had ended up telling her too much about her situation. Not everything, of course, but enough.

'Sorry about that. Issey hasn't got much of a brain-to-mouth filter,' Ella said now.

Paige shook her head. 'It's fine. So . . . where are you from?'

'I'm from Lancashire,' Ella said. 'Very small town.'

'And your perfect family?' Paige smiled.

'They're definitely not perfect,' Ella said, smiling back. 'My parents got divorced when I was six. Mum remarried and my stepdad is amazing. I've got a brother a year older and we've got a cat and that's it. Boring.'

'They play Scrabble when they go home,' Lou said, draining a beer and pouring herself more tequila. 'And a family WhatsApp group. They all really like each other! It's fucked up.'

'That sounds great,' Paige said.

'It's not bad,' Ella said, smiling.

'I always wanted a brother,' Paige said.

'You an only child?' Lou said. 'Me too. Sucks. Dylan's, like, Ella's best friend.'

'Yeah?' Paige said, opening another beer.

'We're pretty close, yeah,' Ella said.

'Once,' Lou said, crossing the room to the terrace, pulling a cigarette packet out from the pocket of her dungarees. 'Once when she was drunk, Ella said he was her favourite person in the world. Imagine that.'

‘Piss off,’ Ella said, laughing.

‘Before that, I thought I was her favourite person in the world. But no. It’s her actual brother. How wholesome.’

Ella rolled her eyes and Paige smiled at her. It sounded lovely. She couldn’t even imagine it.

They moved out onto the roof terrace when the beer ran out. The navy sky was dotted with stars, the air surprisingly warm. Laughter and shouting drifted up to them from the street below. They’d brought pillows and duvets out with them, and were passing the tequila round now, swigging it from the bottle. Paige loved it way more than she’d expected to.

‘No relationships for me this year,’ Ella said when Liane had finished telling them about the boy she’d seen on the train who’d given her a ‘significant look’. ‘All work all the time,’ Ella added.

‘You can’t work all the time,’ Lou said. ‘That’s unrealistic.’

‘Well . . .’ Ella said. She leaned forward to grab some Doritos, but tipped over, ending up with her head in Paige’s lap. ‘Sorree,’ she giggled.

Paige shrugged and helped her back to upright, pushing the crisps closer.

‘I’m still going to have fun with you guys,’ Ella said. ‘But I don’t need the distraction of a boy!’

‘They are distracting,’ Issey said. She was curled up under her duvet like a dog, only the top of her hair visible.

‘Well, I’m not giving up boys. Men,’ Liane said. ‘No fucking way.’

‘I’m not giving them up either,’ Ella said. ‘Just . . . no relationships. I can do . . . casual.’

‘You?’ Lou said. ‘You can do casual?’

‘I can!’ Ella said.

‘Oh, I’m sure,’ Lou said, standing up and lighting a cigarette. ‘It’s just, you know, you never have.’

‘I have!’ Ella said, shifting so she was kneeling up and looking over at Lou. ‘That guy in that bar that time.’

‘Oh, yeah,’ Lou said. ‘I remember him.’ She grinned.

‘What guy in what bar what time?’ Issey said, crawling out of her duvet.

‘I can’t remember the bar. But the guy was doing a survey? And he came over and started talking to us. Me and Lou. And he asked me to dance. And I danced with him. And then I went home with him!’

‘And what happened when you went home with him?’ Lou said, blowing a stream of smoke out over the street.

‘We fell asleep,’ Ella said.

‘And in the morning?’

‘I left.’

‘That does not count,’ Lou said.

‘It so does!’ Ella said, sitting back down and taking the tequila from Paige. ‘I went home with someone I’d just met! It counts! Doesn’t it?’

‘I don’t think it does,’ Liane said. ‘Not if you didn’t have sex. Did you do anything? Blowie? Handy? Anything?’

‘No,’ Ella said, pouting.

‘Doesn’t count,’ Issey said. ‘Sorry.’

Ella sighed. ‘Well, excuse me if I don’t want to just shag random guys I meet in clubs!’

‘That’s what I’m saying,’ Lou said, sitting down next to Ella and wrapping both arms around her. ‘You don’t do casual.’

‘I could,’ Ella said. ‘I could if I wanted to.’

‘What about you?’ Liane asked Lou. ‘Have you heard from Kyle?’

Lou shook her head. ‘Nope. And I don’t want to either.’

‘You’re done?’ Liane asked her. ‘Really?’

‘Definitely,’ Lou said. ‘This will be a Kyle-free year.’

The five of them sat in silence for a little while, Ella staring up at the stars, Paige scrolling her phone, Issey trying to crawl inside her duvet cover. Liane had her eyes closed and may actually have been asleep. She always fell asleep easily when she got drunk.

‘I think this is going to be amazing,’ Lou said. ‘The five of us. Living here.’

Chapter 3

Issey woke up with a mouth that felt like something was decomposing in it and a dead arm. She lifted it over her banging head and tried to wiggle her fingers, but it felt really weird. Like it wasn't her arm at all. Like she was wearing a too-tight rubber glove. She grabbed her wrist with her other hand and tried to shake her hand, but it didn't help. She let it drop back down onto the bed.

