

CHAPTER ONE

VIVIENNE

The day started out so well.

It was sunny, warm – a welcome bonus for what had so far been a rainy April – with misty slats of sunlight streaming through the partially open plantation shutters. The delicious aroma of fresh coffee and buttery croissants floated up from Maxi's café next door, enticing her further into the day.

Vivienne Shager stretched luxuriously, her taut, lithe body unravelling its impressive length from the contours of sleep as her mind made a happy reconnect with the world and what it had in store on this glorious work-free day.

It was hard to believe that four full weeks had passed since she and the GaLs – Girls at Law – had run – and completed – an entire marathon to raise funds for the charity Heads Together. So much had happened in that time – mostly work related, but she'd also had an irritating bug that kept coming and going, trying to lay her low, but never quite succeeding. However, she was feeling pretty good today, she

Susan Lewis

soon realized. This was a huge relief, for she and the GaLs were planning some serious celebration of their fund-raising efforts. The day was exclusively theirs; partners, spouses, offspring, parents, bosses and colleagues had been given notice that they'd have to manage without the key women in their lives from midday until said women were ready to tip in the direction of home.

For Vivi there was less of a problem on the family front, since she had no children and her partner, Greg, was going to Lord's for the day. Her mother fortunately didn't live anywhere close by. On the work front, her immediate boss, Trudy Mack-Silver, was one of the GaLs, so no difficulties there. This wasn't to say that Vivienne didn't have a mountain of work to get through; being a senior member of the in-house legal team at FAberlin Investments meant her desk and inbox were always crammed with issues needing urgent attention. Over time she'd learned how to prioritize the ceaseless flow of demands, though many of them saw her labouring late into the evenings and often over entire weekends. She didn't mind, she loved her job, and even liked many of the giant corporation's upper-management team. They could be tough, bad-tempered, inconsiderate and in some cases offensively sexist, but in times of crisis she watched closely, spoke confidently, and managed to learn a lot from those whose jobs she had in her sights.

'You give great kickback,' Trudy often told her following an intense negotiation or fiery confrontation. 'They respect you for it. It makes them listen and provided you don't go wrong, you could be heading up the entire legal team by the time you're thirty.' Trudy didn't have a problem with this, because she had no such ambitions for herself. She was happy to stay at the level she'd already attained, since it allowed her time to be an-at-home-most-evenings wife to

One Minute Later

Bruno, and available-for-school-runs mum to Harry and Dean.

The other important thing about today was the fact that it was Vivi's twenty-seventh birthday, another reason the GaLs – all graduates of LSE law school – had decided that this should be the marathon reunion day. Combining occasions was something they often did; being so busy with their careers it was the only way to make sure nothing got overlooked.

Throwing back the pale blue striped duvet, Vivi stood as tall as her willowy five foot nine inches allowed, arched her long back and gave a lazy side-to-side twist to stretch out her waist. Since ending the intense pre-marathon training her body had softened slightly, making it, according to Greg, more feminine and curvy, and way sexier. He had a thing about large women, which made his attraction to her a bit of a mystery, given how slender she was. However they'd been seeing one another for several months, non-exclusively, so their friends weren't living in daily expectation of some significant news. A baby. A wedding. Or perhaps something as simple as moving in together.

Despite their casual relationship, Vivi had to admit that he was a bit of a dreamboat in his way, sporty, witty, fiercely intelligent and very well connected in the financial world, thanks to his gentrified family and their historic ties to the City. When he spoke it was immediately evident that he came from privileged pastures; however, Vivienne strongly doubted that he gave a single thought to the relative ordinariness of her own. He wasn't a snob, or not that she'd ever noticed. Nonetheless, she'd never taken him home to meet her family, who still lived in the hopelessly unsophisticated coastal town that Vivi had called home for the first eighteen years of her life.

Susan Lewis

She'd moved on since uni, had redefined her focus, and was part of another world that could hardly be more different to the simplicity of her early years. Not that *she* had changed in character, for she was still the same upbeat and optimistic Vivi that her beloved grandpa used to call Vivi-vacious. This nickname came from her love of life and people, especially him and NanaBella, which was what she used to call her grandma on account of her name being Bella. Vivi also adored her younger brother, nineteen-year-old Mark, and there was no doubt that she loved her mother with all her heart, and knew that her mother felt the same about her. However, their relationship was the most complicated and frustrating part of Vivienne's world, which was why she didn't often go home. She'd spent too many years trying to unlock the closed doors in her mother's heart and unravel the secrets Gina had never shared, and now all Vivienne wanted was to avoid the confusing and conflicting emotions she always came away with after spending time with her mother.

