

The
SUMMER
WITHOUT
YOU

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Chapter One

‘We are not breaking up.’

‘No? What else do you call disappearing halfway round the world for half a year without the person you’ve spent nearly half your life with?’ Rowena Tipton did her best not to let the tears drop from her lashes, but her voice sliding up to soprano was just as telling.

‘Not a half-measure?’ Matt tried joking, before seeing the look he knew all too well that told him now wasn’t the time. He rubbed her hands which always felt so small in his. ‘I call it a new beginning.’

‘But why do we need a *new* beginning? We had one eleven years ago. I like our middle.’ She hiccupped, letting her hair blow in front of her face as she stared back at him with her soulful dark brown eyes – ‘doe eyes’, he’d always said – willing him to see reason. But the omens weren’t good. It would be so much easier to talk him out of this notion under a whimsical blue sky, clouds frolicking in the wind above them and daisy chains round their wrists – it would mean her cleavage was out for a start. He could never get his way against that. But she was wrapped and swaddled, and the weather was as bleak as his words, the sky as grey as an old towel, the ancient oaks that stood around them like elders still bare and budless. Everything

seemed lifeless and spent. She strained to hear the first birds of spring on their return migration, scanned the clouded ground for flowers, but the daffodils had made a poor showing this year, the bluebells not yet pushing their sharp green tips above the earth. It was mid March but nature seemed suspended. The dormancy had a scattering effect every bit as effective as a gunshot and the park was deserted, driving families inside to huddle round the last of the winter fires and leaving the unseen sun to slip from the sky for another day.

Matt tucked her hair behind her ear, his hand cupping her head so that she could rest her cheek against his palm. His tone, when he spoke, was calming, his eyes steady upon hers. 'Because our middle is flabby. We're in a rut, baby. We need to freshen things up.'

'Which is code for "see other people", you mean?'

'No, that is not what I mean. This is not a break-up, Ro.'

'What *is* it, then? You have to call it something. It's not something without a name. Nothing's anything without a name. I mean, how will I explain to peo—'

'It's a pause.'

She blinked at him, her lashes dewy with poised tears. 'A pause?'

'Before we commit to each other for the rest of our lives, it's a pause, an opportunity for us both to be selfish for the last time.'

'But I like being unselfish!' she wailed.

Matt nodded, as though he'd predicted every one of her responses. 'I know you do; it's one of the things I'll miss about you. But I also *want* to miss you, Ro. I want to feel that —' he shrugged, reaching for the word — I don't know, that yearning for you again, and I can't if we're lying

The Summer Without You

together in the same bed every night and sitting on the same park bench in the same park every Sunday morning.'

'So you *have* got tired of me.' The wail was replaced with a wobble.

'No!' he laughed, exasperated. His hand dropped from her cheek and he sat back, draping his arms over the bench and looking out over the Ham corner of Windsor Great Park. The wind blew Ro's tangled not-brown, not-blonde hair across her face again as she studied his profile; it was a face she knew almost better than her own, the one that had excited her when she'd seen it for the first time among the university library stacks, the one that had soothed her when she hadn't got the 2.1 she'd craved (and needed) to win a scholarship on the post-graduate photography course that was otherwise financially out of reach, the one that made her laugh with its impressive eyebrow flexibility . . . How could she not see this face – those blue eyes with the halo of fire round the pupils, the crooked smile that veered left, the cleft chin she could almost rest her thumb in, and that thatch of almost-black hair – for six months?

He looked back at her and for the first time what she saw in that familiar face frightened her: certainty. He was going to do this. He was going to go.

'I could never tire of you. I've just tired of our routine. We've been doing this for too long already and we're only just thirty. We've been together since uni and I don't really know life without you. I don't know who I am without you. You're the love of my life, Ro, but we met too young.' He stroked her cheek tenderly. 'I need to do this. I want to be away from you specifically so that I get to come back to you. I want us to fall in love *all over again* – do you see?' His eyes searched hers, trying to see if she did, but it was

hard to see anything behind the tears. Panic was overriding everything.

