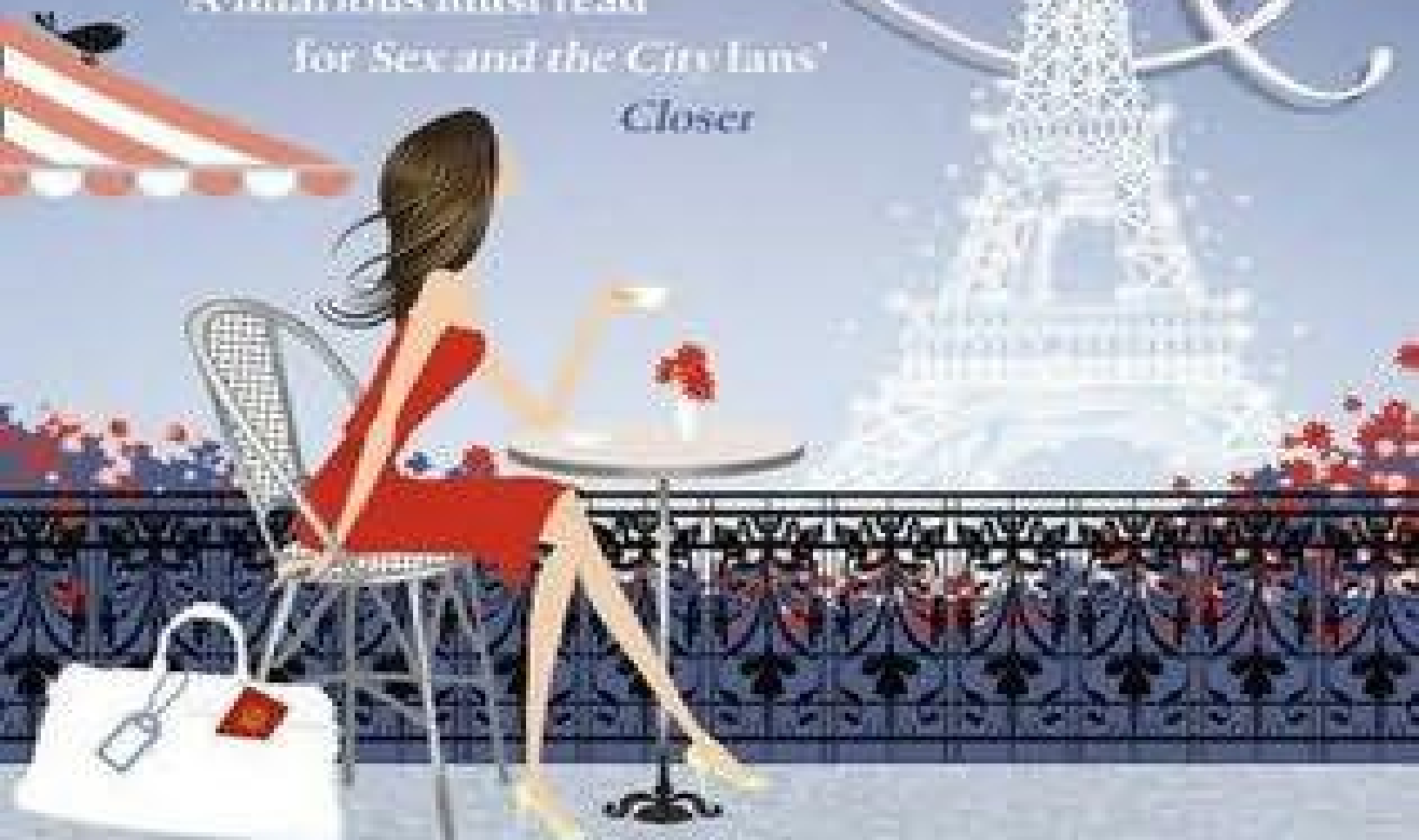


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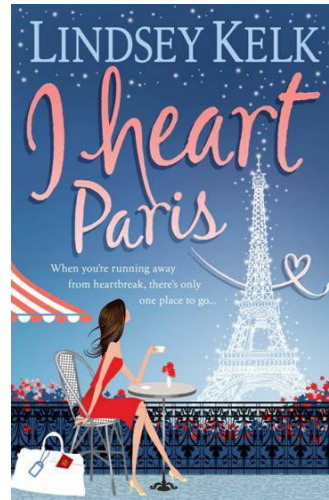
I Heart Paris

A hilarious must read
for *Sex and the City* fans'
Closer



Synopsis:

Angela is in the City of Love — but her own love life is heading for trouble... Angela Clark is a British girl living the dream in fabulous New York. But she's never been to the romantic capital of the world — Paris. So when her lead singer boyfriend Alex suggests a trip there and she is asked to write an insider's guide to the hip city — she jumps at the chance! Meandering along charming streets, perusing Paris's hot destinations — all in the name of research — Angela decides she could get used to the joie de vivre of Paris. But there's something awry, Angela soon realises that evil forces are at work, conspiring to sabotage her big break! And when she spots Alex having a tête-à-tête with his ex in a Paris bar — without best friend Jenny to counsel her — Angela begins to crumble. With London and her old life only a train journey away — now is the time to decide if she should stay and face the music or return to the safety of home.



I Heart Paris

By

Lindsey Kelk

The third book in the I Heart series

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For Mabel, Kara, Joel and Chloe — hope you're not too ashamed of me when you're old enough to read this

CHAPTER ONE

New York hadn't even attempted to cool down in the three days that I'd been away. When my friend Erin had suggested we get away to her beach house for a long weekend, I almost threw myself out of her eighteenth-storey office window to get there quicker. But three days beside the seaside only made it harder to be back in the sticky city. I'd only walked two blocks to the subway and my heel had slipped into the melting, sludgy tarmac between the paving slabs three times already. Ick. It almost made me long for a wet summer Saturday in Wimbledon. Almost.

