

SUNDAY TIMES TOP TEN BESTSELLER

Lindsey Kelk

On a

Night Like

This

'A gorgeous
love story'
MARIAN KEYES

Anything can happen –
if you just take a chance...



ON A NIGHT LIKE THIS

Lindsey Kelk



HarperCollins *Publishers*

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Praise

‘Sparkles on the page like champagne in the glass’
Milly Johnson, bestselling author of *The Woman in the Middle*

‘The kind of book you can’t put down but also want to last forever. Kelk’s signature wit and clever prose – along with her complicated, lovable characters – are at their very best here’

Emily Henry, bestselling author of *Beach Read*

‘As warm as a hug but as funny as a night out with the girls’
Laura Jane Williams, bestselling author of *The Lucky Escape*

‘Touching, hugely enjoyable and properly laugh-out-loud funny with a wonderful heroine that feels completely real ... I loved every page’
Sophia Money-Coutts, bestselling author of *Did You Miss Me?*

‘As far as romcoms go, this really is the best of the best. Absolutely loved it. Five sparkling stars’
Lizzy Dent, bestselling author of *The Summer Job*

‘The friendships in this book are warm and real, the hero is incredibly, incredibly amazing and the romance is sizzling and tender ... You will not want to miss your invite to this ball’

Cressida McLaughlin, bestselling author of *The Cornish Cream Tea Wedding*

‘An absolutely enchanting book – I loved it! The perfect balance between sparkly escapism and big-hearted realism’
Sophie Ranaid, author of *He’s Cancelled*

‘Pure joy. Full of Lindsey’s trademark warmth and wit’
Alex Brown, bestselling author of *A Postcard from Paris*

‘Sparkling and gorgeously romantic’
Sarah Morgan, bestselling author of *The Summer Seekers*

‘Perfect, escapist fiction. Hilarious, and so true to heart. The sort of book that makes you realise life is always yours for the taking’
Lia Louis, bestselling author of *Eight Perfect Hours*

Dedication

*For Juliette and Orlander,
who lent their names to this book
and deserve so much more.
Thank you.*

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CHAPTER ONE

'Once upon a time, in a faraway kingdom, there was a woman called Francesca who couldn't be on time to save her life,' Jess announced as I blew through the door of Suzette's Café on Wednesday morning.

'I'm so sorry,' I said, giving her a quick hug before starting to unravel my many winter layers. After an unseasonably mild October, November was not messing around in Sheffield. 'You know I hate being late but Stew said he'd drop me off but his dad called and he had to run and I missed the bus and—'

'Fran.' My best friend pushed a cup of coffee towards me, along with a white paper bag. 'It's fine, relax, I'm joking. Sit down, I ordered for you because I'm so nice.' I dumped my tote bag on the table and smiled as she opened her own bag and inhaled. 'What does she put in these bloody muffins? How are they so good?'

'Best not to ask,' I advised, glancing over to the counter where Suzette was fixing tinsel to the shelves with a threatening-looking staple gun. 'Something we're not supposed to be eating any more, like white sugar or stem cells or crack.'

'All very moreish in their own way,' she replied, breaking off a chunk of muffin before fixing me with a look. 'Are you all right? You two aren't fighting again, are you?'

'I'm fine,' I said, waving away her concerns with the end of my scarf. My hair frizzed up around me in a static halo as I pulled off my bobble hat. 'Just feeling a bit meh, that's all.' Jess narrowed her eyes to let me know she didn't quite believe me but wasn't going to force the issue. 'Seriously, I'm so sorry. Are you in a rush?' I asked. 'Or can you stay for a bit?'

She shook her head as she pulled a neon-pink travel mug out of her own tote bag, unscrewed the top and poured her giant coffee inside. 'I've got to run,' she said, the tip of her tongue poking out the corner of her mouth as she poured. 'There are a million meetings today and for some reason, they need me in every bloody one of them. I swear, if I wasn't there, the place would burn to the ground in twenty-four hours.'

Jess was a very cool marketing director who did very cool things at a very cool brewery and, while she complained about her job constantly, I knew she loved it down to her bones.