‘No, I don’t see! I don’t understand why you want to go back to the “getting there” phase when I already love you.’

He shook his head. ‘You’re not hearing me, baby. I want us to fall again, get back that feeling of running off a cliff and realizing we can fly! I fell in love with you eleven years ago, and I am deeply *in* love with you now, but everything’s too . . . cosy. I want us to shake everything up, refresh the page, come back to each other with passion. I mean, who said you can only fall in love with someone once?’

‘Because that’s how it works. Nobody falls in love twice.’

He dropped his dimpled chin. ‘Is there a law against it?’

She knew he was taking the mickey out of her, puncturing her earnest words with a faintly mocking, bemused smile. ‘There’ll be some law of chemistry or something that says once a chemical reaction has occurred, it can’t be repeated. It either mutates into something else or just . . . dies.’

They stared at each other. Neither one of them had taken chemistry beyond GCSE.

‘And what if you meet someone else?’ Her voice sounded hollow and small, scarcely up to the task of articulating such an apocalyptic thought.

‘That’s not going to happen. The whole point of this, Ro, is that I’m wanting to rediscover *you* again.’

‘But what if you change while we’re apart? Or I do? Or we both do?’

‘We’ve been together our entire adult lives already. You really think that much can happen in six months?’

The Summer Without You

'Famous last words,' she muttered, watching a red deer graze nearby. She felt Matt take her hands in his again. She looked back at him.

'Ro, I don't want that to happen, and I don't think it will – on my life I don't – but if we're meant to spend our lives together, we'll pull through this.'

'So you're saying it *will* be difficult.'

He rewarded her with a crooked smile. He'd never won an argument against her yet. 'I'm saying it's not going to be easy. The reality is, I'm not going to be able to call regularly, maybe sometimes for a few weeks at a time.'

'A few weeks?' she spluttered.

'I don't think mobile reception is all that great in Cambodia. Anyway, that could be a good thing! We speak probably twenty times a day, but when did you last feel excited to see that it was me on the line? Or actually not hear what I was saying because you were listening to the sound of my voice? You always used to do that, but now we just talk about cleaning the fish tank or covering the bay trees before the frost. I want you to be desperate to get my call, like you used to be. I want you to blush when I see you naked, just like you did first time round.' She saw a small light ignite in his eyes at the memory. 'We can get all that back, Ro. This six months is just an adventure that's going to bring it all back.' He winked at her. 'It's sexy, I reckon.'

Ro blinked at him in disbelief. 'Six months' enforced chastity is sexy? Are you mad?'

'Just think how mad for it you're going to be when I get back.' He smiled. 'You'll be ripping my clothes off.'

She pouted, but her eyes were dancing. 'You could just play a little harder to get. You don't actually need to fly all

the way to Cambodia to force me into making the first move.'

'You know I can never turn you down,' he said, his finger tracing down her nose to the tip. His eyes locked on hers. 'I want you disoriented and desperate without me.' She saw the smile twitching on his lips, the look of conspiracy in his eyes. He was joking and yet she could see that the idea of her unsated lust appealed to him.

'I already am.'

'Now multiply it by six months.'

She swallowed. The thought of even a weekend without him was unbearable.

'And then when I'm back . . . straight to Happy Ever After.'

Ro looked away. His words hurt to hear – he knew the weight they carried. He knew he was all she had – her family, her love, her best friend. But he was going anyway. He cupped her cheek with his palm again and made her look back at him.

'That's a promise, Ro. This isn't just about six months off from the rat race. I'm going to take this time and think of a way of asking you that shows you exactly what you mean to me. You deserve more than just a bended knee.'

'A bended knee would do me fine.' After eleven years, frankly a plastic ring and a train ticket to Gretna Green would pass muster.

He shook his head. 'Think bigger. Let's not settle for this.' He gestured to the park around them, distant cars stopping for the occupants to take photographs of the herds of deer grazing by the road, the tower blocks of Roehampton peeping through the tumbling grey clouds. 'I've got grand plans for us, Ro. I don't want there to be any-

The Summer Without You

thing humdrum about our lives. Let's take this six months to stretch and really wake up. You've got that wedding in New York in a few weeks, anyway. It's your first overseas commission. You never know – it could be the start of you taking the company international! Or transatlantic at least. Why not? Think big.'

