NEDDANG SEASON

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This book is dedicated to all those who work in weddings, an industry hit so hard by the 2020 pandemic.

Thank you for all you do to give others their perfect day.

Prologue

Has anyone seen the peacocks?'
I look up from examining a selection of napkins.
'Excuse me?'

'Have you seen the peacocks?' my brother repeats.

'What peacocks?'

'The ones I hired. I've lost them.'

'Adrian, what are you talking about?'

'I hired some peacocks to roam about the lawn. It was meant to be a surprise for the wedding tomorrow. It's your wedding gift from me.' He grins proudly. 'Guessing you didn't put that on your list. Talk about an original idea.'

I narrow my eyes at him. 'You hired peacocks to roam the lawn at my wedding –'

'Cool, right?'

'- as a surprise present?'

'You're welcome.'

'And they've gone . . . missing.'

'I wouldn't say *missing* exactly, more like they've roamed a bit further than expected.'

I purse my lips. My best friend, Ruby, standing next to me, clears her throat and tries to look busy with the napkins.

'So,' Adrian prompts, 'have you seen them?'

'No, we haven't seen any *peacocks* here in the marquee,' I hiss, through gritted teeth. 'Adrian, are you *kidding me*?'

He looks confused. 'About the peacocks? No. They're genuinely around here somewhere. Also, get this. Did you know that they're actually called *peafowl*? The guy I hired them from told me this. Peacocks are the male ones, and the females are called peahens. *Peahens*! Who knew?' His face lights up. 'Hey, do you think they might be in the house? People have been leaving that door open all day.'

Ruby glances at my expression and jumps in. 'Good idea. Best to check inside. And . . . uh . . . maybe while you're in there, you might want to check that all the bedroom doors are closed, so that if the peacocks do somehow get in, they don't go near Freya's dress or anything like that.'

I think my eyes must be bulging unnaturally out of my head as I try not to explode at my idiot younger brother, because Ruby takes another look at me, and adds, 'Go NOW, Adrian,' in a very urgent tone.

Adrian swans out of the marquee towards the house, swiping one of the favour bags from the wicker basket by the exit on his way.

Ruby turns to face me, putting her hands on my shoulders and looking me in the eye. 'Breathe with me,' she instructs, inhaling and exhaling deeply.

'The day before my wedding, he sets *peacocks* loose in the house?'

'Technically he set them loose in the *garden*,' Ruby corrects, trying hard to make it seem less of a big deal. 'They won't get in anybody's way. And I'm sure he'll find

them before tomorrow. You have to give it to him, it is an original gift.'

I shake my head in disbelief.

'I think we should put the peacocks out of your mind and focus on what's *really* important,' Ruby declares. 'Like which napkin you're going to use. White or almost-white or cream.'

I sigh and turn my attention back to the napkins. 'It has to be . . . almost-white.'

'If you'd chosen the white, we wouldn't have been able to stay friends.' She gestures around the marquee. 'Look at this, Freya. Everything's perfect. Surely we can relax with a glass of Champagne now?'

I turn to admire the set-up as dozens of people busily put the finishing touches to it all. It's mad to think how my dad's garden has been transformed in just a few hours ready for tomorrow. I've always thought that the lawn here was the perfect open space for a marquee and, since we're in the middle of the tranquil Berkshire countryside, it's an idyllic setting for a country-garden wedding. When Matthew proposed, we didn't bother considering any other venues. And, looking round at everything now, I'm confident we made the right decision. It's really starting to come together. All the effort and time I've put into this wedding, all those tiny, teeny, ridiculous details – who knew how many different types of paper an invitation could be printed on? – have all been worth it.

The marquee is beautiful, the fairy-light canopy overhead is magical, and even though the flowers won't be arriving until first thing tomorrow, I already know they're going

to be spectacular because the florist, Lucy, is a genius and I completely trust her. She insisted on being here today with her colleagues to map everything out and make sure her vision was going to come to life as she'd planned it. (A woman after my own heart.)