'No worries,' I repeated. 'Everything's fine.'

'Shall I come round tonight?' she suggested gently. 'Stew's got football practice, hasn't he?'

I nodded, extremely happy with that plan. 'Sounds grand, I'll make dinner. Is there anything you're not eating right now?'

'No, it's too close to Christmas for that,' she replied, screwing the lid back on her cup and dropping it in her bag. 'They've already got the Quality Street open at work, I'll bring you a big purple one.' She scooted around the table to give me a kiss on the cheek. 'What's on your agenda for today?'

'Sitting here and waiting for literally anything to happen?'

'We don't wait for things to happen,' Jess said, white paper muffin bag in one hand, car keys in the other. 'We make them happen!'

'You sound like an Instagram post,' I called after her. 'If you tell me to live, laugh and love, you're not allowed round for tea.'

'More like nap, nom and Netflix,' she shouted back, already halfway out the door. 'See you tonight.'

It had been almost a month since I'd finished my last temping job – a thrilling adventure through the world of data entry for a logistics company in Rotherham – and so far, not a single one of the agencies I was signed up with could find me a new one. Apparently I was 'over-qualified' for almost everything and even though I would have happily wiped Satan's bottom for minimum wage if it meant getting out of the house for eight hours a day, they couldn't find me a thing. All the shops had hired their seasonal staff already and no one else was recruiting this close to Christmas.

Peering through the window of the café, I watched as the shops and businesses turned on their lights, the high street springing to life, the post office, the off-licence, the beauty salon, the bookshop. Everyone else's day was starting while I drank my coffee, ate my muffin and pulled my computer out of my backpack. Everyone had somewhere to go and something to do except for me.

Hands hovering over the ancient laptop as it clicked and whirred into life, I stared at the two rings I wore every day, the only jewellery I ever wore, really. On my left hand, my engagement ring from Stew, a dainty diamond affair shaped like a flower, that had belonged to his beloved Nana Beryl before it was passed down to me with the most serious of strings attached. And on the third finger of my right hand, my mum's gold wedding band. She'd be so disappointed, I thought, twisting it around and around and around. Susan Cooper hadn't spent so much as a day out of work, a fact she had been fiercely proud of, and the thought of letting her down when she wasn't here any more felt like the worst possible failure.

'Don't wait for things to happen,' I whispered, attempting to stoke a fire that had all but burned out. 'Make them happen.'

With some uncertainty, I slipped my earbuds into my ears and dialled a number I had not dialled in months.

'Vine & Walsh, Rose speaking.'

'Rose, it's Fran, Fran Cooper,' I said, straightening my shoulders and taking a deep, steady breath. 'How are you?'

'I'm well, thank you, how are you?' The silky southern accent on the other end of the phone sounded surprised to hear from me, which was fair, given that I hadn't been in touch for the best part of a year.

'Really well but still looking for work.' I tapped my fingers against the edge of the table, heart in my mouth. 'I was wondering if you might have anything for me?'

'I'll happily take a look,' Rose replied. 'But I'm fairly certain we don't have anything in your area, unless you've changed your mind about taking work outside South Yorkshire?'

And that was the reason I hadn't been in touch for the best part of a year. Vine & Walsh was an executive recruitment firm, not just your average temp agency, and every time I spoke with Rose, she told me about one incredible job after another and I had to turn each and every one of them down. In my wildest professional fantasies, I was totally jet set. I dreamed of travelling, seeing the world, of waking up to find I was the kind of woman who could pack two weeks-worth of clothes in a carry on and could go from conference room B to the bar to an all-night karaoke party with nothing more than a swipe of red lipstick and a change of earrings, but after we moved back to Sheffield, Stew and I had both agreed we wouldn't travel for work. Admittedly, that deal was made three years ago when we were living in London and there were a lot more jobs to choose from, but a deal is a deal and it was made for a reason, so I kept my ambitions local.

'Sorry, no,' I said as my heart sank slowly back towards my feet. 'Just thought it was worth checking in.'

