

CHAPTER 1

Rachel woke up with her hair sticking to the side of her face. Her head was pounding and her back was aching from dancing in high heels. She felt beneath the duvet – knickers and a t-shirt. That was better than last week, when she'd woken up still fully dressed. She lifted her head and peered at the clock on her bedside table. Nine fifty-five. Christ!

'Harry, wake up! It's nearly ten o'clock.' She poked the shape under the duvet next to her. Nothing moved. 'Harry, come on. Get up!'

Rachel jumped out of bed and then quickly lay back down again as the room started spinning rather too fast. She should have been at work well before nine but Harry's usual 'just one more for the road' trick was having its full effect. There was no way she could go in yet.

Rachel worked in corporate finance at a well established firm of city accountants and they would expect to know where she was. She leant over and picked up the phone.

‘Good morning, Payne Stanley,’ said a clipped voice.

‘Er yes, Pauline Rowe please.’ Rachel’s voice sounded like a darts commentator. She grabbed the glass of water on her bedside table and took a large gulp.

‘Hello, Pauline Rowe speaking.’

Pauline was the staff manager at Payne Stanley. She had a rather full opinion of herself and a figure to match. Things had been a bit frosty with Pauline since Rachel had indulged in a few too many drinks at the Christmas party and told her that she was an interfering busybody with all the interpersonal skills of a wardrobe.

‘Hi, Pauline, it’s Rachel Altman. You won’t believe what’s happened. I’m stuck in the communal hall of my flat. When I left this morning, I shut the front door and then realised I’d forgotten my keys. When I went to open the main front door that I share with the upstairs flat, I found it was double-locked. I can’t get out of the front door without my keys and I can’t get back inside my flat either. So here I am, stuck. What a nightmare! I’ve rung the landlord, who’s on his way over, but he was in North London and is not going to be here for another half an hour or so. So I guess I’m not going to be in until nearly lunchtime.’

‘I see,’ said Pauline.

From the tone of her voice, Rachel wasn’t sure that she did.

‘I shall let the partners know. Can you come and see me when you’re in?’ said Pauline.

Just at that moment Harry’s alarm clock went off, beeping loudly.

‘What’s that noise?’ said Pauline.

‘Oh, it’s my stopwatch,’ said Rachel, frantically climbing on top of Harry to hit the snooze button. ‘I’ve got my gym stuff with me as, er, I’m training for a ten-k run in a few weeks.’

Harry let out a few grunting objection noises that Rachel tried to stifle with a pillow.

‘Anyway, thanks, Pauline. So sorry for the fuss; one of those really annoying things. I’ll let you know once I’m in. Bye now.’

Harry rolled over and opened one eye. ‘What was that all about?’ he said.

‘Work,’ said Rachel. ‘I gave them one of those fantastic excuses that’s so farfetched they just have to believe it, as no one would make something like that up.’

Rachel rolled on top of Harry and kissed his forehead. ‘Face it, I’m a genius,’ she said.

‘Really? Well, you’re very good at hiding it,’ said Harry, wrapping his arms around her waist.

‘I’m starving,’ said Rachel, rolling off Harry and gently pushing his arms away, ‘and in need of a serious injection of carbs.’

She grabbed the phone again and scrolled through the stored names until she found ‘Pizza’, which was shortly followed by ‘Prostitute’ – one of Harry’s ‘funny’ jokes.

‘Hi, Marco. Yes, hi, it’s Rachel. The usual please. Oh, hold on. Harry, do you want extra pepperoni?’

Harry nodded.

‘The usual with extra pepperoni and a large diet

coke, oh and some headache tablets. Cool, thanks, Marco. You're a star. See you in fifteen minutes.'

Rachel got out of bed more slowly this time and headed for the shower. The clean white gleam of the bathroom made her feel slightly sick. Despite the frequent chaos in her life, Rachel hated mess. Her flat was modern and very tidy. She'd once been told that you can tell the state of someone's mind by looking at their underwear drawer. Rachel's was very organised, all sorted by colour and style. She often wondered what the drawer of someone with a terrible state of mind would look like. How bad could it get? Some unholy jumble of bras, tiny briefs and grey pants, probably.

Feeling marginally restored by several cups of tea, slices of pizza and painkillers, Rachel eventually made it into the office at two o'clock. It was Friday and she'd decided to head home for the weekend. She'd used her gym bag instead of her usual pull-along overnighter case so she could keep up the whole ten-k story thing with Pauline. Typical of Harry not to have told her that he didn't need to be up early and that he'd set his alarm for ten a.m. – never mind when she had to be up.

Harry made no secret of the fact that he was totally disinterested in Rachel's job. He was a freelance writer, mainly writing sports stories for newspapers, so worked pretty much when he felt like it. As far as Harry could see, Rachel's office job just seemed to get in the way of their social lives. He seemed to conveniently forget the steady income it brought in each month.

Rachel wandered through the open plan office with

her gym bag strategically placed on her shoulder and went over to Pauline Rowe's desk. Pauline had a pale blue cardigan on the back of her chair and pictures of cats on her desk partition. She was gossiping with the secretary at the next desk.

'Hi Pauline, made it in now. So sorry, was totally my fault for forgetting my keys. Any plans for me for next week yet?'

Pauline looked at her watch and then up at Rachel.

'Yes, Carl Stephens wants to see you. He's got a new piece of work and I've told him that you're free to help. He's in this afternoon if you could go and see him. Ideally before you go to the gym,' she added, looking at Rachel's gym bag.

'Don't worry, I'm going after work,' said Rachel.

'On a Friday?'