The table settings are great and, now that the napkins have been chosen, are almost finished. The stage is ready for the band, the photo booth set up exactly where it should be in the corner, the favours in the basket by the exit – one down, thanks to Adrian, but that's okay because I ordered spares, just in case – and the table plan, beautifully illustrated by a local artist I tracked down on Instagram, is propped up neatly on the easel. There's also a large rustic crate just inside the door with a pile of cream knitted throws in case it's a little chilly tomorrow, while in the house are forty giant umbrellas I ordered for the guests on the offchance that it rains when we're doing the photographs outside, though when I last checked the weather forecast ten minutes ago, it was still saying it will be mild and sunny. But you can't be too careful - and I've really tried to think of everything.

'Don't worry, everyone, I'm here and ready to help,' announces Leo, Ruby's boyfriend, as he enters the marquee, rubbing his hands together.

'You're a few hours late,' Ruby complains, watching him saunter towards us. 'Everything's done!'

He gives her a mischievous grin. 'Then I'm right on time, if you ask me. Sorry, the train was delayed this morning and it was a little tricky getting a taxi from the station. You were right, Rubes, I should have got yesterday off

work too and driven down with you Wednesday night. But I'm here now!'

'When will you learn I'm always right?' Ruby sighs as he throws his arm round her waist and kisses her cheek. 'Make yourself useful and get us hard workers a drink, will you? Really, the least you could do.'

'Not for me quite yet,' I remark, focusing on the table settings and nervously checking them once again. 'There're still a few things I need to cross off the list.'

'She's joking, right?' Leo asks Ruby, then turns back to me. 'Freya, it's the day before your wedding. Aren't you supposed to be relaxing?'

'Not many brides spend the day before their wedding relaxing, Leo,' I say, getting my phone from my pocket to run through my checklist. 'I'm almost certain that, traditionally, the day before is reserved for freaking out.'

'I don't think you've ever freaked out in your life, Freya. What could you be worried about right now?'

'Well, my brother's lost the peacocks -'

'The what?'

'- and I need Matthew to run through some things with the catering manager, because we have to confirm timings.'

'Speaking of the groom, where is he?' Leo asks.

'He's with his parents. They went for lunch together.'

Leo raises his eyebrows. 'Where? Please don't tell me they went to the Crown. I cannot see Matthew's parents enjoying the cuisine on offer there.'

Leo has a point. He and Ruby have come to stay at my dad's a few times and they're well aware that the Crown is the nearest pub in the area – it's the nearest *anything* in the

area – but the food there is limited and questionable. We're almost certain that the landlord buys a selection of readymeals from the supermarket, whacks them in a microwave and serves them up for a tenner. Matthew's mum, Gail, is very prim and proper. There's no chance she'd touch anything put in front of her in the Crown. I doubt she'd risk perching on one of the chairs, let alone eating the food.

Although Matthew loves it here at Dad's, he's really a city boy at heart, whether he admits it or not. He likes to go on about how one day he'd love to escape to the countryside, but he'd have to give up the huge variety of restaurants and bars on our doorstep in London and – considering that eating and socialising are basically his favourite things to do – I can't see that happening for a long time.

'I think they went for lunch in town,' I tell Leo. 'They'll be back soon.'

'You know what I've been thinking? How nice it is that you and Matthew are opening the Wedding Season and we're closing it,' Leo announces.

I frown at him. 'The Wedding Season?'

'Yeah. We have eight weddings this year.' Leo exhales. 'It's mad.'

'Welcome to your mid-thirties, Leo,' Ruby remarks.

'Mid-thirties? I'm thirty-two! That's pretty much late twenties!' he protests.

'Sure, keep telling yourself that,' she says, patting his arm.

'I think we have eight weddings this year, including ours,' I say, leading them over to the bar to check that the staff will have everything they need tomorrow.

'Exactly, a whole season of weddings.' Leo nods. 'Hence my point. Here we are, kicking off the Wedding Season with yours in March, and we're bringing the season to a close in September. It's going to be a big year.'

'Look at us, all grown-up,' Ruby comments, studying tomorrow's cocktail menu written on the chalkboard. 'I'm going to be a mess tomorrow. Waterproof mascara at the ready.'