As Rose let out a quiet, frustrated sigh, a new email from one of the local temp agencies appeared in my inbox. A vet in Brincliffe needed an office manager to do a two-week holiday cover starting Christmas Eve. Utterly depressing and still the best offer I'd had in months.

'There is one thing, and you'd be perfect for it,' Rose said, a note of possibility in her voice. 'It would mean you'd have to travel, but it's very short term and the money is amazing. I need a personal assistant for a very, very – let me say this again – very high-profile client.'

I looked out of the window at the stone-clad buildings opposite, almost the exact same shade of grey as the sky above them.

'How short term and how much money?'

'Not even a week, it's five days. All your expenses would be covered, and the salary is very generous. *Extremely* generous. And the money isn't even the best part.'

I wound the cord from my earbuds around my finger and squeezed it tightly. Curiosity might have killed the cat but perhaps I could get away with only being lightly maimed.

'OK,' I said, breathing out slowly. 'What's the catch?'

Rose gave a slightly maniacal laugh down the line. 'Don't let this put you off, but I can't say. Fran, it is VV VIP. You'll have to sign a non-disclosure agreement before I can even send the job description over, and I'll need you down in London to interview ASAP, but if I were you, I would seriously consider this one. It could be a huge break. This is a life-changing opportunity.'

A powerful rush of adrenaline shot through my body and I glanced at my cup to make sure it was definitely full of coffee and not rocket fuel.

'It's been a while since I did any top-level stuff,' I admitted, clenching hard. 'The last couple of years I've mostly been at smaller, local companies. Are you sure I'd be a good fit?'

'Positive. It's a PA role, not a corporate job, so you're not going to be making PowerPoints and pivot tables, no one's expecting you to be up on EU regulations or lack thereof. Plus you've got all the extras they're looking for, multiple languages, first aid qualifications, and the sailing experience is just *mwah*, chef's kiss. Puts you right over the edge.'

Ahh yes, the summer I'd spent working in the café on the Newcastle to Amsterdam ferry after my A levels. Truly invaluable sailing experience. Thankfully, I really did have a degree in French and Italian, even if I hadn't used either for anything more advanced than ordering a lasagne from Nonna's on Ecclesall Road in the last three years.

'I can't tell you anything else until you sign the NDA but, Fran, I cannot stress enough what a one-of-a-kind opportunity this is. If they'd let me, I'd quit and do it myself.'

'If it's that amazing, why hasn't it been filled already?' I asked, suddenly wary. Rose was altogether too excited for my liking and I knew from personal experience nothing in life was ever too good to be true.

'It came up quite last minute,' she replied with no small degree of hesitancy. 'And the person in charge of hiring on their end is quite particular. She knows what she doesn't want even if she doesn't seem to have a very clear picture of what she does want.'

So it was a she. I wondered who it could be. You heard all kinds of stories in the temp community. A friend of mine in London once did a stint at a fancy estate agents for a fortnight and ended up selling a house to George and Amal. Well, she was fairly sure she saw the back of George's head from her car when she went to drop off the spare keys, but when I thought about a choice between scheduling appointments for Gavin the epileptic guinea pig or potentially spotting the back of George Clooney's head, it wasn't going to be too difficult a decision to make.

'I'm going to call them right now,' Rose said, the sound of her keyboard clacking decisively in the background. 'Don't go anywhere, I'll bell you back in a sec.'

'OK, sounds good,' I confirmed. 'I'll be right here.'

She hung up, leaving me staring at my laptop screen, slightly out of breath and, I realized as I caught sight of my reflection in the window of the café, absolutely beaming. It was so long since I'd been excited about a job prospect, I'd forgotten how good it felt. The prickling nerves, the anticipation. I didn't have the interview yet, but I was already planning my first day outfit. And it was just five days. Stew wouldn't mind my being away for five days. Before, in my old assistant jobs, I was away all the time, traipsing up and down the country, nipping off to deeply exotic locations like Belgium for a convention or a trade show. I was practically never home. But it had been so long since I'd been anywhere, and things were so much better than they were last time. He wouldn't mind. He definitely wouldn't mind.