Good point, thought Rachel.

'Well, I'm taking this ten-k quite seriously, so I need to get some decent training in.'

Mark Tan, an associate sitting a few desks away, overheard their conversation.

'Hey, Rachel, which ten-k are you doing? I'm training with a few of the other lads in the office for one next month. Maybe you could train with us? We run before work a couple of times a week and then once after, usually on a Wednesday. What do you think?'

'That sounds like a great plan to me,' said Pauline slightly too quickly.

This is getting ridiculous, thought Rachel. Damn Harry and his alarm clock.

'Thanks for the offer, Mark, but I've got my own

routine pretty sorted out now and I don't really want to start messing about with it. Anyway, better go: Carl Stephens wants to see me. See you later, Pauline.'

Pauline didn't look up, so Rachel went to find Carl.

Carl Stephens was a senior partner. Rachel had worked for him a couple of times before and they'd got on pretty well. She knocked on his door.

'Come in. Oh hi, Rachel, sit down. Just finishing an email.'

Rachel looked around his office as he typed: pictures of the kids, a few books, a sporting trophy of some sort – the usual. Quite tidy too, she thought and then quickly had to get rid of the mental image of his underwear drawer. She looked at his side profile as he typed. He wasn't bad looking, had probably been quite a catch when he was a bit younger. Stop! she thought.

Carl finished his email and spun round in his chair to face her.

'Pauline probably told you that I want you to work with me on a new project,' he said. 'You have some time, right?'

'Yes, I finished the report on the pet food business last week and I don't think we'll need to do any more on it for a while. The buyers are away for the next month or so. So I'm pretty free.'

'Great. A good friend of mine from the Beau Street Group rang a couple of days ago. Have you heard of them?'

Rachel shook her head.

'They're a cosmetic surgery group, leaders in their

field apparently. Anyway, they've been approached by some American buyers and they're thinking of selling up. They want us to do a report for the Americans setting out how they make their money, which procedures are most profitable, which doctors are most successful, what sort of clients they have and so on.'

'Sounds really interesting,' said Rachel and meant it.

It was a big improvement on her last few projects. The pet food job had seen her rushing round the country reviewing the performance of grubby factories cooking chunks of meat of indeterminate origin. Before that she'd worked on the sale of an engineering company that made parts for buses. Hardly glamorous. This was much more like it.

'I've agreed with the finance director that we'll get a small team out there from Monday,' Carl continued. 'AJ and Rosa are both free too, I think, so they can go with you. I'll forward you an email that sets out exactly what the report needs to cover.'

'Okay, no problem. I'll get organised this afternoon,' said Rachel.

'This will be an important job for you, Rachel. We're really looking for you to show us that you can handle these key client relationships. You are the face of the firm and that face needs to be a professional one at all times. Do you understand what I'm saying?'

Rachel nodded.

'On time and on the case, that's what I want to see. Plus a great report. Okay?'

'Okay,' said Rachel.

'Okay, good. And I don't want any more emails

from Pauline saying that you've rung in with some ridiculous hangover story.'

Rachel's face fell. Damn that woman!

'So let's make this our last chat about it,' Carl continued. 'The director promotions are in a couple of months, so you'd better make this job count.'

Rachel went back to her desk, dropped her bag and notebook and picked up the phone.

'Shali? Hi, it's Rach. Fancy a coffee?'

Shali Kapoor was one of Rachel's close workmates. They'd trained together at Payne Stanley and had been friends pretty much from day one.

'God, absolutely. If I have to look at this screen for another minute I'm likely to jump out the window,' Shali replied.

'See you across the road in five minutes. Natalie's in too, so I'll see if she wants to join us.'

A few minutes later Rachel was sitting in a steamy coffee shop nursing a large latte. The previous night's partying was starting to catch up with her. She watched Natalie and Shali dart across the road and come banging in through the door.

'What a day!' said Shali, dropping her bag on the floor and slumping into a chair.

'One latte, extra shot, no foam and a decaf cappuccino,' shouted Natalie at the girl behind the counter.

'Who's having decaf?' said Rachel.

'I am,' said Natalie. 'Latest health drive.'

'Well, my health needs a chocolate croissant; get me one while you're up, will you?' said Rachel.

Natalie Smith had joined Payne Stanley a couple of years ago. She was outspoken and funny and Rachel really liked her. She was also dead bright and had often pulled Rachel out of a hole when she'd got behind on her work.

'Big night?' asked Shali.

'It wasn't meant to be,' said Rachel. 'We were just having a few quiet drinks at the pub but they had a band on. They were really good and of course we ended up dancing like idiots until closing time. Then Harry got all carried away and persuaded me to head to Luci's wine bar for a couple more, then we ended up going for a kebab, and before you know it, it's gone two a.m. So I had rather a slow start this morning.'

'Did you get spotted?' Natalie asked.

'Oh, I rang dozy Pauline and gave her some story about being stuck in the communal hall of my flat. I thought she'd totally fallen for it, but instead she emailed all the partners and told them I had a hangover, the miserable old cow,' said Rachel, staring into her coffee.

'Well, I'm having a crap day too,' said Shali. 'I'm working for old Martin Wainwright – what a 'mare,' Shali continued. 'I'm getting the full treatment. Orders barked at me, emails every five minutes but no real help, and I can't face asking him any questions. That breath would kill a buffalo at fifty paces. And he insists on wearing those awful short-sleeved shirts. Hasn't anyone told him he's not an airline pilot? Honestly, he'll be wearing brown shoes next.'

Looking the part, as well as being good at your job,

was a big thing for Shali. She was, as usual, immaculately dressed in a sharp trouser suit and crisp white shirt.