'You think you'll shed a tear saying your vows, Freya?' Leo asks curiously.

Ruby snorts. 'Have you met her? Heart of stone, that one.' 'So sweet of you to notice,' I say drily. 'I hope that's a line from your maid-of-honour speech.'

'Nah, going for something a little less emotional and gushing.' She turns back to Leo. 'If anyone's going to cry tomorrow, it'll be the groom.'

Leo's face brightens as he spots someone at the entrance to the marquee. 'Speak of the devil!'

Matthew shuffles in, dodging out of the way of the catering staff as they carry things in, and almost knocking into the florist, who is going through the fixings and weight loadings of the hanging flowers with the owner of the marquee company.

'S-sorry,' he says, flustered as he stumbles away from them and clumsily knocks into a couple of milk churns. They clang as one wobbles into another.

'There you are,' I say, laughing. 'Those are for the flower arrangements that'll be just outside the entrance to the marquee. We're going to have two there and then some at the top of the path by the gate. What do you think?'

'Uh, fine,' he says, distracted.

'Before I forget, I know your dad was worried about the buttonhole, but tell him I've triple-checked with the florist and she's confirmed that he definitely has one waiting for him'

'Can we ... talk?' Matthew says, his brow furrowed.

'Hey, you're sweating. Are you okay?' I ask, alarmed. 'Oh, no. You're not coming down with something, are you?'

'You want me to get some paracetamol?' Ruby offers, overhearing as she approaches.

'Hey, Matthew!' Leo gives him an enthusiastic slap on the back. 'How are you feeling, mate? The place looks great! You two have smashed it.'

'Yeah, because Matthew had so much to do with it,' I remark playfully.

It's been a running joke between us that Matthew's involvement with the wedding started and ended with him proposing. Every time I've tried to get his opinion on *anything*, he's brushed it off, insisting he's happy with whatever I want.

'Freya, I really need to speak with you,' he says to me, in a serious tone.

'What is it?' I ask, as Leo and Ruby share a concerned look. 'Are you still worried about insulting your uncle by sitting him on table nine? Because I really don't think he'll—'

'It's not that.'

'Well, what, then?'

His eyes dart frantically around the marquee and he anxiously runs a hand through his hair, making it stick up

all over the place. As he does so, we're asked to move aside so staff can carry in the crates of glasses to go behind the bar.

'Look, can we go somewhere private?' Matthew snaps. 'It's so busy in here.'

I frown at him. 'Um, sure. Leo and Ruby, are you okay to hang here for a bit and then we'll do that drink?'

'Of course. We'll make sure everything's under control,' Ruby assures me. 'See you in a bit.'

I follow Matthew as he storms out of the marquee and marches towards the house. The back door to the garden is propped open and we head inside. In the kitchen, we pass Dad and Adrian having a hushed conversation. Adrian straightens and plasters a smile on his face as he sees me.

'You've found those pesky peacocks, yes?' I prompt, as Matthew continues through to the hall.

'Absolutely, sis!' Adrian calls after me. 'Everything's under control.'

'I don't believe you!' I sing-song back over my shoulder.

'Love you, too!'

I shake my head, unable to stop a small smile as we stop by the stairs. My brother may be an idiot, but he's a lovable one.

'I know the whole peacock thing is a bit crazy,' I say, as Matthew leans on the banister. 'But I'm sure that Adrian will—Oh, hey, Aunty Em!'

'There's the beautiful bride to be!' my aunt trills from the top of the staircase. 'And the handsome groom! You all set for tomorrow?'

'Everything's looking great! You need anything?'

'Just running through my reading,' she tells us, as Matthew stares at the floor, his foot tapping in irritation. 'Your uncle is having a cup of tea with the vicar in the sitting room. What a lovely woman! She's been telling us all about her sermon tomorrow. It's going to be so moving.'

'Ah, she's great, isn't she?' I smile up the stairs.

'Is there nowhere private in this place?' Matthew mutters, under his breath.