In this cloying heat, the only way I could cope was to wear as little clothing as possible whenever I had to be outside, and spend as much time worshipping at the altar of the air-conditioning unit as humanly possible. Today's survival ensemble was pretty much nothing more than a really long pale pink vest from American Apparel and a bangle. The bangle was to show I had actually put some thought into getting dressed and hadn't just wandered out in my underwear. Back in London, I would never, ever have left the house in something so skimpy, but it was just too hot to worry about bingo wings. When I left the house, I didn't feel as if I'd forgotten to get dressed. Right now, I was one towelling headband away from the crazy lady that liked to sit outside the twenty-four-hour deli opposite my apartment in her dressing gown and bra.

Once I was safely on the air-conditioned train, I flailed around elegant as ever, hanging from the pole in the centre of the carriage and swapped my shoes for the ever-present flip-flops in my Marc Jacobs satchel. I thought back to the precious moment when the bag had come into my life. I had treasured it more than anything else I'd ever owned, I never put it on the floor, always checked that pens had their lids on, lip glosses weren't leaking and there was no way on God's green earth, I'd have ever put a pair of dirty street shoes in it. Rummaging around for my left flip-flop, I wanted to shed a little tear for the unravelled stitching and the used subway cards, crumpled napkins and dozens of half empty packs of chewing gum that now littered the lining. Classy.

Changing from the Six train onto the L at Union Square, I felt myself begin to smile. The same nervous flutter started to pick up in the pit of my stomach that always attacked me when I stepped onto the train towards Brooklyn. So, maybe there was an upside to being back in the city. Alex. Of course, I wouldn't have the L train flutters nearly as often if I would just move in with him, like he kept asking. According to my friends, it was ridiculous that I was keeping our relationship 'bi-coastal'. I'd spent an awful lot of the weekend trying to explain to über-Manhattanite Erin, who didn't even venture below 14th street unless she positively had to, that Murray Hill to Williamsburg wasn't exactly bi-coastal. And besides, I just wasn't sure I was ready to take that step just yet. Yes, I loved Alex, yes, I wanted to spend time with him but did that mean I should shack up with him right away? No.

After I'd shuffled off the train and hauled myself up the stairs to the street, I paused for a moment to let my eyes readjust to the sunlight. As always, Alex was propped up against the corner of Bedford and North 7th, bobbing his head to whatever was coming out of his iPod, his thick black hair pushed back off his face, messed up at the back, as though he'd just got up. Which, given that it was only one in the afternoon, I guessed he probably had. Sticky August weather or not, Alex's wardrobe never changed. Skinny black jeans clung to his legs, his T-shirt was tight to his chest and he was sipping from a steaming cup of coffee.

I shook my head. How could he drink anything hot on a day like this? Just looking at the cup made me break out in a sweat. Just looking at Alex made the flutter in my stomach graduate into a full-body shiver. I ran my ring fingers under each eye, clearing any potential mascara smudges — not even the most waterproof of mascaras could survive ninety-five degrees of New York City heat — and pulled my sunglasses out of my handbag before I started over.

'Hey.' Alex dropped his coffee in the bin beside him and leaned his head down to mine for a kiss. 'How was Erin's?'

'Amazing,' I replied, reaching back up for another slightly longer kiss that made me catch my breath. 'You should come with us next time. Provincetown is beautiful.'

'I'm not really beach people,' he said, catching my hand in his and pulling me down the street. 'And from the look of those shoulders, neither are you.'

'Oh, I know.' I shrugged the strap of my bag back on to the narrow strap of my dress, revealing my attractive lobster red skin. 'I should just stay inside until September.'

'Hmm.' Alex squeezed my hand. 'That's not going to play exactly into my plans, but I'm not entirely against the idea.'

There was that shiver again.

'And what plans are these?' I asked as we walked up the block to Alex's apartment. His place was only five minutes from the subway, but in this heat, they were five minutes too many.

'So the band has been asked to play a festival,' he said, forcing his hand into the skintight pocket of his jeans, feeling around for a key that wasn't there.

'Really? That's great,' I dipped my hand into the tiny pocket inside my bag and produced my key to Alex's flat as we reached the door. He took it from me with a heart-stopping grin. It was sickening how much I fancied him. It was like, I'd see him every day and after a while I stopped seeing him. And then, out of nowhere, I'd just get a sidelong glance at him and the wind would be completely knocked out of me, as if I were seeing him for the first time.

'See? This is why I need you to move in,' he slid his hand around my waist and pulled me in for another, deeper kiss as we staggered sideways into the apartment building. My skin prickled with goosebumps from the shock of the air conditioning.

'Or you could just remember to take your key out with you,' I whispered, pulling away with stinging lips. Must remember to buy lip balm with a higher SPF. 'Tell me about this festival.'

'Tell me you missed me this weekend,' he whispered back, running his finger over my bottom lip.

I paused, looking down at my flip-flops for a second. It was moments like this that made me feel like a complete idiot for not running back to Manhattan, throwing all my belongings in a bag and pitching up at the apartment in Brooklyn in a heartbeat.

'Of course I missed you,' I took the key from his hand and opened the apartment door. 'Did you cry yourself to sleep every night?'

'I cry myself to sleep every night you're not here,' he shot me a grin and walked over to the fridge, producing two icy beers. 'But since you won't move in, I've had to find a way through it.'

I dropped my bag onto one of his knackered old sofas (better for it than the floor) and took the beer. This was the perfect time to have The Conversation. To say, I really do want to move in with you, but I'm ever so slightly shit-scared. But I didn't.

