

Chapter One

2008

‘WAKE UP OLIVE.’ Bea jostled me awake gently, and I drifted from my dream into the vibrations of her deep, velvety voice. She had plonked herself down on the bed next to me, her curvaceous body cushioned softly on the mattress. Through half-opened eyes, I could make out the outline of her head of huge, tightly curled hair. I had an unused face wipe stuck to my forehead and a pounding headache. I peeled it off and the sunlight streamed into my eyes. Bea had waltzed on in and opened my blinds again. There was no such thing as privacy in this house, and to be honest, that’s the way we liked it. The real world was a maze offering too many choices, too many narrow alleyways, too many wrong turns. Everything in this old and painted-over Victorian semi-detached house felt safe. We paid bills together, we ate together, we ran errands together, we were partial to a group nap. This was our much-loved university student house, and we would be leaving here forever in a few short hours.

‘Ugh?’ I said, moaning. I picked up my phone with one crusty eye open and saw my ghastly reflection looking back at me on the screen. My skin was still clear and smooth but my face looked puffier than usual and my green eyes were blackened, like a panda’s, with eyeliner smudged all down my face. My long black hair was knotted on one side, and there were sticky drink stains along my pale arms. I sniffed. Yes, it smelt like Sambuca. I had obviously attempted to clean my face with the wipe and failed miserably. I looked at the packet on the floor and realized it wasn’t even a face wipe, it was one of those kitchen wipes that you clean surfaces with.

‘Have you definitely packed everything?’ Bea asked, as she picked my underwear up off the floor and flung it into a carrier bag. She lay down next to me, so both of our heads

were on my pillow.

‘Yes. Everything is done. Just a few tiny bits left in a few drawers. Oh my god,’ I croaked, ‘I sound like Deirdre Barlow. I must have smoked.’

‘I did try and stop you. Those horrible Marlboro Reds,’ Bea told me, closing her eyes and shaking her head.

‘I had such a good time last night …’ My voice shook, I was about to cry. ‘I don’t want us to leave, Bea. I don’t want this chapter to be over.’

‘Oh Ol. You just need a perspective change. This isn’t the end. This is the beginning,’ she said, and stroked my unwashed hair.

‘I want to stay here for ever.’ I nuzzled into her big comfy bosom. ‘It’s the end of an era. Us four, in this house together. They’ve been the best years of my life.’ I put my hand on hers. She smelt of Ghost perfume. Her cashmere jumper felt so soft. I just lay there, and inhaled her, my best friend. Past boyfriends had sometimes commented on how touchy-feely my friends and I were. We’d often pass out almost naked in each other’s beds. They never seemed to properly understand the intimacy of women.

The four of us had gone through the same phases over the years: like wearing all black because it seemed more chic; sporting the same gold friendship jewellery; we even got the same tattoo of a slice of pizza under our left boobs on a holiday in Australia (I know, what?). We all passed our driving test the same year, lost our virginity within a few months of each other, grew up and quoted the same TV box-sets. It definitely felt like the stars had aligned when we all ended up going to University College London to study together. We had made a pact, as a four, that UCL would be our first choice. We all wanted to go to the big city together. But we had to get the right grades at A level first, and that was going to be tough because we had spent so much of school pissing about, going to house parties with boys and smoking too much weed. But results day turned out to be one of my favourite days ever. We

ripped open the envelopes together and screeched when we knew we'd be staying as a close unit for another three years. Maybe fear really is the only motivator in life.

We've shared all the same big milestones, the highs and the lows of new boyfriends, break-ups and family dramas. Our lives have pretty much mirrored one another's exactly; with peaks and troughs, like lines on a graph.

'It's been an amazing chapter, babe. But ... it's time.' I could tell Bea was sad, but she was also being optimistic. That's Bea all over – the glass is always half full. The constant exhale of everything will be fine. She patted me, and then unclasped my hand, peeling herself away from me. Her presence always felt so motherly, so safe.