Looking as though he might lose it at any second, he grabs my wrist, pulls me a few steps down the hall, yanks open the cupboard under the stairs and ushers me in. He follows, shutting the door behind him. Startled, I feel for the switch on the wall and turn on the light. It's so cramped in here with all the household bits like the vacuum-cleaner and brooms that we're pressed right up against one another.

'Matthew, what are you *doing*?' I whisper, pushing away the mop handle that falls on my shoulder. 'Why are we in a cupboard?'

'I couldn't hear myself think out there,' he growls.

'Yeah, well, if you wanted some space we could have driven somewhere.' I wrinkle my nose at all the cobwebs in the corners. 'There are much nicer places to get away from everyone.'

'This couldn't wait.'

He bites his lip. He's really making me feel on edge. The way his mannerisms are so jerky, the beads of sweat forming on his forehead, his eyes darting around.

'Matthew, what is it?' I ask in concern, reaching for his hands. 'Is it the peacocks?'

He pulls his hands out of my grasp. 'Peacocks? What? No! This isn't about peacocks. Why would this be about peacocks?'

'You look a bit frazzled, so there's no need for you to know. Let's just say there's a peacock situation, but it's being handled.'

He stares at me in bewilderment and then, suddenly, it's like he just gives up. His hands fall to his sides, his shoulders droop, his head bows. He breathes out, shutting his eyes tightly. 'I can't do this,' he whispers.

'Can't do what? Matthew, are you okay? What's wrong?'

'I'm so sorry,' he whimpers. 'I've known it for a while. I should have told you. I've spoken to my parents about it and they . . . well . . . I *have* to tell you.'

I reach for him but he recoils as much as he can in such a small space, his foot knocking into the vacuum-cleaner. It switches on and he searches for the power button. I calmly reach over and turn it off for him.

'Matthew, what's going on? You're worrying me. Whatever it is, you can tell me.' I smile at him with encouragement. 'We can sort it together.'

'I can't do this,' he croaks. 'I can't do any of this. Not any more. I can't go through with the wedding.'

I stare at him, unable to speak.

'I'm so sorry, Freya,' he says, lifting his eyes to meet mine. 'It's over.'

Chapter One

When you get dumped on the day before your wedding in a broom cupboard, everything seems a bit shit.

I never imagined my world would come crashing down like this, but if I had, I never would have considered it might happen in a broom cupboard. I had a mop handle *literally* resting on my shoulder. My right foot was balanced on the dustpan and brush on the floor. There were about a hundred gross cobwebs hanging around my head. And barely two inches away from me was my fiancé – the man I'd spent the last twelve years with, the love of my life – who had decided this was the best place to tell me that, actually, he'd changed his mind.

A broom cupboard.

My brain couldn't process the information at first. I made him repeat himself. You know, just to torture myself as much as I could. Apparently, I wasn't content with how he'd spelled it out the first time, when he'd said very plainly that *he couldn't go through with the wedding*. No. I made him say it again and again, each time expecting his words to make sense.

But there was no sense to be made. All Matthew did was stand in that broom cupboard and repeat that he'd had doubts for a while but he didn't want to believe them. He'd

hoped they would just go away, and when they didn't, he had no idea what to do. As the wedding crept towards us, he'd tried to work out a way to tell me that he wanted out. Only he could never quite muster the courage.

Suddenly it was the day before and he couldn't bear to cause me pain, but he knew he *had* to do it or it would be even *crueller* to go through with the marriage. So, he'd taken his parents to lunch and he was honest with them. And they'd told him that he absolutely had to tell me. That day. Right there.

'They told you to tell me this in the broom cupboard?' I managed to whisper. Gail and Andrew loved me: how could they have encouraged their son to call off our wedding in a broom cupboard?

'No, no, of course not,' he confirmed, his brow furrowing. 'They didn't mention the broom cupboard specifically. This was the only private place on offer.'

But as Matthew continued to say how sorry he was and how, even though he loved me, he just wasn't *in* love with me any more, I went strangely numb. And because I wasn't saying anything – on account of the bizarre, dazed state I had entered – Matthew continued to make his case, and each reason he listed as to why he was breaking up with me was subconsciously logged in my brain to scrutinise later.