Alex vanished into his bedroom and I didn't follow. Instead I looked around the apartment. The tiny openplan kitchen, littered with take-out boxes and empty coffee cups. Two huge, squishy sofas faced the huge floor-to-ceiling windows with all of Manhattan laid out in front of us, sparkling in the sunlight. It didn't look sweaty, hateful and oppressive from in here. It looked beautiful. And whenever I got bored of looking at the New York City skyline, if that was in fact possible, there was always the massive flat screen TV shoved in the corner, with the DVR already set to record all my favourite shows.

Was I being completely ridiculous? What was the worst that would happen? I'd move in, there would be fewer takeaway cartons in the kitchen, more products in the bathroom. We'd go to bed together every night, wake up together every morning, go out, come home, watch TV, cook, shop, clean, moan, bitch, stop having sex, stop talking, start cheating and end up hating each other.

Wow. I followed my bag down on to the sofa. Now that was not a healthy internal reaction to the idea of moving in with my lovely, lovely boyfriend.

'So, the festival,' Alex called from the bedroom. 'It's pretty cool, we've played it before, but they've asked us to come back and play again, it's like the second headline slot.'

'That's amazing,' I yelled back, trying to wipe those horrible thoughts out of my stupid head. 'So when is it? Next summer?'

'Uh, it's kind of next weekend.' He appeared in the doorway. 'Yeah, it's not that amazing. Someone else dropped out and we were first runner-up.'

'But still,' I let myself be distracted by the biceps peeping out of his T-shirt as he stretched against the door frame. 'It's better than a slap around the face. Is it in the city?'

'That's the other thing,' he let go of the door and came over to the sofa, 'it's in Paris. France.'

'Paris, France?'

'Paris, France.'

'Is there another Paris?'

'Paris, Texas?'

'All right smart arse.' I rubbed my forehead. 'So you're going to Paris next weekend?' At least that would buy me another couple of weeks to try and get over this whole moving in nonsense.

'We're going to Paris next weekend,' he corrected. 'You'll come right? I figure I can't leave you alone in the city after what happened in LA.'

'Nothing happened in LA.' I slapped his thigh. It didn't matter how many jokes he made about my ill-fated work trip to LA, I still wasn't OK with it. As much fun as an all-expenses paid trip to Hollywood to interview an up-and-coming Brit actor who turned out to be gay and tried to convince me to be his professional beard might sound, it almost cost me my job, my work permit and Alex. So I thought it perfectly understandable that I might still be a little bit sore about it.

'OK, OK.' Alex grabbed my hands to hold off the attack. 'So how about you look at it like a romantic trip to Paris. We've never taken a trip before.'

'True.' I nodded, letting him slide his hands up from my wrists to interlink his fingers with mine. 'And I have always wanted to go to Paris.'

'You've never been?' he asked, looking surprised. I shook my head. 'But it's so close to the UK.'

'I missed the GCSE trip after I fell down a pothole on the geography field trip,' I admitted. 'Not my finest moment.'

'I don't know what a pothole is, but it sounds like something you would do.' He kissed me lightly on the lips. 'You know I love you even though you're a walking disaster zone, right?'

'Thanks.' I couldn't really be offended, it was true. I'd already broken two glasses in a week. 'Won't Paris be super expensive though? I'm still broke from LA.'

Broke, but beautifully dressed, I thought, just not today.

'You don't need to worry about anything.' Alex started to plait a section of my hair. 'I'm hardly gonna ask you to come away with me and then expect you to pay for it.'

'But I want to.' I frowned. 'I don't want you to have to pay for everything. You know I'm really not that girl.'

'I thought every girl was the "let my boyfriend take me to Paris for the weekend" kind of a girl,' Alex said, pulling my hair. 'Or is this just an excuse for you to weasel out of the trip the same way you're trying to weasel out of moving in with me?'

'I'm not weaseling out of anything,' I pulled the loose plait out of his hands. 'I do want to go to Paris, I just don't want you to have to pay for me to go to Paris. I'll find a way to make it work. And if it's next weekend, we'll be away for your birthday. Your big three-oh.'

Alex's thirtieth birthday had been looming on the horizon for months and, while he was pretending to be super cool about it, the official line was that I wasn't allowed to 'make a big deal out of nothing', which I had translated from boy-speak to mean 'if I don't acknowledge it, it won't actually happen'. Typical boy-logic that could be applied to many, many of his actions.

'Yeah, well, who doesn't want to be in Paris for their birthday?' he shrugged. 'The record company want us to play a couple of warm-up shows, the festival is on Sunday, but I'll keep Friday night free so we can do dinner or something. What could we do in New York that we can't do just as good in Paris? Or even better?'

He kissed me lightly on the lips and waited for a response. Sneaky tactics, he knew I wasn't at my full mental capacity when there was kissing involved.

'I don't know, I told you, I've never been to Paris,' I managed to get in, between kisses. 'When would we leave?'

'Monday?'

Untangling his hands from my hair, I pulled away slightly trying to remember what day it was. That was the problem with working from home, I had absolutely no sense of time. 'Today's Tuesday, there's too much to organize with work and the flat and, really, Alex, it's only six days.'

'It turns me on when you are so smart.' He persisted with the kissing, moving on to my neck and pushing me backwards against the sofa. 'There's nothing to freak out about, Angela. You pack a bag, you tell work that you're blogging from Paris for a week, you leave Vanessa in the apartment, we go to Paris. And if you're gonna go all feminazi on me paying for your flight, you can make it my birthday present. Seriously, how many times do I have to tell you to stop over-thinking everything?'