She wasn't giving any of this a single thought on this glorious spring morning, although she expected her mobile to ring at any minute bringing a dutiful happy birthday call from home. The postman would almost certainly deliver a card from her mother later, and a text would no doubt pop up at some point during the day saying something like *Hope you're having a fabulous day, but please don't have too much to drink*. There wouldn't be a present, because her mother had stopped buying them a few years ago, saying, 'I always get it wrong, so there doesn't seem any point in wasting my money. If you want something, just ask.'

That was Gina all over. In spite of being a glamorous and successful forty-five-year-old businesswoman with a good sense of humour and plenty of friends, she could be prosaically practical about things that called for frivolity or

One Minute Later

indulgence. (Although, Vivi reminded herself, their surprise trip to Venice a few years ago had proved her mother could be both imaginative and impulsive when she wanted to be.) However, it was true to say that Gina was usually awkward with celebrations, and as for showy declarations of feeling, well, that wasn't her at all. Actually, she was nothing if not a maddening set of contradictions, because she could be a lot of fun when she wanted to be, and when it came to throwing a party she didn't do things by half. Things had changed, however, since Gil, Vivi's stepfather and Mark's father, had left, just over nine years ago. Dear, wonderful Gil who was still as much a part of their lives as if he'd never gone, except he didn't live with her mother any more – and if anyone could work out the bizarreness of that relationship they'd certainly have a better insight into Gina's mysterious psyche than Vivi had ever managed.

'Don't ask me,' NanaBella had lamented at the time of the break-up. 'I've never really understood your mother, you know that, and she could baffle the heck out of Grandpa when he was alive.'

'But you always loved her and stood by her,' Vivienne had pointed out, for it was true, her grandparents had always been there – for them all.

There was no NanaBella or Grandpa to stand by any of them now. Grandpa had succumbed to cancer when Vivi was six, and NanaBella had been the victim of a drunk driver four Easters ago while on her way into town.

That was another reason for Vivi to feel guilty about not going to see her mother more often. Gina had been devastated by the sudden loss of her beloved mother – they all had, including Gil. But trying to be supportive of Gina was like trying to hug a cactus. She couldn't accept love without becoming prickly and awkward; although she clearly wanted

Susan Lewis

affection, she just didn't seem to know how to handle it.

What was that line about an enigma wrapped up in a mystery inside a riddle? Well, that was her mother, and even Gil, as besotted as he was with her, never tried to claim she was easy.

Reaching for her mobile as it rang, Vivi saw it was one of the GaLs and decided to let it go to messages. She simply had to go to the bathroom before speaking to anyone, and then she'd pop down to Maxi's for an Americano and pastry to fuel herself up for the day. If her mother called and didn't get an answer she'd assume Vivi was either out for a run, or at Greg's, or still asleep with the phone turned off. She wouldn't worry, because that was something Gina resolutely refused to do, in spite of the fact that the tight line between her beautiful eyes showed that she spent just about every moment of every day worrying about something.

Did she even realize that?

Vivi thought she probably did, but whatever was causing her anxiety – and maybe it was many things – she guarded it jealously, as though letting go of a single hint of an issue would snap the strings inside her and everything would fall catastrophically apart.

Standing in front of the twin-mirrored bathroom cabinet with its frame of snowball lights and inbuilt heat pad, Vivi pulled a face at herself and stretched out her jaw. She must have slept awkwardly because her neck seemed achy, and the stiffness in her limbs told her that she ought to get back to some proper exercise soon. Still, at least she was breathing more easily this morning, so the bug she'd no doubt picked up on one of several flights she'd made in the past three weeks might finally be clearing.

She was, by anyone's standards, a strikingly lovely young woman. With almond-shaped eyes, blue as a summer sky,

One Minute Later

and a full, sloppy mouth (her description), she was so entrancing that her friends swore she could hypnotize at a hundred paces. Her complexion was smooth and olive, her cheekbones high, and her light brown hair was a wayward riot of waves that fell about her face and neck in a style all of its own.

Right now it was a tangled mess, and her still sleepy eyes were shadowed by the residue of last night's mascara.

Last night?

Oh, that was right; she'd been at the office until almost midnight, after returning from New York on the red-eye in the morning. It had been a flying visit to the Big Apple, quite literally: one meeting, followed by a dull dinner at Bobby Van's Steakhouse and an overnight stay at the Beekman.

After dragging some trackie bottoms on over her pyjama shorts and a T-shirt over the camisole, she slipped her feet into an old pair of flip-flops and texted Maxi with her order. Before leaving she made a quick scan of her emails to be sure nothing earth-shattering had cropped up overnight and finding that nothing had, she went through to the spacious open-plan kitchen-cum-sitting room and gave a small sigh of pleasure to find it virtually drowning in sunlight.