He believed he could be happier. We'd met when we were so young that we'd never had a chance to see what else was out there. What if, he kept saying, what if this wasn't as happy as we could be? What if there was something more? 'I can't do this, Freya. I can't do this. It doesn't feel right. I'm so sorry.'

Finally, tired of repeating himself, Matthew moved on to logistics. He courageously stated that he would help in any way possible to make the process easier on me.

I stared at him, still numb. 'The process?'

'Of cancelling the wedding.'

Oh. Right. *That* process. God. I was losing Matthew, *and* the wedding I'd just spent eleven months planning was off. We were going to have to let everyone know that I had been dumped in a broom cupboard less than twenty-four hours before I was supposed to walk down the aisle.

We'd have to ring round the guest list so that nobody made the unnecessary journey, and tell everyone already here to head home. The marquee would have to be taken down, the catering team cancelled – not to mention the florist, the band, the bar staff, the vicar, the church string quartet, the wedding-car company, the minicabs, the photobooth guy.

'And what about the peacocks?' I whispered.

'I'm sorry?' he said, kicking the vacuum-cleaner to one side.

'The peacocks. They're missing.'

'Freya, what are you—'

'The peacocks that were meant to roam around the lawns tomorrow,' I said, firmer now, irritated that he wasn't getting it. 'If the wedding is off, we have to find them so they can go home.'

Matthew stared at me as if I'd lost my mind. Which, I think it's safe to say, I had.

'Peacocks? That's what you're worried about? The peacocks?' His jaw clenched. 'I've just told you the wedding's

off and you're . . .' He trailed off, sighing and shaking his head. 'Look, Freya, this is kind of what I'm talking about. We don't . . . mesh well any more. You're so *pragmatic* all the time. So *together*. Which is great. For you. But I'm, you know . . .' he searched for the words '. . . I'm all over the place. Temperamental. Emotional. We can't be good for each other. We just can't. We don't make sense.'

He paused, biting his lip. I stared at him some more.

'Freya, you have every reason to hate me,' he continued dismally. 'I wish beyond measure I wasn't doing this to you. I'm a stupid bastard who should have said something sooner. I'm so sorry. But I also know I'm doing the right thing. I think one day you may thank me.'

There was a long silence. He tried to wait it out, but he gave up and asked if I was okay. Then, when I still wasn't responding, he begged me to say something, to tell him what he should do.

I asked him to leave me alone in the broom cupboard.

He was a bit confused, I think, but he nodded, told me he was so sorry once more, and then opened the door. 'I'll go and speak to your dad,' he said softly. 'Get the ball rolling.'

Of cancelling the wedding. He'd get the ball rolling of cancelling our wedding.

I asked him to close the door. When he did, I reached up and turned off the light and then slid down to sit on the floor, next to the dustpan and brush. The mop fell forwards, bouncing off the back of my head. I sat there for a while, wondering if there was really a need for me to leave this cupboard ever again.

Perhaps I could stay there for ever. It wasn't so bad. Sure, it smelt kind of musty and was already inhabited by a number of spiders, but once you got over all that, it really could be considered quite a cosy and convenient living space.

After a while, the door opened and Dad sat down next to me. He put his arm around my shoulders. I rested my head against him and closed my eyes. 'Dad,' I whispered into the darkness, 'I don't want to see anyone.'

'I assumed as much,' he replied. 'Adrian's sorting it.'

'How did this happen?'

'I don't know,' he said, holding me close. 'I just don't know.'

We stayed there for a long time until Adrian rapped on the door and reported that everyone was gone. It was just us three. Together, he and Dad lifted me to my feet and practically carried me up to my bedroom and sat me on the bed.

They reluctantly left the room after I insisted, slowly shutting the door behind them. And finally, safe in the knowledge that I was alone, I began to cry, my body heaving with alarmingly uncontrollable sobs.

My whole world had just fallen spectacularly apart.

Dad keeps bringing me walnuts.