'Oof. Fuck! Iz!'

Issey yelped, jerking backwards and banging her head on the wall. 'Shitsquirrels. Li?'

Liane rolled over, but Issey could still only see the top of her hair. 'You punched me.'

'I didn't even know you were here. Why are you here?'

'Weird noise. In m'room.'

'Weird smell in mine,' Issey said, shuffling up the bed and leaning back on the pillows. The line through the blinds made stripes on the bed.

'Tequila makes me fart.'

'Nice.' Issey reached for her phone and opened Twitter and Instagram. 'I'm not even hungover.'

‘You’re prob still drunk.’

‘Last night was good, wasn’t it?’ Issey said, typing Paige’s name into the Instagram search box. ‘Paige is nice.’

‘I told you she was.’

Issey shivered. She shouldn’t have left her window open last night. She pulled at the duvet, trying to tug it back up to her chest, but all she succeeded in doing was revealing an undressed Liane.

‘Soz,’ Liane said without moving. ‘Might be naked.’

‘You are,’ Issey said. ‘You are naked. In my bed. Like some sort of perv. What if I was naked too, hmm? That would not be appropriate.’

‘It’d be fine,’ Liane said. ‘S’not like I was going to hump you in your sleep. Anyway, you sleep in shorts and a vest. Always have.’

Issey rolled her eyes. Liane was right. She wasn’t that keen on being so predictable. Maybe she’d go out later and buy herself a nightdress or something. Sensible pyjamas like Ella’s.

‘Anyway. Look at this.’ She held her phone up to Liane’s face and watched as Liane scrunched her nose up and blinked against the light.

‘Is that Paige?’ Liane asked.

‘Yes!’ Issey said, scrolling. ‘And look!’

‘I know,’ Liane said, shuffling up the bed until she was next to Issey. ‘I follow her. She’s gorgeous.’

The photo showed Paige lying in bed on her front, showing quite a lot of cleavage, her mouth open, staring straight into the camera.

She scrolled past some photos of food and sunsets and clouds and stopped on one of Paige in a bikini, in front of a mirror.

‘She looks sexy as fuck there,’ Liane said.

‘Do you think?’ Issey said. She pulled her legs up so she could rest the phone on her knees. ‘She’s quite big.’

‘Yeah, she is,’ Liane said. ‘But look at her! She’s so hot.’

‘Do you think?’ Issey said again. She took her phone back from Liane. In the next photo, Paige had one hand on her hip, the other pushed into her hair. Again she wasn’t smiling, but was looking directly into the camera. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Well,’ Liane said, taking the phone again. ‘I’m half hard.’

‘Oh my GOD, Li!’ Issey said, dropping her phone and shoving Liane halfway across the bed. ‘Not in my bed!’

Liane laughed. ‘God, you’re such a prude.’

‘I’m not!’ Issey said. ‘What the fuck? Why would you even say that?’

Liane picked up the phone and scrolled some more. ‘Well, OK. You’d never post a photo like this, would you?’

The photo she’d landed on showed Paige sitting in a chair, her legs pulled up to her chest. She was holding a fluffy blanket over herself, but you could see she was naked underneath – the curve of her hip, the side of her boob.

‘I might,’ Issey said.

‘Yeah, right.’

‘I might!’

‘You’re making breakfast?’ Paige said, shuffling into the kitchen, wrapped in a huge white fluffy dressing gown, her hair wet and pushed back. No make-up and no glasses. She looked, Lou thought, glancing up briefly from resting her head on her folded arms on the breakfast bar, like an

underdeveloped photo of herself. Or like she'd used the wrong Instagram filter.

Ella was standing in front of the cooker, stirring something in a pan.

'Best thing for a hangover,' Ella said over her shoulder.

'I feel like death,' Lou said, without lifting her head. 'Are you rough?'

'I've been better.' Paige sat down and started scrolling through her phone. 'But I've been worse too.'

'We need to all chip in for better tequila in future,' Lou said, reaching for the steaming mug of tea in front of her. 'I can feel my guts rotting.'

Paige laughed.

'There's tea in the pot,' Ella said, bending to pull out the grill. 'Help yourself.'

Paige slid the teapot towards herself. 'I can't believe you made a pot.'

'Ella's a domestic goddess,' Lou said, managing to prop her head on one hand and look over at Paige.

'Apparently,' Paige said. She poured herself a mug of tea and added three sugars. When she looked at Lou, Lou was grinning back at her.

'I like it sweet,' Paige said.

'Apparently.'

'Do you eat meat?' Ella asked, piling bacon onto a plate next to the cooker.

'I eat everything,' Paige said. 'Obviously.'

'Hey,' Liane said, as she and Issey joined the others in the kitchen. 'Don't do that.'

‘Do what?’ Paige asked.

‘Put yourself down.’

‘Oh fuck, Gems, you are a goddess!’ Issey said, cuddling Ella from behind.