Ro rolled her eyes and huffed crossly. He wouldn't be saying this if he'd met the bride. He'd never leave SW14 again if he met *her*.

He hooked his finger under her chin and made her look back at him. 'I know that look. Stop being so stubborn. You need to set up the company properly. The website's too slow, for a start. This is your chance to really focus on getting everything just the way you want it. By the time I come back, you could have the company in a completely different place. I'll be refreshed, and we'll both have our eyes wide open again. We'll be unstoppable.'

Ro had lost. She knew she couldn't talk him out of this. He had played his trump card – promising to propose – and what was she going to do, anyway? *Not* wait for him? As if.

Slowly she gave a small shrug. What else could she do? 'Well, it doesn't look like I've got much choice, does it?'

He swooped down and kissed her gratefully, his fingers winding through her hair as jubilation slowly began to give way to lust.

'Let's go home,' he said in a low voice.

'Already? But I thought we were having brunch at—'

'I fly out on Tuesday, Ro.'

Ro felt her stomach lurch. *This* Tuesday?

'Shh, shh. I didn't want to upset you even a week longer than I had to. But six months off from this body is going to

drive me almost out of my mind,' he murmured, running his hands up her waist. It was true. What she lacked in height or athletic prowess, she made up for with a naturally curvy, soft pin-up figure. It was camouflaged in her signature boyfriend jeans, but gave a knockout punch in dresses at the almost constant stream of friends' weddings. Even now, after over a decade together, when their sex life had cooled to several degrees below simmering and could justifiably be called 'regular', Matt couldn't walk past her in just her underwear. Could he really do without her for all that time?

She saw the same doubt in his eyes as his hands traced the contours he knew so well. Muscle memory alone led him around her, knowing exactly where to skim and where to pause and explore.

He grabbed her hand and pulled her up to standing, kissing her more passionately now. When he pulled back, Ro felt her stomach flip to see his eyes so clouded with desire. 'Home. Now. I've got forty-eight hours to stock up on six months' worth of you.'

Ro giggled delightedly as he suddenly pulled her into a fast run back towards the shiny red Polo parked at the bottom of the hill. Maybe he was right. Maybe it was working already. If they were missing each other before they were even apart, this could be the making of them after all. Six months from now, she'd be Mrs Rowena Martin and they'd both have what they wanted: Matt his bright new beginning, her the happy ending.

Chapter Two

'Look at me, please . . . And just one more,' Ro said from behind the camera, her right hand making tiny micro-adjustments on the lens until she found the pin-sharp focus she was looking for on the bride's face. Not that this bride lacked focus. This was a million-dollar wedding if it was a cent, and Ro had several times glimpsed the veins of steel that had bagged this bride her groom – most recently, dressing down her own father through gritted, whitened teeth for standing on the hem of her dress.

Outwardly, everything was as perfect as a Martha Stewart set: the twelve bridesmaids were all dressed in blue-sky silk columns and pearl chokers, with buffed shoulders and upswept hair; the huge potted blossom trees were in full bloom, the aisle densely carpeted with pink petals; and the guests had, thankfully, all honoured the cream dress code. Ro had been grateful to have the camera to hide behind as she'd snapped away in the bridal suite before the ceremony, shocked and embarrassed by the no-knickers (full Hollywood) look the bride was working under her modest tiered silk mousseline dress by Vera Wang. Personally, Ro gave them eight months. She didn't see this couple getting to a year, not judging by the way the groom kept looking over at the maid of honour.

She walked slowly round the Waldorf Astoria ballroom, her camera dropped by her side as she watched the guests; some were still seated at their tables, but most were beginning to get up and mingle again, and the room was starting to throng. She guessed they were mostly around her age, possibly slightly younger – late twenties, rather than early thirties. There wasn't a baby to be seen anywhere, though they may have been banned – probably had been: this bride didn't do 'messy' or 'unscheduled' – but she had clocked a few bumps. They were likely all still in the throes of wedding fever, that time in their lives when they went to five or six weddings a year as friends and acquaintances jumped on the merry-go-round and life seemed like one long party lived out in a marquee and pretty dresses.