It's been a week since the broom cupboard break-up, and every single day, my dad has dutifully brought walnuts up to my room. Apparently, he googled ways to help someone get through a break-up. An article he read stated that certain foods can help to improve your mood and one of them was walnuts.

So, now I am surrounded by little bowls of walnuts. They are literally everywhere. I don't understand where he's getting all these walnuts from.

'Thanks, Dad,' I say, when he appears in my doorway carrying yet another bowl. 'But I'm not hungry. And I've already got the ones you brought in this morning.'

'I'll just pop these here in case you need another snack,' he insists, coming over to place them on the desk next to my keyboard. 'So! How's work going?'

'It's fine.'

'Are you sure you should be working, Freya? It's great that you can work from home, but your boss did say you could take some time off and I think it might be a good idea to—'

'No, Dad, I need to work,' I tell him firmly, my eyes fixed on my screen as I scroll through my emails. 'It's keeping me busy and distracted. It's getting me out of bed in the morning.'

'Yes, but . . .' He searches for the right thing to say.

I sigh and swivel in my chair to face him. 'Dad, honestly, I'm fine. I don't need any time off.'

'If you're sure,' he says sadly.

I offer him a small smile. 'Look, Dad, you don't need to worry about me. I'll be *fine*. I'll head back to London in a week or so. I just wanted to give Matthew time to . . . clear out all his stuff from the flat. You know, so I don't have to see it when I get home and be reminded of . . .'

Him. Our life together. Our future.

I swallow the lump in my throat, hurriedly turning back to my laptop. God, I hate this feeling. I hate how much it aches all the time.

I can't get rid of this stupid, fucking ache.

It might seem strange, but at thirty-two, this is my first ever heartbreak. I started dating Matthew when I was twenty, and before then I didn't have any serious boyfriends. He was my first love. Whenever I told anyone that, they always said how lucky I was. But now, the fact that I've never loved anyone else feels like a curse. Because I have no idea how to cope with a break-up. I didn't realise it felt like this.

How can someone be the most important person in the world to you and then, just like that, they're gone from your life? Vanished? Except they're *actually* still out there somewhere. They've just chosen *not* to be with you. And you're supposed to go on with your life. You know everything about that person, but all of a sudden, you're not allowed to know them at all. It's like grieving the death of someone, but they're still alive and kicking.

I can't get my head round it. It can't really be happening. It just *can't*.

He'll realise what he's done. He has to. This is a gigantic, cruel, mortifying mistake, and he'll see that soon. We'll be fine once he's got his head sorted. Until then, I've landed on the temporary solution of hiding away from the world and everyone in it. I can't let them see me like this.

Before my heart got shattered in a broom cupboard, I'd have described myself as an energetic, busy person. I was good in the mornings, able to push myself out of bed when the alarm went off, unlike Matthew who pressed snooze several times. Usually I was out on a run before he got up. I'm not good at running – or any kind of exercise, to be

honest – but I like the quiet, solitary time to get my thoughts in order, and I always feel much more ready for the day after my five-kilometre loop.

Once home, I showered, dressed, did my make-up, and then made the coffees while Matthew was in the bathroom. He'd take any old mug, but I always have my coffee in the flask that Ruby bought for me as a joke. It has 'HOT STUFF' written across it. I love that flask, and if I don't have my morning coffee in it, I worry I'm going to have a bad day. (I know this seems like a stupid superstition *and yet* the morning Matthew broke up with me I had my coffee in one of Dad's mugs with a flamingo on it. That's proof right there.)

By the time I left for work, Matthew would be getting dressed. He's a graphic designer, and his office is in south London, a half-hour commute from ours.

'Love you,' I'd tell him every morning, handing him his coffee and kissing his cheek.

'You too,' he'd reply sleepily.

A matter of habit for some couples, maybe. But it had never felt that way for me.

Anyway, I haven't been able to force myself out for a morning run since the wedding-that-wasn't. I can't even muster the energy to bathe properly. I just stand there in the shower, letting the water splash on the top of my head. I mean, it's *tragic*. If I had more energy, I'd feel ashamed of myself, but there's just no room for that right now.