She loved this apartment so much she could marry it. With its high, stuccoed ceilings, tall sash windows and wonderfully airy rooms – all two of them, plus full bathroom containing utility area – she simply couldn't bear to think of living anywhere else. It was certainly one of the reasons she and Greg hadn't considered moving in together. It wasn't big enough for two, and it would be crazy to make this their home when his riverfront duplex in Wapping was at least three times the size, and in real-estate terms far more desirable. Plus, he owned his place outright, thanks to his father, while her first-floor, street-view section of a Georgian town

Susan Lewis

house close to Hollywood Road in Chelsea, was rented. It wasn't that she couldn't afford a mortgage, she was earning enough now to take on some hefty repayments, but the amount needed for a deposit in an area like this – in fact almost anywhere in London – was still out of her reach, largely thanks to her lavish lifestyle. Her friends had managed their down payments thanks to BoMaD – bank of Mum and Dad – but her mother could never have found a near six-figure sum without selling her own house or hairdressing salon, and even if she'd been prepared to do that (she wasn't), Vivi wouldn't have let her. However, her mother – refusing Gil's offer to step in – had practically emptied her savings account to help raise a deposit for the lease on this flat. Having viewed it with Vivi she'd understood right away why her daughter had fallen in love with it, so she'd been keen to make it happen. Since that time, just over four years ago, Vivi had repaid almost two-thirds of the amount, and by the end of the year her mother's account, thanks to the interest Vivi had added to the loan, was likely to be healthier than it had ever been.

Still feeling slightly stiff, she performed a couple more stretches, then grabbed her phone and wallet and let herself out of the flat into the black-and-white tiled front hall where her upstairs neighbours had parked a bicycle and pushchair. There were also several paintings lining the walls, all done by the delightful and talented Maryanna, who paced about the large attic studio like a trapped cat in the grip of an artistic frenzy. Though her canvases were as indecipherable as they were confrontational (Maryanna's word), Vivienne had long ago decided that she loved them. She owned two, but had left them in the hall for others in the building and their visitors to enjoy as they came and went.

The large black front door with its colourful stained-glass

One Minute Later

windows and shiny brass letter box was as grand as any Regency house could boast, as was the Doric columned portico with its ornamental box hedges in tall granite pots. Slender black railings edged the steps down to the pavement, where they turned at right angles to each side to provide a barrier between passers-by and the void above the basement flats.

Maxi's was adjacent, with a handful of bistro tables spilling out of the wide-open bifold doors, its palm strewn interior with plush leather banquettes and slouchy sofas cooled by the gentle spring breeze. In spite of it not yet being nine on a weekend morning, the place was already buzzing.

After collecting her order, free for the birthday girl, Maxi insisted, and bowing her thanks to the Greek regulars whom Maxi encouraged to join in a chorus of *charoumena genethlia*, Vivi ran back up to the flat accompanied by the musical sound of many text messages arriving.

Five so far. As she read them, still catching her breath after the sprint, she sipped her coffee and blinked away a spell of dizziness. Remembering she hadn't eaten since yesterday lunchtime, she tucked into her Danish and turned on the radio. Though she probably wouldn't listen to the news, it was second nature to have it on in the background, and when she'd had enough of it she'd do her usual thing of planting her phone in the speakers and scrolling to some favourite tunes.

More texts piled in, mostly from the GaLs: Trudy, Shaz, Saavi, Sachi and Becky, all saying they couldn't wait to see her later. In came a surprise message from Michael (CEO of FAberlin) and then up popped one from Greg.

Have a great day. Can you do dinner with Carla and Seamus on Wednesday? Sushi?

She thought there might be a conflict, so making a mental

Susan Lewis

note to check before getting back to him, she finished up her Danish and began a quick sort of the mail that had come through the door while she was in New York.

Work hard, play hard, that was her motto, and lately she'd been doing far too much of the former. Boy, was she ready to party today!

Realizing that her mother hadn't called yet, she was about to try her when the telepathic airwaves beat her to it. 'Hey Mum,' she chirruped as she clicked on. 'You remembered!'

'Remembered what?' her mother countered.

'Ha ha. Are you treating us to a few days at a luxury spa for some M and D bonding, or should I expect a back brush for the shower to replace the one that broke?'

'Did it break? You didn't tell me. I can return it.'

'If I didn't know you were joking I'd think you were weird.'

'You think that anyway. So what are you doing today?'

'Meeting the GaLs for lunch at Beaufort House. We'll probably still be there at teatime.'