'I know, but let me wallow for a bit, Bea. Zeta isn't coming to collect me for ages yet.' My older sister Zeta was driving down from teaching a workshop in Bristol in her battered old mini, so she would be late. She always was – she was notorious for it. It wasn't that she was scatty, just that she was an intensely dedicated charity volunteer, and if someone needed her for something, she would be there for them. She never felt as if she could say no, even if it meant saying no to her own family sometimes. I was glad my big sis was going to come and get me and help with my bags, but it wasn't exactly her priority.

'C'mon. Have a shower. I'll take that big suitcase downstairs for you,' Bea said, as she rolled up her sleeves.

'Don't take it down yet,' I said, tears glistening in my eyes.

'Ol. Look. It's OK. I'm sad too. We all are. But c'mon, you need to get showered.'

I suddenly had a flashback to the previous night. The barman had given us all endless free shots because he fancied Cecily, Bea had ended up doing the worm on the dance floor, and Isla had stolen someone's sombrero.

'How are you not hungover?' I heard a moan from outside the door, directed at Bea. 'Are you an alien?' Cec had appeared in a T-shirt and a lace thong, sucking on a straw in a

water bottle. Her blonde bob was still magically in tact. Her long legs had streaks of fake tan left on them.

‘I *am* hungover. But you know me, I can’t lie in,’ replied Bea, shrugging.

Cec took a running jump and landed on my bed. On top of me. Her naked bum cheek touching my leg.

‘Bea, you’re so *odd*,’ Cec said, and threw Henry, my cuddly toy, at her. It ricocheted off her chest and squeaked. ‘God, I feel rough.’ She snuggled in under my armpit, laughing and then said: ‘Olive you reek!'

‘Make room for me,’ Isla croaked at the door, her dark blunt fringe flopping over her eyes, and her glasses wonky on her freckled face. ‘Guys, I have the fear. Seriously, did I say or do anything weird last night?’ She walked across the room, kicked off her slippers and curled up underneath the duvet with us, spooning Cecily. Isla always gets ‘the fear’, ever since our sixth-form days when she got hammered at our leavers’ do on Bacardi Breezers and asked our only male teacher (poor Mr Simmons) ‘to dance’, as if she was a character in a Jane Austen novel.

‘While you’re there, Bea, can you take my suitcase down too?’ Cec said, pushing her luck.

‘Piss off. I’m not your mum,’ Bea laughed, rolling her eyes.

‘I don’t remember much from last night, you know. We really went for it, didn’t we?’ said Isla. ‘I do have a faint memory of us breaking into that park on the way home.’ Oh my god, she’s right, we had scaled the walls, and it was all Cec’s fault. Her and her wild ideas.

‘I swear it was the one where Hugh Grant and Julia Roberts hung out in *Notting Hill*,’ Cec said, trying to hold down a burp. Living in London as students regularly allowed for these strange night-time adventures.

‘You can pretend it was, love,’ Bea said, lifting a heavy bag out of the room.

We had sneaked into a park (could have been someone's private garden, to be honest) and sat on a bench together, underneath some twinkling fairy lights, and reminisced about the last three years living in our special little home. We had played 'Dancing in the Moonlight' by Toploader on my iPod and danced with each other. We sang like out-of-tune cats.

'Guys,' I gulped, then paused. 'Can we always, always make time for each other – no matter what happens?'

Cec swung her arms around me. 'You're not getting rid of me, mate.'

'Of course, Ol, you are such a worrier!' Bea said.

Isla nodded along like a Churchill dog.

As I lay there, hungover in bed, the reality was dawning. We were moving out. Moving on from the disgusting kitchen, the mice, the creaky radiators and the creepy landlord. There was no happier feeling than four of us in the bed. Four young sweaty bodies, entangled, feeling fragile, but excited for the future. They were my home. Home with a capital H.