‘Anyway, I have exciting news,’ said Rachel.

‘Ooh, what?’ said Natalie and Shali in tandem.

‘Carl Stephens has asked me to work on a new project with him, looking at a cosmetic surgery business, no less. Can you believe it – at last I get on a project where the business is really interesting,’ said Rachel.

‘I quite fancy Carl Stephens,’ said Shali.

‘You fancy everyone,’ said Rachel. ‘And besides, he’s married.’

‘Only window shopping. No harm in that,’ said Shali.

‘What’s the business called?’ said Natalie.

‘Beau Street Group. Apparently they do every sort of procedure you can think of.’

‘Maybe they have celebrity clients,’ said Shali.

‘God, I hadn’t thought of that,’ said Rachel. ‘How exciting!’

‘You’ll have to let me know how much they’re charging for boob jobs,’ said Natalie.

Rachel and Shali both looked at her.

She added quickly, ‘This good friend of mine is thinking of having one. She’s a TV make-up artist and they’re all into that sort of thing.’

‘I wonder if they do all those weird things like you see on TV – you know, toe reshaping, injections to stop your armpits sweating, all that sort of thing,’ Shali added.

‘Maybe they’ll even do, well, you know...’ Natalie nodded knowingly.

‘What?’ said Rachel.

‘Well, how shall I say it – tightening operations.’

Rachel nearly choked on her latte. ‘God Natalie, where did that come from?’

‘I saw it on one of those dreadful car crash TV shows that you can’t help watching. This woman in her forties wanted the fanny of a teenager, so the surgeon gave her one – sorry, I mean, you know, created her one.’

At this point Rachel and Shali were laughing so much that the girl behind the counter waved at them to keep it down.

‘Lucky you, Rach,’ said Shali, catching her breath. ‘What a great job to be working on. I’m so jealous. You’ll have to report back regularly, you know, give us the whole scoop.’

‘Well, I’m not sure I can – you know, business ethics, need-to-know basis and all that. After all, I am the ultimate professional.’ Rachel flicked her hair as she spoke.

‘Since when? And besides, we definitely need to know,’ said Shali.

‘Look seriously, though, it’s highly confidential that the business might even be up for sale, so you guys mustn’t talk to anyone else about it, okay? But if I see any celebrities, you’ll be the first to know,’ said Rachel, tapping her nose.

‘No accepting any inappropriate gifts while you’re on this job either,’ said Shali, laughing. ‘We’ll have to

report you if you start turning up with a smooth forehead.'

By now it was nearly half past three and Rachel hadn't done a stroke of work all day.

'Better get back,' she said. She picked up her gym bag. Natalie and Shali stared at it. 'Don't ask,' she said. 'It's actually got my weekend stuff in. I'm off home after work as my brother's back.'

'How is your handsome brother these days?' said Shali. 'I definitely fancy him.'

Rachel's brother Rowan was a couple of years older than her and he'd always been popular with her friends. He'd be thirty this year.

'Married with a baby. God, do you have an off switch?' said Rachel.

'Not so I've noticed. Anyway, let's go,' said Shali. 'You've got an important project to plan for.'

Yes, thought Rachel, and I need to make it count.

CHAPTER 2

Having briefed her team for Monday and sent a few carefully placed emails, Rachel sneaked out of the office. She was paranoid that she would bump into Pauline any minute and be forced to pretend she was off to the gym. Fortunately she didn't and she was soon getting out of a cab at the station.

'Return to Bath, please.'

The ticket man didn't even look up. 'What day ya coming back?' he said.

'Sunday, early evening.'

'Makes no odds to me what time you travel on a Sunday,' the ticket man said, seemingly annoyed that Rachel had bothered him with such irrelevant information.

Rachel glared at him but he didn't notice. He printed her tickets and passed them under the window.

'Which platform for Bath?' Rachel asked in her politest voice.

'S'on the board,' said the ticket man, nodding his head towards the large screen in the middle of the station.

‘Gosh, thanks for your help,’ said Rachel.
‘No problem,’ said the ticket man, oblivious to her sarcasm.

It was going to be a long trip.

On the train, Rachel got herself a large gin and tonic from the buffet car and settled down to read a stack of trashy magazines she’d bought at the station newsagent. As she read, she was struck by the number of articles about cosmetic surgery. Stories about actresses having liposuction were clearly big news. Intrigued, she got out her phone and opened the email from Carl Stephens setting out what work they needed to do on the Beau Street Group.

She started reading the list:

Full details of sales split by procedure.

Price lists by procedure.

A list of key clients.

Oh good, she would have to get details of every type of operation they did and how much each cost. Also, she would have the perfect reason for having a good nose through the client names to see whether she could spot anyone famous. She was really looking forward to this job.

Rowan met her at Bath station.

‘Hey, sis’, how are you?’ Her brother gave her a big hug.

‘Great form, thanks,’ said Rachel. ‘Actually, I’m hungover and knackered, but other than that great.’

‘Well, I’m totally knackered, but sadly not hungover,’ said Rowan. ‘I tell you, this baby thing is hard work. There should be a warning on the side of the box

saying “Caution: This product could seriously damage your health”.’

Rachel laughed. ‘You don’t mean that. Naomi is so cute. How old is she now?’

‘Nearly seven months – can you believe it?’ said Rowan.

They got into Rowan’s car and headed out of the station. Rachel’s parents’ house was a rambling farmhouse in a small village twenty minutes outside of Bath. They’d lived there all Rachel’s life and although they’d often talked of buying somewhere smaller, Rachel couldn’t imagine them moving.