Leaning back in my chair, I stared past my reflection, out into the street. The pub on the corner was already busy with old boy regulars, and next door, the Be Beautiful salon was packed to the rafters with shadowy figures moving around behind the frosted windows. The door opened and the owner herself stepped out onto the street, vape pen in hand. I slouched down in my chair and wrapped both hands around my coffee mug. Lifting it to my mouth was as close as I would come to an upper body workout today.

Bryony looked beautiful, of course: blonde hair wrapped around her head in a braid crown, makeup perfectly applied and, even from across the road, I could see her perfect nails shone a rich ruby red. My own hair was full of half a can of dry shampoo, my makeup non-existent, and my nails were short and bare. Not painting them was the only way I could guarantee I wouldn't chip them. You weren't supposed to like your partner's ex, I reminded myself as I continued to watch her with my standard level of morbid fascination, and at least Bryony had the decency to be deeply unpleasant whenever we were forced to interact, which was all too often since she was still Stew's sister's best friend. It would have been much worse if she was a wonderful person and I was just a jealous arse, pouting over the fact a woman much more beautiful than me had also once been engaged to Stew Bingham. But Stew didn't care about things like elaborate hair and shiny nails, I reminded myself, reflexively touching my diamond ring. Stew cared about me.

It was a fact that might have been more reassuring if the door hadn't opened for a second time, my fiancé walking right out of the salon behind Bryony. He was wearing the Bingham & Son overalls he'd left the house in that morning, and had an adorable smudge of something on his snub nose. Sinking lower, I pressed myself against the wall as I tried to come up with a reasonable explanation as to what he might be doing in the Be Beautiful salon, when he was supposed to be fitting a cast-iron claw-foot bath with his dad. Eyelash extensions? Colouring that flash of grey that had recently appeared at his temples? Or simply engaging in a good old-fashioned affair? Before my brain could completely spin off out of control, my phone vibrated into life with Rose's name and number lighting up the screen.

'Hello?' I answered, eyes still fixed on the scene outside the salon.

'Fran-it's-Rose-I've-got-good-news,' she said all at once, without pausing for breath,

'Good news as in I've got the interview good news?'

'Exactly like that! I'm sending everything over to you right now, you just need to whizz the NDA back to me and I'll send you a train ticket for tomorrow morning.'

'Tomorrow as in the day after today?' I asked, my heart pounding against my ribs. One eye on Stew, one on my phone. 'You didn't say I'd have to interview tomorrow?'

'And if you're successful, you'll start the job tomorrow as well,' Rose confirmed. 'Fran, don't turn this down. It's a once in a lifetime opportunity.'

'Once in a lifetime doesn't automatically translate into a good thing,' I replied, newly formed doubts beginning to take root in the back of my mind. 'Lots of bad things only happen once in a lifetime.'

'The interview is with a Sarah Pierce – don't worry about writing it down, I'll email the details – and I'm quite certain it's just a formality,' Rose said, talking over me excitedly. 'They love your CV, and from the sounds of it, they're desperate. You're a shoo-in.'

Charming.

'So, you'll sign the NDA and send it back right away?'

'Yes.'

'And you can be in London tomorrow?'

'I can.'

I peered out of the window to see Stew and Bryony still standing outside the salon, grinning at each other as it began to rain. Perfectly normal behaviour that didn't ring any alarm bells in the slightest. She held out her vape pen and Stew leaned forward to take a cheeky toke, his cough blooming in the chilly air as she pulled it away, laughing.

'Then I think that covers it,' Rose cut through my miserable thoughts and brought me back to earth with a bump. 'Any questions?'

I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose, focusing on work and pushing what was clearly happening right under my nose as far away as possible. I'd always been good at that.

'No, I don't think so,' I replied confidently. 'This is amazing, thank you so much.'

'I'm sending all the info over now,' she sang down the line, her voice full of cheer. 'Call me if you have any problems at all, any questions, any issues with the job.'

'I will,' I promised as I ended the call, knowing that I wouldn't. I didn't have problems, that was part of my charm.