It was interesting seeing the differences to the British weddings she usually covered. She'd never photographed an American wedding before. The commission for this had come through the bride's sister, who'd been a bridesmaid at a wedding Ro had covered in Dorset ten months earlier. She'd taken Ro's card after seeing her signature colour-saturated filters, which lent each image a dreamy, nostalgic vibe. The most obvious difference between the Atlantic cousins was the men all wearing dinner suits rather than morning suits – the strong black and white stamping effect looked great through the lens – and the bridesmaids all looked a lot more sorted, professional even, than their British counterparts. None of them was drunk yet, for a start. The speeches had been a lot more corporate too, and obviously the couple had written their own vows – something that hadn't really taken flight back home, where it was considered more proper to go along with the traditional King James version and have a reading of 'The Owl and the Pussycat'.

The Summer Without You

Yes, it was interesting, all this – but not diverting. It didn't matter that she was in the ballroom of the famous Waldorf Astoria in Manhattan, 3,500 miles from home. That only told her that she was even further away from where Matt was, now nearly 9,000 miles away in fact. The distance between them had never been greater, and they'd spoken only three times in the three weeks since he'd gone (and one of those had been as he'd boarded the plane).

'Not going to be easy' – his phrase – wasn't even close to covering it. 'Devastating' was closer to the truth. It had been one thing accepting the sentiment behind his grand plans in theory, but returning home from the airport to a house full of his absence – his clothes strewn across the floor, his electric toothbrush wet next to hers ('There won't be any electrical points where I'm going'), his pillow still indented with the shape of his head – had poleaxed her. She'd barely told anyone he'd left, and she wasn't sure the milkman counted, anyway. Matt had kept his plans a secret from everyone, not just her – knowing they'd try to talk him out of it, question why he was really leaving her behind – so the phone had sat quietly on its cradle, no offers of rallying drinks at the pub or Indian takeaways or shopping trips to boost her spirits. She'd spent the first week dressed almost entirely in his clothes and spraying herself with his deodorant, and the house was so quiet that one evening in the kitchen, she'd actually convinced herself she could hear Shady, their long-crested goldfish, moving through the cloudy water of the fish tank.

But extending her trip here by a few days had been a mistake. Just because the days were dragging by in London didn't mean they would actually be any shorter over here. Going to bed early only made the nights longer instead of

the days, taking the boat out to Staten Island didn't make the minutes tick past any quicker than cycling over to Barnes Common, and walking through Central Park may as well have been Richmond Park. The only concession she could make was that spring seemed more forthright here. It was early April and already the trees were fully in bud; the grass was speckled with daisies basking in the sun; joggers were wrapped in lighter layers . . .

Ro watched as the bride – bored, now, of her veil – wandered off to a cloakroom to touch up her make-up, her shoulder blades swishing like scythes above the top of her dress, while the groom made a dash for the bar. She rested against the back of a chair for a moment, exhausted and parched, and wondering whether to run to the kitchens to beg a plate of food. She'd been on her feet all day and no one had had the presence of mind even to offer her a glass of water, much less a sandwich. Everyone had eaten but her, and the reception was segeuing into the 'party' section of the night, with drinks being drunk at twice the speed and the band tuning up by the dance floor.

She turned quickly, too quickly, the rubber tip of one shoe catching the other, and she tripped, almost colliding with a waiter who was walking towards her with a tray carefully balanced with drinks.

'Whoa!' he laughed, his arm swaying above her like a tree branch. 'Easy, tiger.'

'Easy, *tiger*?' Ro echoed, mortified and grasping for dignity. 'You – you can't speak like that to the guests, you know.'

His eyes swept over her black trouser suit and red Converse. 'But you're not a guest,' he replied. 'I've been

The Summer Without You

watching you. You haven't stopped all day.' He grinned and held the tray out to her. 'Want one of these?'