As usual, Rachel’s mum greeted her at the front door like she’d just been released from a ten-year prison sentence – hugging her until she couldn’t breathe and then ushering her into the sitting room for a dry sherry.

‘Do you have any gin?’ Rachel asked.

‘Bit early for gin, don’t you think?’ Rachel’s dad replied, despite the fact that it was gone seven p.m.

Rachel’s dad was a retired engineer and a pretty straight-laced character who hadn’t met Rachel’s mum until they were both well into their thirties. Her childhood had been full of ordinary holidays and getting your homework done on time. He also liked the sound of his own voice and regularly told the same very dull stories over and over again. Her mum would try to say, ‘I think they’ve heard this one, dear,’ but he would plough on regardless, often snorting with laughter over Fred’s golfing disaster or some chaotic Rotary Club meeting. It wouldn’t even occur to him that the others listening hadn’t found the story funny the first time

they'd heard it, let alone the third, fourth or fifth time. He was also obsessed with journeys.

'Was your train on time?' he asked as he poured Rachel a sherry.

'Yes, it was actually. I was quite surprised,' said Rachel.

'You were lucky,' he said. 'That line is very hit-and-miss. I went up to London last week and it was twelve minutes late getting in and nine minutes late getting back. No explanation, nothing. Don't know why they bother with timetables. Those buffet cars are expensive as well. It was a good thing your mother had packed me a couple of sandwiches. I only had to buy a cup of tea and that was bad enough. Daylight robbery, I say.'

Rachel and Rowan caught each other's eye and tried not to laugh.

'Did you write to *The Times* about it?' Rachel forced a straight face as she spoke.

'No, I didn't. Not really one for *The Times*. Think I might write to the train company, though. Mind you, you'll probably find you can only telephone some dreadful call centre, and then they'll charge you a fortune for a phone call that they take ten minutes to answer.'

Rachel decided to change the subject. 'How has your week been, Mum? Any gossip from the shop?'

The local charity shop was her mum's lifeline. She had stayed at home the whole time Rachel and Rowan had been children, dedicating herself to looking after the family. She was naturally a shy person and working mornings in the shop was the one thing that managed to bring her out of herself.

‘Well, we’ve had such a busy week,’ Rachel’s mum said. ‘We were given several large bags of clothes last weekend, really good quality things. We think someone must have died – sad really. Anyway, it took us ages to sort and price them. Then on Wednesday this young girl came in looking for things for a seventies fancy dress party and she was raving about the new clothes. She phoned some of her friends who were going to the same party and before we knew it the shop was packed. We sold more clothes that afternoon than we’d normally sell in two weeks! Plus we got a donation of plants left over from the local school fête and they did really well too. Grace and I were rushed off our feet. Still, all in a good cause.’

Rachel found it hard to believe that her mum knew what being rushed off your feet meant and began to wonder why she’d come home. Why was it that the thought of being home was always much nicer than the reality? It had been the same pattern since university days. She put up with truckloads of banal conversation in return for getting her washing done and a Sunday roast.

Rachel looked around. ‘What time are Laura and Naomi arriving?’

‘Oh, they’re not coming,’ said Rowan. ‘Naomi is waking up a bit early at the moment, which Laura is trying desperately to sort out. She thought moving her about might set her back a bit. They’ll come next time.’

Rachel knew how disappointed her mum would have been when she found out.

Rowan seemed to read her mind. ‘It’s no reflection

on you, Mum, honestly,' said Rowan. 'It's just the way the timings worked out. Laura normally would have loved to come.'

Rachel's eyes gleamed. Her brother on his own for the weekend. It had been ages!

'Shall we pop to the pub after supper?' Rachel suggested.

'Good idea,' said Rowan, trying to hide the relief in his voice.

After they'd eaten, Rachel and Rowan headed off to the local pub.

'God, what are they like!' said Rachel.

'They mean well,' said Rowan. 'We'll probably be just like them one day.'

'What an awful thought! Do you think we'll see anyone from school at the pub?' Rachel asked, keen to get away from the idea of turning into her mother.

'Probably,' said Rowan. 'Loads of them still live and work round here.'

The local was a traditional style pub with low-beamed ceilings that worked hard to make itself look more olde worlde than it really was – brass plates by the fire, the odd scythe stuck on the wall and a series of big fireplaces. Rachel bought them a bottle of wine and brought it over to the quiet corner of the pub that Rowan had chosen.

'Not the greatest but at least it's cold,' said Rachel. She poured them both a large glass. 'Cheers. How is Laura? Shame she's not here.'

'She's fine,' said Rowan, but Rachel could tell from his voice that she wasn't. 'Actually, we're having a bit of

a tough time. The last few months since Naomi was born have been pretty stressful – not like I’d imagined it at all. Laura’s been so uptight and I can’t seem to get anything right. If Naomi is crying, anything I suggest is bound to be wrong. I know Laura’s tired but she won’t let me give her a break. She’s convinced herself that she’s the only one who can look after Naomi properly. This whole waking up early thing is just another example; she’s completely neurotic about it.’

‘You’re a great dad and I’m sure it will blow over,’ said Rachel, aware that her ability to give advice in this area was not the best.

Rowan didn’t seem to hear her and carried on. ‘The other morning, I had to get an early flight to Stockholm and I got up at five a.m. to have a shower. The noise woke Naomi up and Laura went mad, shouting about how selfish I was and that now she would have the whole day with a grumpy baby whose routine was all mixed up. I pointed out to her that the toughest thing she had to do all day was have coffee in Starbucks with all the other mums, whereas I had six hours of meetings with three hours of travelling either side.’