'At least once more,' I said, giving up. I reached my arms up around his neck and shifted around on to the sofa as his hand moved up my thigh and under the thin cotton of my dress-slash-vest. 'So you say you missed me this weekend.'

I felt his breath against my ear, giving me an altogether different case of goosebumps.

'Like you wouldn't believe.'

CHAPTER TWO

'What is that noise?' Alex groaned from underneath his covers.

'My phone,' I staggered out of bed the next morning and rolled into the living room, swearing and following the beeps. 'Go back to sleep.' I plunged an arm into the darkness that I hoped was the sofa until I felt my vibrating phone.

'Yeah?' I answered eloquently.

'Hi, Angela?'

'Muh?' I mumbled, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes. What time was it anyway?

'Angela, it's Cici? From the office? Were you still in bed, sleepyhead?'

There was no wonder I was shocked. If I had to name a New York nemesis, it would be Cici. She was my boss's assistant at *The Look*, tall, skinny, loaded, desperately 'On-Trend' and, God bless her, she might hate me with a fiery passion, but at least I could rely on her to be consistent. Until today. Shit.

'Erm, I was in the shower,' I lied for absolutely no reason. I pulled the phone away from my ear. According to the clock flashing on bedside table, it was eight-thirty a.m. There was no conceivable reason why I wouldn't still be in bed. Was there? Had I forgotten something? 'What's wrong, Cici?'

'Nothing's wrong,' she giggled. Actually giggled. 'Mary just asked that I give you a call to see if you could make an early lunch meeting today. Well, not really a meeting, more of a get-together. Twelve? Pastis?'

I almost dropped the phone. Mary Stein, my editor at Spencer Media, had never so much as walked me out of her office let alone taken me to lunch. 'Yes?' I asked as much as confirmed.

'Awesome.' Cici giggled. Again. 'Oh, Mary said to let you know that Mr Spencer, as in Spencer Media, will be joining the two of you. So... and I just want you to know that I say this with love, you should dress up. You know, just don't wear what you usually wear here. Or anything you've ever worn here. It's kinda fancy.'

And there was the Cici we all knew and loved. Before I could even sigh in reply, she'd hung up. Sitting in my knickers on the cold laminate flooring, I stared out of the window at the city in front of me. Lunch with Mr Spencer as in Spencer Media? What was that supposed to mean? Surely it had to be good though, there was no way it could be a bad thing.

What was a bad thing, was the state of me, I thought, peering at my reflection in the window as I pushed myself back up. I couldn't really show up at Pastis in a vest and flip-flops with just-shagged hair. Bedhead was great in theory, but in reality, it just looked as though I hadn't showered.

'Do I have any clothes here?' I asked a sleepy-looking Alex, as I dropped to my hands and knees in the bedroom to search for a stray dress or errant smock under his bed.

'Pretty sure you came in clothes,' he mumbled, throwing his forearm over his eyes. 'I know you lose shit all the time, but surely you haven't managed to lose your clothes in a one-bedroom apartment overnight.'

'You're hilarious.' I pulled the slightly worse for wear strappy dress from yesterday out from under the pile made up of Alex's jeans and T-shirt. 'Work just called, I have to meet Mary for a meeting at Pastis at lunch. I have to go home and get changed.'

'If you lived here you wouldn't have to,' he replied without moving.

'You make a fine point,' I said, wriggling into my dress. Leaning over the bed, I gave him a quick kiss and a gentle slap around the head. 'I'll call you later.'

'Yeah yeah,' he smiled, still with his deep green eyes closed. 'I know I'm nothing more than a booty call to you. You callous, British heartbreaker.'

I paused in the doorway, slipping my feet into my Havaianas, and watched him shuffle back under the thin white sheet on his bed. I was being stupid. Imagine waking up to that messy black bedhead every morning. And imagine not having to leg it back to Manhattan to use a decent brand of shampoo, conditioner of any kind, and find something to wear. How did boys keep their hair so soft without conditioner? Was the whole industry a sham? I shook my head and tried to concentrate. Now was not the time to worry about the effectiveness of Pantene.

'You planning on going soon or are you just gonna stand there and freak me out all day?' Alex asked from under his covers, making me jump.

'Going,' I said, grabbing my handbag from the sofa. 'Gone.'

'I'll come over tonight? We'll talk Paris?' he called.

'Tonight,' I agreed, closing the door behind me. Shower and Pastis first. Alex and Paris later.

Putting myself together for my lunch meeting would have been a lot easier if I hadn't started running through a million different terrifying scenarios in my head on the way home, during my shower, through every wardrobe change and while applying the few scraps of make-up that might not melt off on my way downtown to Pastis. I hailed a yellow cab outside the apartment in my LA-purchased dandelion yellow Phillip Lim dress and gold strappy flats, and tried not to think about all the reasons Mr Spencer might want to see me. Maybe he just wanted to meet the girl that had interviewed and inadvertently outed James Jacobs. Lots of people did. Mostly women, young and old, who wanted to give me a really, really filthy look and then ask me incredibly inappropriate questions about his boyfriend.

Or maybe he was a fan of my blog. My slightly random English-girl-living-in-New-York-rambling-on-about-her-everyday-life blog. Yes, that would definitely appeal to a sixty-something media magnate. Or perhaps he was a massive fan of the Shakira album review I'd just filed? Or perhaps he was a massive

Shakira fan and didn't like the album review? Surely not, I'd been super kind. No, there were just too many possibilities even to begin guessing.