‘Hot!’ Ella said, gesturing at the pans in front of her.

‘Yeah you are,’ Issey said, kissing Ella’s cheek and joining the others at the table.

‘I wasn’t putting myself down,’ Paige said. ‘I was stating a fact. There’s nothing I don’t eat.’

‘But the “obviously”,’ Liane said, frowning.

Paige shook her head. ‘It’s not like I don’t know I’m fat.’

‘You’re not –’ Liane started to say.

‘I am though,’ Paige said. ‘There’s no point pretending I’m not. But you’re perceiving it as negative. I’m just stating a fact.’

‘Coming through!’ Ella said, hip-checking Issey out of the way and putting a bowl of beans and a plate of fried eggs on the table between them all. ‘There’s bacon and sausage coming too. And toast.’

‘Fucking hell,’ Issey said. ‘This is mad. You’re an angel.’

Ella smiled before turning back to the cooker. ‘I thought it would be nice for us to all have breakfast together.’

‘You’re such a mum,’ Lou said.

‘Shut it.’ Ella brought over the bacon and sausages, piled the toast on a plate, and then joined the others at the table. ‘But we do need to sort some house stuff. How we’re going to pay bills and who’s going to be responsible for different things in the house. That kind of thing.’

‘Not now, eh?’ Issey said, stabbing a sausage with a fork. ‘It’ll give me indigestion.’

‘Tonight then?’ Ella said. ‘I want to get it sorted.’

‘We’re all in tonight, yeah?’ Lou said, pouring herself another tea, her eyes still half closed. ‘So we can do it tonight.’

Lou spent most of the day in bed, waiting for her head to stop hammering. She spent some time staring at her boring beige walls and boring white ceiling and trying to work out how she could transform her room for not much money. By late afternoon, she’d decided to walk down Church Street and do a bit of shopping. She knocked on Ella’s door and pushed it open without waiting for Ella to speak.

‘Hey,’ Ella said. She was sitting in the middle of her bed with notebooks and uni books spread out around her.

‘What are you doing?’ Lou asked, horrified.

‘What does it look like?’ Ella pushed her glasses up her nose and then took them off altogether and dropped them on top of one of the books. ‘What’s up?’

‘But . . . we haven’t even started yet. What are you studying?’ Lou perched on the end of the bed and then got up again and walked across the room to look out of Ella’s window.

‘I’m just going over some of last year’s stuff,’ Ella said. ‘Like a refresher.’

‘Jesus,’ Lou said. ‘That decides it.’ She turned and leaned back against the window. ‘You’re coming out with me.’

‘I can’t,’ Ella said. ‘I –’

‘No, you are. This is mad. I know you’re dedicated and everything, but this is too much. You need to live a little.’

‘Where are we going?’ Ella asked, tidying her books into a pile. ‘Primark.’

* * *

When they got back – Lou with four bags, Ella with one – ‘Can’t Stop the Feeling’ was blasting from Issey’s room and Liane was lying on the sofa in the living room, watching *How to Get Away With Murder*.

‘What d’you get?’ she asked Lou and Ella, rolling onto her back to look over at them.

‘What season’s this?’ Ella asked, squinting at the TV.

‘Two,’ Liane said.

‘Stuff for my room, mostly,’ Lou said. ‘And a playsuit. And some boots.’

‘And a hat and a onesie,’ Ella added.

‘Cool,’ Liane said, rolling onto her side again.

‘Come and help me put the fairy lights up?’ Lou asked Ella, who followed her downstairs.

They stopped outside Issey’s room, where Issey was standing on her bed and sticking a huge selection of photos to her wall with Blu-Tack.

‘Where’s Paige?’ Lou asked her.

Issey stopped sticking, but stayed on her bed, bouncing gently. ‘Work. But she’s going to be back for dinner. She said she’ll pick up some food from Tesco on the way back and then we can do all the boring shit. My words, not hers. Although I think she said something similar.’

By the time Lou’s bags were empty, her room was transformed. A red heart-shaped rug covered the cheap laminate flooring. Six small mirrors were arranged in an artfully haphazard way on the wall behind her bed (which had four new cushions

piled on top of the pillows). Flamingo fairy lights dangled from the curtain rail, and disco-ball fairy lights curled around the mirror on the dressing table.

‘Are you still going to paint it?’ Ella asked.

‘Fuck, yeah,’ Lou said, lying back on her bed. ‘Pink like those flamingoes. Come and have a cuddle. Second year, baby!’

Ella laughed and joined Lou on the bed, snuggling into her friend’s side, as Lou squeezed her and kissed her on the temple.

‘It’s going to be great,’ Lou said.

‘Yeah,’ Ella agreed, half heartedly.

‘It is, you knob. You’re brilliant. But you need to relax!’

‘I relaxed last night,’ Ella said, tipping her head back where some hair had got caught under Lou’s shoulder.

‘Guess what?’ Lou said. ‘You can relax more than once a millennium.’

‘I’m not that bad,’ Ella said.

‘Let’s go and get a beer,’ Lou said.

Ella rolled her eyes. ‘Fine.’