‘Helpful,’ said Rachel.

‘Yeah, not really,’ said Rowan. ‘It just cost me a large bottle of perfume and two nights in the spare room.’

‘Have another glass of wine,’ said Rachel, lost for anything else more useful to say.

They sat in silence for a few moments. Then across the bar Rachel spotted someone familiar.

‘God, Rowan, look – it’s Dawn Hunt. I haven’t seen her for ages. Let’s go and say hello.’

Dawn and Rachel had been in the same class at school. Before Rowan could answer, Rachel was up and heading across the pub. Dawn was with a group of friends, most of whom Rachel either knew or vaguely recognised.

‘Hey, stranger, long time no see! You look well,’ said Dawn, getting up and hugging Rachel. She saw Rowan hovering behind. ‘And your lovely brother too. We’re lucky! Come on, sit down.’

They both sat down and Rowan was quickly engrossed in watching the football on the TV with a couple of the other guys at the table.

‘So, how are you, city person? Still loving the big job?’ asked Dawn.

‘Yes I am, really enjoying it actually, and very busy at the moment, so that keeps me out of trouble. Plus I get to meet lots of interesting people, so I can’t complain,’ said Rachel.

‘I’ve never really understood what you do,’ said Dawn.

‘It’s not that tricky really,’ said Rachel. ‘You know when you buy a house and you get a survey done? Well, we do the same thing, just for people buying and selling businesses.’

‘How many businesses do you see that need new windows and a damp-proof course?’ Dawn was laughing.

‘More than you might imagine,’ said Rachel. ‘Mostly, though, they just need some decent management. Anyway, talking of management, how is the salon doing?’

Dawn had left school to train as a beautician. Once she'd qualified she got a job working at the local beauty salon and had steadily progressed to become the salon manager. She was likable, streetwise and understood what it took to run a small business.

'God, really well actually. You'd be amazed what people will pay for a scrub down with some warm mud. We've also just started this new cleavage facial that I read about it in a Swedish beauty magazine. We give the old pair a bit of a birthday at the same time as a standard facial and then finish off with firming cream and a light coating of fake tan all over. It's so popular that we've had to take on an extra girl on Saturdays.'

Rachel was slowly realising that there was a whole world of beauty treatments and cosmetic surgery that she knew nothing about.

'What's the most unusual thing you do?' Rachel asked, feeling slightly like someone from one of those car crash TV shows that Natalie had talked about. All in the interests of research, she thought weakly.

'It's got to be Hollywood waxing,' said Dawn, 'which actually isn't that unusual any more but it is a bit of a weird concept. All that talc and getting on all fours, just to get rid of every hair God gave you. I really don't get it, but it brings in plenty of regulars, so who cares? If that's what they want, that's what we do.'

'Do you find many of your customers have also had some work done – you know, the odd lift or tuck here and there?'

'Quite a few actually. Loads have had Botox or fillers, even though they're dead expensive. No idea

where people get the money to keep doing them every few months. You can always spot those with boob jobs too, especially when you're doing massages.'

Dawn and Rachel sat chatting until the wine and the football were finished.

'We're off to Club Tropicana after closing time,' said Dawn. 'Fancy joining us?'

Club Tropicana was a nearby nightclub so stuck in the eighties even the building had shoulder pads. The seats were arranged around circular tables under plastic palm trees, connected by a series of intertwining bridges leading to a black and white mirrored dance floor. They served two-for-one cocktails, made with watered-down spirits and adorned with huge umbrellas. It had been the scene of so many nights out for Rachel over the years – nights either spent in dark corners, or in tears, or in the ladies' throwing up.

It had been ages since she'd last been dancing – well, apart from last night, but that didn't really count. That had just been a pub band, not a proper nightclub. Rachel had a busy few weeks coming up and she deserved a good night out. She knew that baby-free Rowan would be up for it too.

'Yes, why not,' said Rachel. 'Let's go.'

The next morning Rachel woke up when her mum knocked on her door.

'Tea, darling,' her mum said as she entered the room.

Rachel groaned and rolled away from the light that came streaming in the gap in the open door.

‘Gosh, you were late back,’ her mum said. ‘I’m sure I heard you around three a.m.’

‘Not really sure. Thanks for the tea,’ said Rachel, praying her mother would then leave.

Instead, she sat on the side of her bed. ‘It’s so lovely to have you here, darling. I do miss you,’ her mum said, stroking her head. She clearly wanted to chat.

With great effort Rachel sat up and picked up her tea. Waves of nausea swept over her.

‘It’s lovely to be home too, Mum. What time is it?’

‘Just after eight. I know how early you normally start at that job of yours, so thought you’d appreciate the lie in.’

You have no idea, thought Rachel, recalling her two o’clock start the previous day.

‘Thanks.’

‘Did you have a good night?’

Rachel thought for a moment. She could vaguely remember some very dodgy dancing and persuading some lanky builder that she had a boyfriend, but mostly she remembered laughing – Rachel had no idea what about, but that didn’t seem to matter.

‘Yes, it was a real laugh, thanks. We ended up at Club Tropicana.’

‘Oh not that awful place,’ said her mum. ‘I’m surprised it hasn’t closed down by now. Anyway, your father and I thought that we could all have a trip to Hayfield House today. Have a wander round, maybe get a pot of tea and a scone. Then we could pop into the garden centre on the way back. I need to get a few new bedding plants. What do you think?’

Rachel thought that she would rather stick knitting needles in both eyes.

‘Er, sounds great. Maybe I could have another hour first? Get my energy up.’