I hoped and prayed all the way downtown that Cici would have booked us a table inside the restaurant, very near an air-conditioning unit, and not one of the see-and-be-seen tiny tables outside looking out on to the cobbles of the Meatpacking District, but as the cab swerved across the street, I could see Mary's steel-grey bob sitting opposite an equally authoritative head of icy white hair. Not only was I the last to arrive, I was going to be stuck sweating like a pig in the street. Fantastic. Attempting to get out of the cab in a ladylike fashion and failing, I stumbled forwards, snagging the front of my sandal in the cobblestones. I caught myself at the last minute, stood up, straightened my skirt and gave Mary a half wave. I couldn't see behind her massive black sunglasses, but I was fairly certain the smile she gave me in return did not make it all the way up to her eyes.

'Angela Clark, this is Robert Spencer,' she said, rising out of her chair as I hobbled around the table.

Mr Spencer held out his hand and gave me a very, very firm handshake. Ow.

'Well, hello Angela,' he said, gesturing for me to take a seat beside Mary. 'I have to say, I've been looking forward to meeting you for a while. And please, call me Bob.'

I gave Mary a quick sideways look, but she was too busy spitting her water back into her glass to respond.

'Thank you, uh, Bob,' I replied, setting my handbag between my feet, underneath the table. 'It's really lovely to meet you. A real privilege. An honour, really.' Mary kicked me sharply under the table before I could carry on. It seemed fair.

'Not at all,' he said smoothly, nodding to the waiter at his elbow to pour three large glasses of white wine. 'I always like to take time out to meet our rising stars here at Spencer Media.'

He held up his glass. 'To you, Angela.'

'Thank you.' I tried not to think about what could happen if I started drinking wine on a completely empty and panicky stomach and took a small sip.

'So, Mr Spencer wanted to meet with you and talk about some new opportunities,' Mary said, folding the menu with which she was clearly very familiar. 'Things you might do outside the blog, outside *The Look*.'

'He did?' I asked, staring into the opaque glass of her sunnies. Was she serious?

'Ladies,' Mr Spencer folded up his own menu and placed it in front of him. 'Shall we at least order before we talk business?'

'Of course, Bob,' Mary smiled tightly and sipped her wine. It was so strange. I'd never seen her outside her office and she did not look comfortable at all. In fact, nothing about this entire scenario was comfortable. I was starting to feel as if I were at dinner with my mum and dad while they were in the middle of a particularly nasty argument. And no one who's ever argued with my mum would want that.

'Have you eaten at Pastis before, Angela?' Bob asked.

I shook my head and chugged my wine. I had a feeling that it was just going to be better to avoid talking whenever possible.

'Then I'd recommend the scallops to start and then maybe the *pasta puttanesca*?' Bob folded up his menu.

'You know *pasta puttanesca* means whore's pasta?' I dropped in casually.

Mary coughed into her wine glass.

'I mean, it's what whores would make after they'd you know, worked.' I looked from Mary to Bob and back to Mary again. Yep. Should have stuck with the no talking plan.

'Perhaps the *moules frites*,' Bob said quietly.

Before I could agree, someone's mobile started to chirp. Bob pushed out his chair and took a tiny phone out of his jacket pocket. 'So sorry ladies, that's me. Excuse me for a moment?'

'Of course, Bob,' Mary said again, this time through gritted teeth as he left the table.

'How is he even wearing a jacket?' I asked, turning in my seat to watch him walk out into the street. My head span as I turned back around. 'It is so bloody hot.'

'If I were you, I wouldn't drink quite so fast, Angela,' Mary said, pouring me a glass of water. 'This isn't a social lunch.'

'Arses. I was really, really hoping that it was,' I reluctantly swapped my, wow, more than half empty wine glass for a tumbler of water. 'So what is it?'

'It's a pain in my ass, is what it is.' Mary drained her wine glass and returned my raised eyebrow with a look of her own. 'I can hold my liquor, don't you worry. This, Angela, is a "Big Deal For You". Apparently one of Bob's granddaughters is your "biggest fan" and she seems to think you should be doing more, I don't know, "legitimate journalism" for some of Spencer's other magazines like *Icon* or *Belle*.'

'Legitimate journalism?' I didn't enjoy the number of times she had made air quotes during her last sentence. '*Belle*? They want me to write on a fashion magazine?'

'Apparently so. I don't know what though, so don't ask me.' She poured herself more wine. 'I'm only here because I heard about this through Cici and called Bob to find out what the hell was going on.'

'Hang on a minute, how did Cici hear?' Now I was really confused.

'Cici Spencer. She's one of Bob's granddaughters.'

I was sober in a heartbeat. 'Of course she is.'

'You don't think I employ her for her charm, do you?' Mary gave me an understanding grimace. 'Bob and I are old friends.'

It took everything I had not to raise an eyebrow. Old friends. That old chestnut.

'But Cici hates me,' I said, swapping my water for wine. Definitely time for wine. If I was going to stay in control of my facial expressions as well as my mouth though, I had to stay off the booze. 'Why would she tell her grandfather to give me more work?'

'Cici doesn't hate you,' Mary said, topping up my water again. 'Cici is jealous of you. She knows she's only my assistant because of who her grandfather is. She's been trying to get on the writing staff since she finished college, but even Bob knows she can't write for shit.'

'Oh. Wow. That's awful.'

'Don't start feeling sorry for her Angela, she's a bitch. And she'd get rid of you without a second thought if she thought she could take your job.'

'Fair enough,' I said, packing away any blossoming Cici-sympathy. 'But then why would she recommend me for more projects?'

'I keep waiting for her to lose interest and embrace her trust fund like her sister, but that girl just will not give up,' Mary nodded towards Bob as he strode back towards the table. 'I'd be impressed at her tenacity if she were working for anyone else, but me. And don't be a fool. She didn't, it was her cousin.'

Bob took his seat opposite me as our starters arrived. The food looked delicious, but I really wasn't very hungry any more.

'Apologies ladies, I've asked my secretary to stop my calls for the next couple of hours, so I'm all yours,' he said with another beaming smile.