She eyed the champagne regretfully. 'Well, like you say, I'm not a guest.' Her voice sounded peevish even to her.

'I won't tell,' the waiter replied.

'No. Thanks, but I never drink when I'm working. There's a direct correlation between a blurry head and blurry pictures,' she said, automatically raising her camera to her eye as she saw a line-up of groomsmen behind him lifting one of the bridesmaids in a replay of the shots she'd taken of them all outside the church earlier. Clearly, beer was hitting bloodstreams.

'I bet you haven't eaten either, huh?'

'What? Oh, uh . . . no,' she replied politely, her finger rapidly depressing the shutter button.

'Tch. They never cease to amaze me, these people. They'll spend thirty grand on flowers, but not . . . Come on, follow me.' He put his hand over the lens and she pulled away, annoyed.

'Hey!' She pointedly grabbed a microfibre cloth from her pocket and began cleaning the glass. 'If I end up with your fingerprints overlaid on the photos . . .'

'What, it might distract everyone from the bride's mother's Botox addiction?' he laughed.

Ro laughed back. It was true – the bride's mother had an expression every bit as frozen as a ventriloquist's dummy and Ro had been struggling to get a 'natural' shot of her all day. In every frame she looked like she'd just hiccupped.

Ro looked at him properly, this irreverent waiter. He was tall and easy on the eye, his light brown hair closely cropped in not quite a buzz cut but only a grade above, and he was sporting week-old stubble. 'Come on, I'm

offering you a once-in-a-daytime opportunity here. Dinner on the house while the bride's preoccupied with her own reflection. What time are you on till tonight? Midnight?'

Ro bit her lip. She was ravenous. She didn't cope well without food. Matt always said her appetite was one of the things he loved most about her. 'Well—'

'Just follow me.'

He set off at a rapid pace, expertly balancing the tray above people's heads – one advantage of his extra height – as they wove through the crowd. Several people tried to stop him for drinks, but he smiled and told them he was on his way back to the kitchen for refills, even though the glasses on his tray were blatantly full and untouched.

Ro followed, jogging lightly behind, her camera swinging round her neck.

'Uh-uh, keep right here,' the waiter said, as he kicked open a right double door just as the left one swung open in the opposite direction. 'See what I mean?' He grinned as another waiter sped past with an overloaded tray.

She only just jumped out of the way in time.

'Lethal,' Ro breathed.

'Yo, José!' he called out, sliding the tray onto an empty counter. 'We got any food for the photographer here? We're not the only ones being worked like dogs.'

A minute later, a medium-rare filet steak with a red wine jus and vegetables was passed through to the serving station. Ro was so hungry she wanted to fall into it face first.

'Over here,' the waiter said, carrying it over to a small chef's table in the corner and grabbing some red-hot cutlery from the still-steaming dishwasher. Someone placed a glass of water in front of her too.

'Thanks,' Ro marvelled, sitting down quickly and tuck-

The Summer Without You

ing in without delay. She only had a few minutes before the bride would be back.

‘So, you’re English?’ the waiter enquired, watching her follow every hot mouthful with a gulp of water.

‘Yup.’

‘First time to New York?’

‘Second, technically,’ she mumbled, her mouth full.

‘Technically?’

She chewed quickly, not sure she had time to eat *and* chat. ‘I was born here. My parents moved to England when I was eight months,’ she said quickly, spearing a broccoli floret.

‘Oh, right. So then you’re American.’

She shrugged. ‘Well, technically, but I don’t have any sense of it. I feel as British as pie.’

‘What – key lime?’ He grinned.

‘Steak and kidney.’ She chuckled.

‘You’re lucky you belong to both. I’ve always wanted to go to London. Stay for a bit.’

‘Mm.’ She glanced at him suspiciously, hoping this wasn’t some warm-up for an invitation to stay.

‘You here alone?’