‘Yes, of course, dear. I’ll wake you again in an hour or so. And don’t forget to drink your tea. I’m sure it will make you feel better.’

And with that, she shut the door.

Two hours later Rachel and Rowan were in the back of their parents’ car heading for Hayfield House. As they were getting ready, her dad had packed two litres of water and an emergency pork pie ‘just in case’, even though it was a sunny day and the journey would last no more than half an hour. Rachel had no idea what type of disaster could befall them in which they were likely to be saved by a pork pie, but she knew there was no point asking.

‘What did we do in life to deserve this?’ Rowan whispered as the car wound its way slowly through country lanes.

‘Too little sleep, too many cocktails,’ Rachel whispered back. ‘And please don’t let me be sick, I couldn’t bear it,’ she added.

In the front of the car, her parents were having an in-depth discussion about the best route to take.

‘We should stay off the main road,’ said her dad. ‘All those Saturday shoppers: we’ll be stuck for ages. I suggest we take the B139 and then cut up past the old vicarage and then down to that T-junction. You know, the one with the sign for the lavender shop.’

‘Yes, dear, whatever you think,’ said her mum. ‘We

should avoid the road up to Lanes School as well. Grace said that they've a car boot sale on today and there's bound to be a queue.'

'Ah yes, good point. I'll turn off by the supermarket,' said her dad.

Rachel put her head in her hands in despair.

Rowan looked over and squeezed her leg. 'Nearly there,' he said.

The day was pretty much as bad as Rachel thought it would be: hours of trailing round dusty rooms full of old furniture. Her parents stood and admired the craftsmanship, while she and Rowan pretended they were presenters on *The Antiques Road Show* to relieve the boredom. The only high point was the enormous piece of chocolate cake that she had in the cramped tea shop.

On the way back, as promised, they stopped at the garden centre. Her parents ended up arguing as her dad refused to ask where the daffodil bulbs were, preferring to look for them himself. He was still looking for them fifteen minutes later, by which time Rachel's mum had asked someone, been through the tills and was loading them in the car along with her new bedding plants.

Eventually they got back home and Rachel and Rowan both fell onto the sofa to watch TV. As they sat there watching sad Saturday game shows, Rachel suddenly couldn't wait to get back up to London. After all, she had a big day on Monday to prepare for: first day out at Beau Street and she needed to be ready. On time and on the case, as Carl Stephens had said. She could do that, she thought. No problem.

CHAPTER 3

Rachel got back to her flat on Sunday evening. As she opened the door she was hit by the smell of stale pizza. Harry had left after her on Friday and hadn't bothered to clear up. She stared wearily at the mess. How hard was it to put a few things in the bin? Just as she finished clearing up, Harry rang.

'Hi, how were the Dullards?' he said.

'My parents are not dull,' said Rachel defensively, still cross about the pizza.

'Since when?' said Harry.

'They just like their routines; nothing wrong with that,' said Rachel, not in the mood to have a debate about the dullness or otherwise of her parents.

'No, nothing at all,' said Harry.

'Also, the flat really smelt of pizza when I got back. You could have put it in the bin, you know,' said Rachel.

'Sorry, I went back to sleep and ended up leaving in a bit of rush. Anyway, I was ringing to see if you fancy a drink?'

‘No, no tonight. I’m really tired and I’ve got an early start. Maybe tomorrow,’ Rachel said.

‘Oh come on, Rach, just a quick one. I haven’t seen you all weekend. I promise to get you home on time.’

Rachel hesitated. Harry didn’t often admit that he missed her. But she needed a clear head in the morning. ‘Sorry, Harry, not tonight. I’ve got stuff to get organised.’

‘Okay, you be a good girl, go and polish your shoes ready for school tomorrow.’

‘Don’t tease me, Harry. I’ve got a new project starting and I could do without having a raging hangover on the first day.’

‘Alright, I guess I’ll survive. Call me tomorrow, though, okay?’

‘Yes, I will,’ said Rachel and they hung up.

The next morning Rachel woke up early and spent quite a while getting ready. She had a vision of the Beau Street Group being full of immaculate people floating about in white coats and she wanted to make sure she created a good impression.

Their offices weren’t far from Harley Street and she was meeting the two other members of her team, AJ and Rosa, in the reception. Rachel got there a few minutes early and as she went into the building, the security guard popped his head out of a small room just inside the front doors.

‘Lovely day,’ he said, looking out of the large glass pane to the side of the rotating doors. ‘Wind was a bit south-westerly earlier, but it’s dropped now. Shouldn’t be any rain either, so that’s good.’

From inside his room Rachel could hear a radio, a

lady's voice reading slowly what sounded rather like the shipping forecasts but it was probably just the news. The security guard was a twinkly sort of guy in his sixties, the sort who'd probably worked there for twenty-five years and would soon be joining the carriage clock generation.

'Now, who are you here for?' He spoke to her as if she was a small child.

'Beau Street Group.'

'Ah yes, let me show you where to go.' He moved over to where there was a map of the building on the wall and stood by it, slightly to one side, facing her. He coughed slightly as if he was about to start a speech. 'Now, you are here,' he said, waving his arm in a theatrical manner towards a large red 'You are here' arrow on the map. 'You need to proceed across the lobby to the reception desk, where you can sign in, here.' He turned his hand and ran the back of his fingers across the map and then tapped his finger on the square box marked 'Reception'.

'What, that reception desk over there?' Rachel asked, pointing to the reception desk that was in full view about twenty feet away.

'Precisely,' said the security guard.