'What a relief,' Mary replied, spearing a scallop.

I looked nervously from one to the other, Bob's benevolent grin clashing with Mary's openly pissed off expression, and reached for the wine. Sod it.

'Let me,' Mary said, snatching the bottle from my hand and splashing a mouthful of wine in the bottom of my glass.

This wasn't going to be awkward at all.

'I don't know if you're aware, Angela, but you have a great fan in one of my granddaughters,' Bob finally got around to business over coffee. After Mary had refused dessert on behalf of both of us. Bigger.

I blew on my cappuccino and smiled nervously. It was still far too hot for coffee, but this really didn't feel like a Diet Coke kind of situation. 'Really? I didn't know that,' I lied, hopefully convincingly.

'Oh yes. And Mary speaks very, very highly of your writing.'

'She does?' No need to fake surprise this time. 'You do?'

'I do,' Mary replied, grudgingly. 'Your blog is very good.'

'And the piece you did for *Icon*, I read that one, Angela. Very good. You have a fun style, very personable.' Bob set down his coffee cup. 'I understand from Mary that you're only with us on a part-time basis at the moment. On a freelance arrangement?'

'Well, I don't work in the office,' I explained, trying to read Mary's face,, which she was hiding behind her poker straight bob. 'But my work permit is tied to my writing the blog for *The Look*, so...'

'We own her ass, Bob, so just get to where you're going,' Mary interrupted. 'You're taking her off me, is that right?'

'Not at all,' he shook his head and covered one of her hands with his. 'You know I'd never tread on your toes. Although I do think it would be in Angela's interests to spread her wings a little. Get a broader experience of Spencer Media. Does that sound like something you'd be interested in, Angela?'

I bit my lip and nodded. I was worried that if I actually made a noise, Mary might throw her espresso in my face. And there might not be a lot of coffee in that cup, but it looked really hot.

'Fantastic, maybe you could come in and meet the *Belle* team next week,' Bob suggested. 'Maybe think of a couple of ideas to bring to the meeting. I know Emilia is very keen to meet you.'

Mary and I choked on our coffees in tandem. Emilia Kitt, editor of *Belle* magazine, Spencer Media's fashion monthly, was notoriously not keen on meeting anyone. As in anyone. I had been in for a meeting with Mary a few weeks ago and saw Angelina Jolie waiting in the lobby. And she was still waiting when I left. For Emilia.

'This is probably a really stupid thing to say, but I'm actually going to be in Paris next week,' I said, not sure whether or not I was making a huge mistake. 'From Monday. For a week.'

'You are? Since when?' Mary asked.

'I only found out yesterday.' I turned to give her my best 'help me out' face. Bob's expression really hadn't changed all through lunch so I had no idea what he was thinking. 'It's my boyfriend's thirtieth birthday.'

No one looked particularly impressed.

'He's in a band and they've been asked to play a festival in Paris.'

Still not impressed. And now Bob was looking at me as if I were a groupie.

'And I thought it would be really good for the blog. Didn't the visitor numbers go up when I was in LA?'

'Yes, but you were plastered all over the gossip pages when you were in LA,' Mary reminded me, unnecessarily. 'Are you planning on making an international spectacle of yourself in Paris?'

'Wasn't planning on it the first time, so who can say?' I defended myself pathetically.

'I think this all sounds great,' Bob said, finally breaking the stony silence that had built up between me and Mary. 'Emilia is planning a European issue in a couple of months. Perhaps you could put together an insider's guide to Paris for *Belle*? Off the beaten track, show us all the underground hotspots?'

'I could do that,' I agreed slowly.

'Then you'll come in and meet the *Belle* team tomorrow.' Bob suddenly got up from the table. 'I'll have Emilia's assistant call you later today, Angela.'

Mary stood up just as suddenly and, not knowing what else to do, I followed suit and accepted Bob's overly dramatic air kisses.

'Lovely to meet you, Angela, and Mary, always a pleasure.' He smiled and walked over towards a long black town car that had just pulled up beside the restaurant. Mary sank back down into her chair and emptied her wine glass.

'Cheap bastard didn't even pick up the bill.' Mary shook her head and pulled a huge wallet out of her even bigger bag. 'Well, I hope you're happy, Angela Clark.'

'Shouldn't I be?' I asked, trying to work out what had just happened. And whether or not Mary was sleeping with Bob. Because she most definitely had been at some point.

'Writing for *Belle* magazine is not going to be the same as writing a blog for me.' She called over a waiter and passed him a black American Express card. 'You're going to need to know exactly what you're doing.'

'But I can do this, the travel guide to Paris,' I said. 'It'll be fine. Won't it?'

'You know I like you, Angela,' Mary said, putting her elaborate signature on to the credit card slip. 'But if you fuck this one up, there's no way I can help you. The girls on *Belle* are not the girls on *The Look* or *Icon*.'

'But they want me to do this, don't they?' This did not sound promising. 'I mean, it was their idea?'

'It was Bob's idea,' Mary corrected me. 'Worse, it was Bob's granddaughter's idea. Just, before you go in to the office, know that the girls on *Belle* make Cici look like a labradoodle. Each and every one of them has destroyed the career of someone else, or slept with at least three different married men to be there.'

'They sound nice.'

'Then I'm underselling what a pack of bitches they are.' Mary tucked her wallet back into her bag. 'They're not going to love that you're waltzing through the door with a Paris assignment without ever having so much as broken a nail at Fashion Week. Not that any of them have actually ever broken a nail in their lives. Unless it was to scratch someone else's eyes out.'

'Oh bloody hell,' I said, breathing in deeply. 'Any way I can get out of this?'