‘Yup.’ The video cameraman back in the ballroom was a local freelancer she’d hired on recommendation from a photographer friend but only met for the first time yesterday morning: he didn’t count as company. ‘My boyfriend’s travelling,’ she added, just in case this was also a warm-up for a chat-up line.

‘Well now, that’s a shame,’ he said, but with such a hapless grin she found herself grinning back again before she caught herself and abruptly stopped – she didn’t want it to be confused for flirting. ‘So do you like it here?’

‘Mm.’ She made a so-so movement with her head.

He nodded. ‘Yeah. New York can be a tough place to be on your own.’

‘Yo, dude! What you doing sittin’ there, man?’ They both looked up to see a man in a white jacket marching towards them. ‘You can’t be chatting up the chicks! I got people with a thirst on out there! Don’t you need the money or nothin’?’

The waiter stood up with a heavy sigh. ‘Guess I’d better shoot. Nice chatting to you.’

‘Yeah, you too,’ Ro nodded, having to place a hand in front of her mouth for politeness’s sake. ‘And thanks . . . For the meal, I mean.’

He winked and jogged off. ‘All right, I’m coming, I’m coming!’

Ro watched him go, bemused to notice a flash of lurid Hawaiian-print boxer shorts peeking out between his shirt and trousers.

She finished her meal quickly, wiping her mouth with the napkin that had also been – thoughtfully – provided and marching quickly back through the kitchen, remembering to stay to the right on her way back out through the double doors.

The bride was on the dance floor – veil shed like a snake’s skin – and had changed into a strapless miniskirted version of her wedding dress, the groom nowhere to be seen. She was standing with her hands on her hips, a gaggle of nervous ushers variously trying to persuade her to dance/drink/take a seat. But the more solicitous they became, the more her eyes narrowed.

Ro’s gaze quickly skirted the room for the groom too. She couldn’t see the maid of honour anywhere either, and

The Summer Without You

from what she'd glimpsed earlier . . . Oh dear, this wasn't good, not good at all.

She walked quickly round the perimeter of the ballroom. Everyone was waiting for the first dance so that they could get on with hitting the dance floor themselves, and the absence of the groom and maid of honour was becoming more conspicuous by the minute.

Ro reached the doors and looked out into the hallway. Some smaller rooms had also been reserved for the wedding – cloakrooms, bathrooms – including a modest, quiet conference room that had been set up specifically for interviewing the bride and groom's friends and families for the video that Ro would splice and edit back in the UK.

She padded silently across the hallway in her rubber-soled shoes. A few of the older guests were already collecting their coats, some men checking their texts on the way back from the toilets.

She was passing a mobile photo booth when a sprinkle of flirtatious laughter stopped her in her tracks. The curtain was drawn, the light popping as shots were taken. Just in sight – though she'd almost walked straight past them – she saw a white shirt and a pair of black trousers had been stuffed round the back of the booth.

Ro hesitated. Kicking out below the curtain was the distinctive blue silk hem of a bridesmaid dress. Oh no. No, no, no. This wasn't happening. No way was this marriage imploding on its very first day. There could be no break-up until *after* she'd been paid.

Looking around her quickly to check that no one was watching, she bent double, searching for the pair of legs that must be, now, trouserless, and in the booth too.

They were.

She heard more laughter from behind the curtain, a low buzz of muted voices. 'No!' a female voice screeched delightfully, clearly meaning 'yes', as the light popped again.

Ro rolled her eyes and reached down for the discarded clothes – how reckless? – just as she heard the furious rat-a-tat-tat of stilettos on the marble floor behind her.

She looked down at the clothes balled in her hand and turned in the same instant she switched them behind her back, a frozen smile on her face.

'Have you seen my husband?' the bride demanded, her eyes scanning the empty spaces of the corridors like a sparrowhawk hunting mice.

Without visibly moving, Ro threw the clothes behind her, hearing just a soft, muffled *thwump* as they fell to the floor of the booth. 'Uh, no . . . now you mention it, I haven't seen him recently. I was just in the loos and he wasn't there.' The bride scowled. 'In the bathroom, I mean . . . obviously.'