'Thank you very much,' said Rachel, rather bemused as to why they had needed the whole map on the wall presentation thing. 'I'll, er, just walk over there, shall I?'

'Yes, you do that.'

'Thanks,' said Rachel and walked over to a striking but slightly scary looking receptionist.

'Can I help you?' the receptionist said, tossing her

hair slightly as she spoke. Her smile looked slightly lopsided and Rachel suddenly had an overwhelming urge to leap across the desk and peer at her face for signs of surgery. She resisted.

‘Yes, thank you. I’m Rachel Altman from Payne Stanley, here to see the finance director, Tom Duffy. He should be expecting me.’

‘Take a seat. I’ll let him know you’re here.’

‘I’m just waiting for two colleagues,’ said Rachel. ‘They should be here in a few minutes. I’m slightly early.’

She sat down and looked around. If the reception was anything to go by, the offices were going to be lovely. The surfaces were adorned with opulent flower arrangements and the decor was deep red with heavily textured wallpaper. The seats in the waiting area were a mix of finely upholstered chairs and soft leather sofas. Small boxes of leaflets advertising various miracle treatments sat on the coffee table, next to a neat pile of beauty magazines. Rachel sat and flicked through one, listening to the quiet hiss of the air conditioning while she waited for the other two to arrive.

AJ arrived first, shortly followed by Rosa. By the time they’d all signed in, Tom Duffy had arrived in reception. He walked over to them and looked at each of them in turn. Rachel could see that he wasn’t quite sure which of them was in charge, so she quickly stepped forward and held out her hand.

‘Hello, Rachel Altman, very nice to meet you, Tom. Can I introduce my team: Alistair James, but everyone calls him AJ, and this is Rosa Castelli.’

‘Hello, welcome to the Beau Street Group,’ Tom

said, smiling at them and gesturing towards the small lift behind reception. 'Let's go up, shall we.'

The three of them followed Tom into the lifts, up and into a meeting room.

'Can I get you some coffee?' Tom asked.

'That would be great, thanks,' said Rachel.

After the obligatory tea party, they all eventually sat down.

'I understand that you and Carl Stephens have known each other quite a long time,' said Rachel.

'Yes, probably ten years or more now,' said Tom. 'We've worked together a few times before. How much has Carl told you about this job?'

'He's given us the basic briefing and we've seen the email you sent, but it would be great to hear it from you directly,' said Rachel.

'Well, it goes without saying that this is all totally confidential,' said Tom.

Rachel, AJ and Rosa all nodded earnestly.

'We've been approached by the Equinox Practise, a large US-based cosmetic surgery business who are planning to expand in Europe and are interested in buying us. We weren't looking to sell, but if we can get a good price for the business then we'll definitely consider it. In order to work out how much they might be prepared to pay, Equinox have asked for a load of information – how much we charge for the procedures we do here, what profits we make, what sort of client base we have, that sort of thing.'

'Yes, I saw the list you sent to Carl,' said Rachel, nodding.

‘Well, we’d like you guys to prepare that for us and then present it to the Americans when they come over in just over a month’s time. It will be much better if it comes from someone independent; avoid them worrying that we might have been selective about what we tell them.’

‘Okay, no problem,’ said Rachel.

‘Good,’ said Tom. ‘It will be interesting to see how much they might be prepared to pay for us,’ he added, staring up at the ceiling as he spoke.

He didn’t quite rub his hands but Rachel could tell he was imagining the prospect of a large wad of cash coming his way. She’d seen this before, in other businesses they’d worked with. Management teams had often started out very positive about selling, only to be disappointed by the offer that followed. She hoped that this business was as good as they thought it was. It would make a nice change to be able to deliver good news.

‘I’ll have the team start bringing you in the information you need. You can work from this office, and I’m just around the corner so just come and find me if you have any questions,’ said Tom.

Rachel spent the rest of the day finding her way around, organising their project room and briefing Rosa and AJ.

‘Don’t forget we need to be professional at all times,’ said Rachel. ‘This is no different to any other business that makes money out of providing a service.’

‘Quite right,’ said AJ, laughing. ‘No different at all. Apart from the fact that we’re not in a factory and there are still pictures of tits everywhere.’

‘They’re hardly the same as girly calendars, AJ,’ said Rosa. ‘They’re just adverts for boob jobs.’

‘I think you’ll find the expression you’re looking for is breast augmentation,’ said Rachel. ‘And it’s what they do, so it’s hardly surprising that they’re advertising them. We’re going to have to get used to talking about this sort of thing and using all the proper expressions as it won’t be that long until we’re standing up presenting about it.’

‘I think it’s hilarious,’ said AJ. ‘I have no idea how I’m going to talk to the doctors about what they do with a straight face.’

‘You wait until you have to meet the doctors who do penis enlargements,’ said Rachel. ‘That will take the smile off your face.’

AJ looked horrified. ‘Do they do those here?’

‘I expect so,’ said Rachel. ‘Carl said they did pretty much everything going. Anyway, we’ll find out soon enough. We’re getting all the sales figures tomorrow.’

When Rachel got home she rang Harry and arranged to meet him for a drink. As she got ready to go out she looked at herself in the mirror. She pulled her brown, shoulder-length hair away from her face and peered at it closely. She had a few lines around her eyes and her mouth that she hadn’t really focused on before. Laughter lines, she was pretty sure. That was a good thing, surely? It meant that she was happy and had plenty to laugh about. Rachel hoped this job wasn’t going to start making her obsess about what she looked like. She’d never even thought about cosmetic surgery and now she was going to spend a few weeks studying it in detail. Would it make

her more likely to want to have it? Or maybe it would put her off for life. Rachel comforted herself with the thought that the latter was the far more likely option. She was bound to come across some horror stories.