Fran Cooper, dependable, reliable and one hundred percent guaranteed to make your life easier. That was my brand. As I watched Stew wander off down the street with a great big smile on his face, I realized the only person I ever made things difficult for, was myself.

CHAPTER TWO

'What are these and why aren't we burning them right this very second?'

Jess held a pair of pink flowered culottes aloft with a horrified expression on her face.

'They're Stew's mum's,' I said, snatching them out of her hand and tossing them back into the ironing pile that lived on the spare bed. 'I had to borrow them last Sunday after Mandy's youngest decided to hurl his pudding across the room and I got doused in custard.'

'What I wouldn't give to get doused in custard,' she sighed as she flopped onto her back. 'And now I'm hungry. What have you got for pudding?'

'I haven't got anything for pudding,' I told her, holding a smart black blouse up to the light to check it was in fact still black and hadn't been washed into a sad state of charcoal grey by our archaic washing machine, before putting it in my suitcase. 'In fact, I haven't even got anything for dinner, I was busy getting ready for tomorrow and I forgot. Pizza?'

'Can't beat pizza.' She took the sensible black blouse out of my suitcase and dropped it down the back of the bed. 'You really don't have any clue who you'll be working for?'

'Haven't the foggiest,' I replied, reaching across her to pick up the blouse and put it right back in the suitcase. 'I tried Google, but there are about a million Sarah Pierces, I gave up after an hour. It's all very intense though, I've never had to sign an NDA for an interview before. And the job requirements list is a lot.'

'The no jewellery rule seems a bit much, but I do support the proper manicure and pedicure regulations – I can't bear manky feet.' Jess had not signed an NDA but she had sneaked a peek at my phone when I was in the toilet, so she knew just as much about my potential new job as I did.

'Hopefully they'll accept my DIY job, or I'll be out on my arse before I've even started,' I said, peering down at my newly polished pink toes. 'Fingers crossed it's not a foot fetishist.'

Jess pulled an ancient bottle of sunscreen out from the pocket of my suitcase, took a sniff and gagged, before throwing it in the bin. It had been a while since the suitcase had seen any action.

'I reckon it's Oprah,' she guessed. 'Or Mark Zuckerberg. Or Paul Hollywood.'

'Why Paul Hollywood?'

'Strikes me as someone who would enjoy the power,' she reasoned. 'I bet he goes through assistants like I go through hot dinners. To be honest with you, Fran, I don't know how you do it. I've seen too many people treat their assistants like absolute shit.'

I held my hand out for the pair of socks she had stuffed down the front of her shirt and tucked into her bra. 'Is this a good time to point out we only met because I was covering for your assistant?'

'Proves my point entirely,' Jess said, jiggling her boobs until the socks fell out. 'I'm a monster and you're a masochist. I thought you were looking into teacher training?' I froze, socks in hand.

'Did Stew tell you that?'

She nodded slowly. 'He mentioned it at the pub quiz last week. Should he not have?'

'No, he shouldn't,' I bristled. 'Teacher training is his idea, not mine. Or, more specifically, it's his mum's idea. After twelve years, she's decided she doesn't like telling people I'm a temp, apparently. Can you imagine me as a teacher?'

Jess laughed so hard and so sharp, she started to cough and had to pause to wipe tears from the corners of her eyes. 'Sorry, but no, absolutely not.'

I shook out a black jumper with slightly more force than necessary.

'I love kids, don't get me wrong, but I couldn't cope with them all day long. My class wasn't that badly behaved and we gave my French teacher a nervous breakdown. He just stopped coming in one day, then we saw him at the duck pond in the next village over wearing a tracksuit with a massive beard. That would be me within a week.'

'And you could not pull off a beard,' Jess said.

'Not with my colouring,' I agreed. 'Shall we order the pizza? Large pepperoni and a medium whatever you want.'

She stuck out her tongue and gagged. 'Why are we getting pepperoni when we both hate it?'

'Because Stew loves it and I'm trying to butter him up.' I tossed a white T-shirt at my packing pile with a grimace. 'He's not going to be happy when I break the news about me going away.'