'Not now Bob's involved,' Mary said, standing up again. 'Look, I don't want to be too cynical, this could be great for you. Just keep your eyes open, OK? And you might want to get a haircut before your meeting.'

Well, I thought, pinching the ends of my bob, checking the split ends and sighing, at least Paris will be fun.

CHAPTER THREE

Three hours later, after a hastily arranged trim and several buckets of iced tea, I'd found the last shred of shade in Central Park and was halfway through my *Rough Guide* to Paris, with the *Lonely Planet* and *Wallpaper* guides well thumbed beside me. I scribbled down address after address in my notebook, but somehow my mind kept flitting back to an image of me and Alex skipping along the banks of the Seine, him in a black polo neck, holding a cigarette, and me in a very fetching stripy sweater dress and beret. Sometimes I was clutching a baguette. Sometimes I relocated us to the top of the Eiffel Tower. It was all very Tom and Katie. Except less creepy.

An irritating beeping snapped me out of my fantasy. I looked around, but for some reason, everyone was staring at me. It took me a couple of moments to realize that it was my phone ringing and a couple more redfaced seconds to find it in the bottom of my bag.

'Hello?' I answered, eventually.

'Is that Angela Clark? This is Esme from *Belle* magazine. You have an appointment with Donna Gregory tomorrow at nine. Please be in the *Belle* reception at eight forty-five a.m.'

'Uh, OK?' Esme from *Belle* magazine was all business. 'Will Emilia be in the meeting?'

'Sorry?' Esme from *Belle* magazine sounded confused.

'Emilia. Bob, Mr Spencer, said she was keen to meet me,' I explained, feeling a little bit like an idiot.

'Oh. No.' Esme from *Belle* magazine confirmed I was in fact, an idiot. 'Do you need directions to the offices?'

'No, I actually work on *The Look* so—'

'Oh, cute. Then we'll see you at eight forty-five,' Esme from *Belle* magazine confirmed. And hung up.

I lay back on the grass and stared up at the sunshine. This was going to take some thinking about. Writing my blog was great, but writing for *Belle*? It could just be incredible... Everyone read *Belle*, it was global, it was massive. And surely Mary was just throwing a hissy fit because she was pissed off that Bob had gone over her head. It made sense, she didn't like having her writers poached for bigger publications. She was the online editor at *TheLook.com*. With *Belle*, we were talking the printed pages of the world's biggest fashion monthly. There was way too much at stake here for me to worry about offending Mary's ego, that wasn't going to get me anywhere fast. She had offered me the moon on a stick when I'd pulled off the James Jacobs interview and so far I'd seen an awful lot of the stick and not very much else. Where was my monthly column in *The Look*? Still 'under discussion.' This was an opportunity that I would not cock up.

My phone was still hot in my hand from my brief chat with Esme when I felt it vibrate into life again.

Did u get ur hair cut yet? It looked like shit last week xoxo

Of course it was Jenny. I checked my watch for the time difference between LA and New York, five p.m. here, two there. Knowing her, she'd probably just woken up. My best friend and first New York roommate, Jenny Lopez, had been out in LA for the last five months, and from the look of the constant stream of photographs she sent over, she was having a fairly good time. If you considered partying with pop stars, hanging out with celebutantes and twenty-four-seven shopping with someone else's credit card for 'work' having a good time. Which I was fairly certain she did. And while it was much easier to get my work done without Hurricane Jenny in the apartment, I missed her horribly. Even with the continuous flow of text messages, emails, phone calls and, ever since she'd bought her new laptop a month ago, video calls, New York sometimes felt empty without her. And America's Next Top Model marathons just weren't the same without her screaming 'Smize, bitch!' at the top of her voice. It was good to know I could always trust her to be worried about the big issues at all times. Rolling over on to my stomach, I quickly tapped out a reply.

YES. Guess what? Going to Paris with Alex next week!

I checked to make sure my skirt was still covering my knickers while I waited for her reply. Maintaining your modesty was never easy when your skirt only just covers your pants in the first place.

GOOD. And Paris? 4real? Yay-we're-movin-in-together trip?

I paused to tie up my newly chopped hair. The loss of my split ends was great, but it was just too hot to have my long bob flopping around the back of my neck.

Just a trip. Talk later x

Having managed to get myself into a relatively uncomfortable, relatively non-knicker flashing position that was, for the time being at least, out of the sun, I flipped through my phone book, looking for someone else to talk to so I didn't have to move.

Hey Lou, you still up? A x

Before I could send another message, my phone started to buzz again and Louisa's name flashed up on the screen.

'Hey!' I answered happily. 'How are you? What are you up to?'

'Hello you,' Louisa replied over a crackly line. 'I was just online. I'm trying to book a caterer for our wedding anniversary.'

Louisa had been my best friend for ever, but I hadn't actually laid eyes on her since I'd accidentally ruined her wedding reception. It wasn't like I'd meant to break her new husband's hand, but I was a little bit upset having just found my fiancé shagging some tart in the back of our Range Rover. Of course I'd upped sticks and run away to New York the very next day. Who wouldn't?

'Oh my God, it's been a year already?' I couldn't quite believe it. So much had happened. 'It's gone so quickly.'

'It's been a year,' Louisa said. 'Think you're ready for a repeat performance?'

'Maybe not just yet. You're having a party?'

'Er, yes. Tim thought,' she sounded as though she was picking her words very carefully, 'it might be nice to have a bit of a do what with last year's... fireworks.'

'Right,' I pressed my lips together in a tight, thin line. 'Well, you can tell him not to worry about me. I'll actually be in Paris.'

'You're going to Paris?' Lou squealed. 'But that's so close by! You have to come to the party.'