Harry was playing on the fruit machine when Rachel arrived at the pub.

‘Hi, get me a pint, will you?’ he said without looking up. ‘Nearly done.’

Rachel went over to the bar and ordered a pint and a gin and tonic. She sat down at a table near the fruit machine and watched Harry as he finished using up his credits. His hair flopped slightly onto his forehead as he peered into the machine, trying to see if the matching shapes were just a couple of nudges away.

He’s very good looking, she thought, remembering how totally spellbound she had been when she first met him. Harry had a very direct way of talking, and that included talking about his feelings for Rachel. She’d never met anyone before who had managed to do that while still being totally cool. A couple of weeks after they’d met, Harry had said to her, ‘You know, Rach, I think it’s the fact that you’re so smart as well as pretty that makes me crazy about you.’ He’d said it in such a matter-of-fact way that it came across as simply that, a fact. She’d been so surprised and flattered that she’d had no idea what to say in reply. So she’d said nothing. Instead, she’d got up, taken his hand and flagged down a cab to take them back to her flat. What a night that had been. For a long time Rachel hadn’t quite been able to believe her luck and kept waiting to find out what the catch with Harry was.

Eventually she worked it out. His directness made him incredibly persuasive and she found it almost impossible to say no to him. As a result, he was constantly leading her astray. When he wanted to go on somewhere and she wanted to go home, he would say to her, 'It's not as much fun if you don't come. I just want you with me, Rachel.' And she knew he meant it.

Harry finished his last spin and came over to join her.

'Good day at school?'

'Yes, really good actually,' Rachel said.

Normally she wouldn't bother to tell Harry much about the details of her day as she knew he wasn't interested. Office jobs were just that, as far as he was concerned. Rachel often wondered how Harry could be so into her at the same time as being so disinterested in something that was such a big part of her life. However, this project was different: she was sure he'd be interested in this one. Yes it was confidential, but this was only Harry. He didn't exactly move in the same circles as cosmetic surgeons.

'I've started a new project: a cosmetic surgery business that's up for sale,' she said, quickly adding, 'I think quite a lot of celebrities might go there.'

'Wow, how cool! What sort of things do they do?' Harry asked.

'Most things, I think. We'll be finding out tomorrow. Certainly plenty of boob jobs, though, judging by the posters they have about the place.'

'Will you get to see the before and after photos?'

'Harry!' Rachel gently punched his arm. 'I know

we get to look at most things but even we don't have good reason to start rifling through medical photos. I might get to find out which celebs have had stuff done, though, as we're going to be having a good look at the client base.'

'Might be a few good stories in that,' said Harry.

'I'm sure the whole place is full of stories. Anyway, I haven't got long to learn all about it as we're going to be presenting to the American buyers in a few weeks. So I'll need to know my Botox from my buttock lifts by then.'

'Buttock lifts? Too weird,' said Harry. 'Why would you bother doing that?'

'Because people don't like having saggy arses, I guess,' said Rachel.

'Well, they should use you as their after model,' Harry said, slipping his arm around Rachel's waist.

'What are you after?' said Rachel.

'You,' said Harry.

Rachel laughed. As usual Harry was pushing all the right buttons.

'How was your day?' Rachel asked.

'Not bad. I spent most of it trying to track down this bloke who's promised me an intro to a golf pro he knows. Apparently he's teaching some great new putting technique and I want to interview him about it. He's already got a few of the top golfers on his books and I want to get to him before it becomes old news. Found the bloke eventually, and I think after a few rounds of golf and a couple of decent lunches, the story's mine.'

'It's a tough life,' said Rachel. 'One sporting event

or long lunch after another. I don't know how you cope.'

'I know, it's taken years of training,' said Harry.

'Years of watching sport and drinking lager more like.'

'Every job has its own type of training. I just happen to be perfectly suited to mine.'

Rachel had to agree with him. Harry was perfectly suited to his job. Mind you, she was pretty good at hers too; well, most of the time anyway.

'I'm starving,' said Harry. 'Let's go and get a curry.'

'Good idea,' said Rachel, suddenly realising how hungry she was.

As they were eating, Harry's phone beeped with a text message.

'It's Paul,' said Harry. 'He's got some spare tickets for the comedy club and wants to know if we want to meet him there?'

'What time do you think it'll finish?'

'Probably around eleven thirty. It should be a laugh. I'll text him back yes.'

'Okay, but I can't be too late – early start in the morning and I need my beauty sleep,' said Rachel.

'Hardly,' said Harry.

The show actually finished well after midnight and by the time Rachel got home it was closer to one a.m. She reluctantly set her alarm for six a.m. and climbed into bed.

CHAPTER 4

Rachel sat in the meeting room at Beau Street convinced that she was sweating curry. The room wasn't that big and it had got quite warm with the three of them working in it. Rachel grabbed two breath-freshening mints from her bag and put them in her mouth, swilling them round to get rid of any hint of last night. The double shot latte that she'd drunk on the way in had kicked in though, and she was raring to go. One of Tom Duffy's team had dropped off a large set of files containing sales and client information that morning and they'd also been given a computer with access to booking records.

'Right, guys, let's get going. We need to work out a way to divide the work up. I've had a look through the files and the sales are split by the top five procedures and then by the rest. They have most of the information set out at the front of the sales records for each month. So Rosa, why don't you take the top five, AJ, you look at the rest, and I'll start work on the client base.'

Rachel read from the files. 'Right, these are the top