I've temporarily lost any kind of enthusiasm for personal hygiene, and my skin is retaliating by breaking out, just to kick me when I'm down. It's cruel really. All those years of

being so regimented with my skincare routine – double cleansing, a vitamin C serum, careful moisturising – but now it's gone out of the window. The idea of washing my face twice is *too much*.

It's all gone to shit. All of it. My love, my life, my combination skin.

On what would have been our wedding day, I literally only left my childhood bedroom to go to the bathroom and, even then, I pretty much crawled on all fours to get there. At one point, Dad was on the landing and he had to step aside to let me crawl past him along the carpet to the loo. He stood watching me go, not saying a word.

I imagine, one day, we'll laugh about that.

When they took the marquee down the next day, I closed all the curtains in the house so I wouldn't accidentally see it being dismantled. I curled up in my bed with my headphones on, blasting music into my ears to block out the banging and clanging of all traces of the wedding being removed.

On Monday, I mustered the energy to go downstairs for lunch. Adrian and Dad tried their best not to make a big deal of it, but it was obvious that they were freaking out. As I sat at the table, glumly pushing food around my plate, they sat tensely, attempting unnaturally cheery conversation.

'Aren't those birds singing today?' noted Adrian, a guy who has never noticed birds tweeting in his life. 'Ah, nature.'

'Yes, nature.' Dad nodded, trying his best. 'It brings so much.'

'Yes.'

'Hmm.'

They turned to me. I didn't say anything, my eyes fixed on my plate, too tired to participate. There was an awkward silence until Adrian couldn't take it any longer. 'I think I can hear a bumble bee!'

'Extraordinary!'

The conversation continued in this vein until I thanked them for lunch, put my plate in the dishwasher and headed back upstairs to the safety of my depressing little den. I have managed to conjure better conversational skills since then, but it's all so tiring. I still feel exhausted All. The. Time.

I decided I didn't want to take any time off work. I had booked two weeks off for the honeymoon, but I called my boss, Phil, on Tuesday morning and asked if I could carry on as if nothing had happened. By then, I'd spent three days in my room wallowing, and I *needed* something to take my mind off the horror that was my life.

'If you're sure you're okay to work?' Phil asked, sounding *very* uncomfortable.

Phil is an awkward person anyway, so the idea of talking to me at such a sombre time must have been *excruciating* for him. At sixty-one, he's a bit older than the rest of the team and, being naturally shy and quiet, he doesn't enjoy the socialising side of work, so it's not like we know each other very well. He's very much the sort of person who wants to march into his office in the morning, do his job and leave.

'Of course I'm okay!' I insisted, sitting slouched on my bed in just my pants, slipper socks and Matthew's old Foo Fighters T-shirt, while sticking a twisted bit of tissue up my nostril. When I was crying earlier, I blew my nose so hard it bled. 'Why wouldn't I be?'

'Oh. Well. I . . . ahem . . . I was very sorry to hear about . . . what happened. Very sorry.'

I felt the stab of humiliation, the idea of everyone in the office talking about it. Feeling sorry for me. The idiot who had no idea her relationship was over until the day before her wedding. I still can't believe that idiot is me. 'Thanks, Phil, but I'm fine.'

'If you think work could be a good distraction . . .'
'I do.'

'But you must look after yourself, Freya,' he said firmly, which was really quite sweet of him. 'You take things at your own pace.'

'I promise I will.'

Which was a lie, of course. You can't really do my job at your own pace. I'm a brand manager for Suttworth, the biggest drinks company in the country, and it's not like people stop selling and drinking alcohol across the UK just because I'm having a life crisis. But I do have a brilliant team who are helping me out, and since I can stay at home for now, I don't have to be presentable, which definitely works in my favour. I had also made sure that things were all sorted and under control before I left the office the week before last, to much pre-nuptial fanfare. They decorated my desk, with white balloons and silver confetti, and cracked open the Champagne.

I was the excited bride-to-be off for a few days of wedding prep before jetting away on a honeymoon to Barbados.