I held my phone away from my ear. 'Oh, I'd love to,' I was lying a lot today. 'But Alex is playing at a festival and I'm reviewing it for *Belle*, so I just wouldn't be able to get away.'

'Really? *Belle*? Wow!' Louisa made a small mewling noise that I chose to ignore. 'But you can't be so close by and not come and visit. What did your mum say?'

'My mum hasn't said anything because I haven't told her yet,' I said quickly. 'And I'm not convinced I'm going to so please don't say anything if you see her.'

'Oh, Angela,' I could feel a lecture coming, 'I know your mum can be hard work, but she does miss you.'

'Playing the mum card is the wrong way to guilt trip me into coming home. You of all people should know that,' I warned. 'Besides, since she and dad took that internet course I can't bloody get rid of them. Did you know they have Skype?'

'I had heard,' Louisa said. 'She's always on about it to my mum in the supermarket. So Alex is playing a festival? I can't believe you're going out with a rock star. Is it amazing? Has he written any songs about you?'

'He's not a rock star,' I gave my official line. 'He's just Alex.'

I felt myself flush from head to toe. It wasn't entirely true. I absolutely loved that Alex was in a band. I loved that I got to watch him get all sweaty onstage, singing songs he'd written for me. I loved to see a room full of chin-stroking hipsters and doe-eyed girls with ironic tattoos in vintage dresses staring at him while he did something he loved, something he was amazing at. But really, day in and day out, it wasn't about him being a rock god. It was about him buying tea bags for his apartment without me asking, even though he hated tea, the way he always Tivo'd *Gossip Girl* for me, even the repeats, and how, when he was writing a new song, he would sit cross-legged on the living-room floor with his acoustic guitar, fringe flopping into his eyes, tongue stuck out of the corner of his mouth, always with a Diet Dr Pepper. Everyday life really wasn't rock and roll, but it was sort of wonderful.

'Yeah, right,' Louisa said, entirely disbelievingly. 'You love it.'

'Well, maybe.' No point even trying to lie to Lou. 'He's actually asked me to move in with him.'

'Wow, really? Already?'

'It's not that soon, I've known him for a year,' I said, surprised to find someone who wasn't jumping up and down with joy while simultaneously packing my bags for me.

'But it hasn't exactly been smooth sailing, has it, honey?'' Louisa said diplomatically. 'I just don't want you to rush into anything. You're not lonely out there, are you? You know you can always come back. Any time. Just say the word and I will have your room ready.'

'Louisa, calm down, everything is fine.' Bless her heart. 'I'm fine and I'm not rushing. Honest. I haven't even decided if I'm going to move in yet.'

'I just worry about you, that's all,' Lou replied. 'Anyway, if you can't come to me, how about I come to you? Will you have an afternoon free for lunch or something? Are you there on the Saturday?'

'That actually sounds brilliant,' I said, suddenly excited at the idea of seeing Louisa, not in a wedding/wedding reception/wedding anniversary/anything to do with weddings situation. 'I would love that.'

'Fantastic!' Louisa squealed again. 'Let's be really cheesy and meet under the Eiffel Tower or something.'

'Yeah, OK.' I smiled. That was just the sort of thing Jenny would want to do. God forbid the two of them should ever be in the same place at the same time. The universe might implode or something. 'I actually cannot believe it's been a year.'

'I know,' Louisa said. 'I think the longest I'd gone without seeing you before you abandoned me was something like four days.'

'Surely not more than three,' I was surprised at how upset I was all of a sudden. I really hadn't been that homesick since I got to New York. When had I had time? 'I'll text you when I get to Paris. Love you, Lou.'

'You too honey. Can't wait to see you and maybe you could bring this non-rock star of yours for my approval?'

I pursed my lips. 'Yeah, if he's not rehearsing or something, then yeah, definitely.' Was it weird that I felt a bit queasy at the idea of mixing my two lives up like that? 'Talk to you later.'

I hung up and smiled. It would be amazing to see Louisa. It would be amazing to go to Paris. It would be amazing to write for *Belle*. It would be amazing to take a trip with Alex. Really, this wasn't turning out to be the worst Wednesday in the world ever.

After another hour of lounging in the park, the sun finally worked its way around to my safe little spot and forced me to drag myself home. Vanessa, my temporary roommate, was at work at The Union and so the apartment was eerily quiet and ridiculously hot. I bashed the air-conditioning unit sticking out of the living-room window and grabbed a Popsicle out of the freezer before sitting down at my laptop. What would the *Adventures of Angela* reveal today? I logged into TheLook.com, clicking through the links until I got to my blog.

When I started writing, almost a year ago, I'd found it so hard to put my thoughts well, not exactly down on paper, but it was tricky to write about what was going on in my life and then post it online for all the world to see. But now I found it so cathartic. Writing the blog really helped me clear my head and make sense of things. I'd learned what was safe to put up there and what wasn't, how to share what was going on without spilling anyone's secrets, and for the most part, I only got nice comments and emails, at least no one had ever chased me down the street with flaming torches and pitchforks. And apparently, my mother had got bored of reading it some time ago. Thank God. I started tapping away into the empty white box.

The Adventures of Angela: Ooh la la

Today has been one of those days when everything happened at once. My boyfriend asked me to go to Paris with him next week, I had a really important work meeting which has led to a really really exciting new project, I arranged to meet up with my best friend from London, oh, and I got my hair cut. It's been a big day.

But aside from the massively dramatic event that was taking half an inch off the ends of my bob, how exciting is Paris? I know I'm a bit rubbish for not having gone before, especially when I lived in London for five years, but yay, I'm going now! And sigh, with my boy. And that's the only way to do Paris isn't it? It'll be all romantic walks down the Left Bank, holding hands outside Notre-Dame, watching the