The booth began to hum, vibrating softly, and the bride looked behind Ro, her attention diverted. She looked at the drawn curtain. 'Who's in there?'

'In there?' Ro echoed, her voice an octave higher than usual. 'Um, no one.'

'The drape is drawn.' She bent to the side. 'And I can see legs. Someone's in there.'

Ro looked down. At least the legs she could see were encased in black trousers again. 'Oh yes, of course. And, uh . . . you're right. Obviously someone's in there. It's just not . . . your husband.'

The bride's eyes narrowed suspiciously again.

A sudden whirring started up and they both looked down as a strip of photos slid out. The bride reached for

The Summer Without You

them, but Ro got there first, whipping them away before either of them could set eyes on the images. ‘Uh . . . I can’t let you see those.’

‘Why not?’ the bride demanded furiously.

‘Because—’

But the bride wasn’t hanging around to hear Ro’s story and in the next instant she had flashed open the curtain. Her jaw dropped at the sight of her maid of honour and the waiter who had fed Ro only twenty minutes earlier smiling back at her, a sign hanging from the bridesmaid’s neck.

‘What the . . . ?’ the bride stormed.

The waiter locked eyes with Ro, who was looking on, open-mouthed with shock. They both knew he was going to get fired for this.

‘It’s not what you think,’ Ro said, hurriedly closing the curtain again, much to everyone’s astonishment.

‘Why is . . . why is my maid of honour standing in that booth with a *waiter* and wearing a sign that reads—’

‘It’s a surprise!’ Ro blurted out. ‘For the video.’

The bride blinked at her.

‘Yes, uh . . . I mean, it may not work, but . . . we thought we’d give it a go and . . . if it doesn’t work, I’ll leave it out. It’s just good to have options, that’s all.’

She nodded frantically, smiled manically, her fingers threading through the strap of the camera round her neck.

‘But what—’ At that moment, the groom appeared from the men’s bathroom, fiddling with his cuffs.

‘Where have you been?’ the bride shrieked as he walked over, taking in the testy scene. ‘Everyone’s waiting for our first dance.’

‘Well, I’m ready when you are, baby,’ the groom

shrugged, as his bride grabbed him by the elbow and steered him back to the ballroom.

'Hayley!' the bride snapped over her shoulder. 'Are you coming?'

The maid of honour peeped out through the curtain, giggling nervously and mouthing 'thanks' to Ro as she skittered past.

A moment later, the waiter peered round the curtain. 'Is it safe to come out?'

'Just about.' Ro turned back to him.

'I don't know how to thank you. You saved my ass for sure,' he said, buttoning up his shirt and hurriedly tucking it back into his trousers. He reached over and picked up the tray she hadn't noticed sitting on a side table just a short distance away. 'You don't know how badly I need this money.'

She shrugged. 'Well, I figure one good turn deserves another.'

'Here. By way of thanks,' he said, pulling something from his back pocket.

'What's this?' she asked as he handed her a small card. She noticed a smudge of dark pink lipstick near his ear.

'A friend's having a party tomorrow night. Just tell 'em, "Shaddywack".'

'Huh?'

But he was already back on duty, walking towards a group of guests with his tray.

She looked down at the card he'd handed her:

Hamptons summer weekends house share

4-bed, 2.5-bath cottage on Egypt Green, East Hampton. 2-acre lot.

MD-LD \$25,000 ¼ share. Responsible professionals only.

The Summer Without You

To make the cut, bring a gift that defines you and come to
the Pink Room, Penthouse Level, 53rd Street and Broadway,
April 10, 7 p.m. to 11 p.m.

Contact h.slater@googlemail.com to register
for entry password on the night.

She shook her head, slightly baffled, before remembering the photos still in her other hand. She looked at them and squinted in disbelief: the maid of honour was variously pouting and laughing at the camera, her hands in her hair, the waiter bare-chested with a buttonhole rose behind his ear, nuzzling her neck. Ro looked at the hand-painted sign round the bridesmaid's neck and sighed: 'Get Humped this summer.' What did it even mean? And, more to the point, how the hell was she going to work it into a wedding film?