Jess clucked her tongue and shrugged.

'The only things that make Stew happy are the Blades winning and his mum. He'll get over it.'

I bit my lip and grabbed an assortment of clean underwear out of the chest of drawers, dumping it all into the suitcase. Even though I knew she was right, I still felt an unwelcome pang of disloyalty when I didn't rush to his defence. Jess would always be Team Fran, even though the rest of the world thought Stew was the greatest thing since sliced bread. One of the problems with moving back to your boyfriend's hometown, living within a five-minute radius of the rest of his family, was that he would always be the golden boy and I would always be the outsider. Most of the time it didn't bother me, but every once in a while something happened to remind me I didn't quite belong. Something like seeing him chatting to his childhood sweetheart when he was supposed to be somewhere else entirely.

'Are you sure everything is OK with you two?' Jess asked, taking the pile of knickers out of my suitcase and rolling each pair before neatly putting them back.

It was the perfect opening. I could tell her what I'd seen outside the salon: she'd make grumbling noises, call Bryony a cow, then reassure me that nothing was going on and I didn't need to worry. But I couldn't do it. We shared almost everything, but when it came to me and Stew, I couldn't help but censor myself, even with my best friend. Voicing your fears only made them real. It was all so much safer and more manageable when it was just in my head.

'Everything is fine,' I said with as much authority as I could muster. 'It's just the working away thing, he's going to be annoyed. And what if I don't get the job and I've created drama for nothing? Do you think I should cancel my interview?'

'Fran,' Jess met the look of uncertainty on my face with a fierce expression of determination. 'You're going to go to London, you're going to get this job and it's going to be amazing. I saw how much they're offering for five days' work, you'd have to be certifiable not to go for it.'

'You're too nice to me,' I said with a smile, pretending not to notice as she slipped a black thong in my suitcase, hiding it underneath my more utilitarian underwear. Little did she know, it was a gym thong not a sex thong, making it the least alluring piece of underwear in the entire world.

'No, I'm not,' she stated. 'I'm just nice enough. You are kind and thoughtful and practically perfect in every way.'

'You know, I don't think Mary Poppins was all that pleasant,' I said. 'Have you ever read the books?'

'I think we both know I have not,' she replied. 'Since when was Mary Poppins based on a book?'

'Since forever,' I said, planting my hands on my hips and staring into the suitcase. Trousers, check. Shirts, check. Pants and bras and socks, check, check, check. Was that everything? I really wanted to be fully packed and ready to go before Stew got back from football practice.

'It's going to be fine,' she said gently, giving my hand a squeeze. 'What's the worst that could happen?'

'The last time you said that we ended up in lockdown for a year.'

'That reminds me, I promised I'd take some banana bread into work this week,' she muttered as she held up two nearly identical, worse-for-wear, nude bras. Or at least they used to be nude. If the fabric matched the skin tone of anyone on earth in their current state, I imagined that person might want to see a doctor sooner rather than later.

'These are the saddest bras I've ever seen in my entire life,' Jess declared, draping one of them over her head, the cups hanging down over her ears, as she twirled the other in the air like a lasso. 'They're begging to be put out of their misery, Fran. There's about as much support left in them as a ham sandwich.'

'The colour is a bit off, that's all. They're perfectly serviceable bras,' I replied, grabbing them back and stuffing them into my suitcase. 'Not everyone's underwear drawer is made up of peekaboo leopard print push-ups and black silk suspenders.'

'One, the world would be a sunnier place if it was, and two, you can't have a peekaboo push-up bra, the padding gets in the way of the hole for the nip.' She eyed my fresh five-pack of white high-waisted briefs and blushed. 'And underwear can be serviceable without looking like you stole it from your nan. I'm going to get you some for Christmas. By January, you'll have a knicker drawer to rival Meghan Markle.'

'Is she a well-known lingerie connoisseur?'

'Just strikes me as someone who would have really nice pants,' Jess shrugged, fiddling with a tiny silver hoop in her left ear. 'Just trust me. Text me your size, and I'll get you something nice, totally tasteful.'