Ugh.

Anyway, these walnuts everywhere around my room really don't help much. Earlier, I tried to eat one by lobbing

it at my open mouth half-heartedly and I missed. It hit the corner of my lip and dropped to the floor. I stared at it and wailed, 'WHYYYYYY?'

It was a low point.

'Well,' Dad says, clapping his hands together as he glances around my bedroom, 'if you feel like a break from work, then let me know.'

'I will,' I say, clicking on a spreadsheet for no reason at all, just to have something I could pretend to examine. 'Thanks, Dad.'

'I did actually come up here for a reason.'

'You've already delivered the walnuts.'

'Another reason,' he says, forcing me to swivel round to face him again. 'As Adrian has to fly back to New York tomorrow morning, I wondered if you might want to invite Leo and Ruby over. You know, for some company.'

'I really don't want to see anyone.'

'I think it would be a good idea.'

'I have you for company,' I say.

He smiles modestly. 'I'm hardly good fun. You need people to help lift those spirits.'

'My spirits are perfectly lifted.'

He sighs. 'Freya, I know you put on a front . . .' He holds up his hands as I open my mouth to protest. 'Please. I know what you're like. You take after your old man, pretending everything's fine when it isn't. Not talking about stuff.' His eyes fall to the floor and his voice softens. 'It's all very well but, trust me, it's important to . . . to let things out once in a while. I understand you don't want to dwell on it, but don't sweep over it. Not something like this. You're allowed to

lean on people. What else are we good for if not to be there in times of trouble?'

I take a deep breath. 'All right, Dad. I'll ask Ruby and Leo to come for the weekend. Things must be bad if you're talking about being there in times of trouble.'

'Thought I'd take a stab at being sincere.'

'You pulled it off nicely.'

'Don't expect it to happen again.'

'I'm pleased to hear it.'

'So, you'll invite Ruby and Leo?' he prompts.

'I'll message them now.'

'Good stuff. I'll let you get back to work.' He heads to the door, then hovers there, glancing back at me. 'Oh, your mum phoned again. She said you haven't been answering her calls to your mobile.'

'She's not really the person I want to speak to at the moment.'

'I understand, but she's your mum. She's worried. She wants to be there for you.'

'That's new for her,' I say breezily.

'I know she can be a bit . . . well . . .' he searches for the word and gives up '. . . you know. But she really regrets how things are with you and Adrian, and she's trying her best to make it better. Just because you're all grown-up now it doesn't mean she doesn't worry. You should have heard her when I rang her to let her know that . . . things weren't going ahead.' He frowns at having to allude to it. 'She was in bits for you. She really wanted to extend her stay for a couple of weeks, so she could be in the area, near to you. It took a lot of persuading to get her to head home.

I think she just wants to make sure you're okay. A message would suffice.'

I take a deep breath. 'Fine. I'll send her a text.'

'Good.' He smiles warmly at me. 'You just have to keep putting one foot in front of the other.'

I blink at him. 'What?'

'In life,' he says, as though that clears everything up. 'One foot in front of the other. You'll get there. I know you will.'

* * *

Reasons NOT to call Matthew

- He destroyed the life we'd built together in one fell swoop
- He dumped me in a broom cupboard
- He cancelled our wedding
- He completely humiliated me, and I don't know how I'll EVER face friends and family again without feeling embarrassed about the whole thing
- He cost me a lot of money by cancelling the wedding ONE DAY BEFORE, rather than three months before when we would have lost deposits but not entire costs
- He's a fucking selfish little wankface and I hate him

Reasons to call Matthew

 I love him and miss him and I don't understand how this happened

Conclusion

- Chucked my phone out of the bedroom window
- Decided to listen to 'Total Eclipse Of The Heart'
- Realised all my music is on my phone

- Remembered that I just threw my phone out the window
- Wailed, 'WHY IS THE WORLD SO SHIT?' at the top of my lungs
- Remembered I have a laptop
- Used my laptop to play 'Total Eclipse Of The Heart'
- Sobbed into my pillow
- Problem solved (for now)