'Well try not to make a fool of yourself, drink tends to do that to a person.'

Vivienne mimed *yadda yadda yadda* and smiled as she said, 'And what are you doing today?'

'Working, of course. You know Saturdays are my busiest day, and Jan left yesterday so there's no one to run reception. I'll be frazzled by the time we close, so lucky I'm not going out tonight.'

That wasn't unusual for her mother; she hadn't had much of a social life since her marriage had ended, although Gil still frequently drove the fifty or so miles from his home to take her to dinner. Strange, but Vivienne kept reminding herself that it was her mother's life, not hers, so if Gina and Gil wanted a long-distance relationship with unspecified benefits it was their business, not hers.

One Minute Later

‘Are you seeing Greg today?’ Gina asked.

‘No, but we’re supposed to be meeting some friends for lunch tomorrow. I might have to cancel though. I’ve got so much on at the office...’ She checked to see who an incoming text was from and said, ‘Mum, sorry, I have to go. I’ll call again later, OK?’

There was a brief silence, and Vivi wasn’t sure whether her mother was hurt or annoyed, probably both. ‘If you have time,’ Gina replied. Her tone betrayed nothing more than a soft sigh that said she was used to being cut short, since it happened all the time. *And where did I get that from?* Vivi thought defensively as she rang off. Her mother had been cutting her short all her life.

The text was from Michelle, her best friend since they were five; Michelle who’d been like a sister to her until their lives had taken such different paths, Vivi to go off to London and uni, Michelle to stay in Kesterly, marry young and have a family. They’d remained in touch mostly through birthday cards and the occasional text, but in spite of Vivi being godmother to both Michelle’s children they hardly ever saw one another now. There was a time when it would have broken Vivi’s heart to think of them drifting apart, in a way it still did, but life, ambition, motherhood and all sorts of other demands meant they no longer had much in common.

Michelle never forgot Vivi’s birthday, and Vivi desperately wished she could say the same, but more often than not she was late with a text, and later still with cards. She was generous with presents though, especially for the children, and Michelle always sent photographs to show how delighted they were with the new toy or book or outrageously expensive designer wear.

Happy Birthday to you. Hope you have a fabulous day.

Susan Lewis

We all send love. What are you planning? Are you even in the country?

Remembering she'd been in Dubai the last time she and Michelle were in touch, Vivi couldn't help wondering how interested her friend really was in her life. Probably not very, for Michelle had never been ambitious, caring little for the crazy kind of jet-set existence that was so totally at odds with the plodding and predictable world of Kesterly. But it was typical of Michelle to show an interest: kind, considerate, full of fun and mischief, she had a way of making a person feel valued and special even if they no longer shared girlhood dreams. What a gift that was. Vivi wished she had it, but every time she tried to focus more on matters outside work something would come up and everything else would be forgotten.

She texted back: *Tx for the happy birthday. You're amazing. In London. Seeing the GaLs at Beaufort House. Should be fun.* Had Michelle ever heard of Beaufort House? She'd know who the GaLs were, though she might not remember all their names. She was aware, of course, that they were Vivi's closest friends now, just as Sam, Michelle's husband, had become her closest friend.

What mattered was that they'd always been there for one another while growing up. Nothing would ever change that; Vivi just hoped a time would never come when they lost touch completely, though she was aware that it easily could.

Kicking off her flip-flops, she was about to read her other texts when Michelle came through again. *Millie wants you to know that her little brother should be called Eeyore because he cries like a donkey.*

Vivi broke into a deep, throaty laugh, and for a few minutes they texted back and forth as though almost five-year-old Millie was sending the messages about her new pony and

One Minute Later

the present she and Mummy had sent to Vivi for her birthday that smelled lovely.

Ten minutes later Vivienne stepped into the shower and closed her eyes as a power-charged flow of warm water cascaded over her. She spun around, lifting her face to the jets, and put a hand to the wall as she swayed. She was thinking about her sweet little godchildren, Millie and Ash, and what a pity it was that her own children (when she finally got round to having them, and that wasn't going to be any time soon) would be so much younger than them. And maybe, with her living in London and them way across the country in Kesterly-on-Sea, they wouldn't even really get to know one another. That felt sadder than sad, given how close she and Michelle had always been, but the only solution would be for her to meet and marry someone who wanted to live in Kesterly, which was never going to happen. Nor, considering Sam's business as a local builder and Michelle's own ties to Kesterly, were they ever likely to move to London.

By the time Vivi was ready to leave the flat she'd taken three more calls from various friends, and had managed to book herself a Shellac manicure for eight on Monday evening. She probably ought to make a hair appointment sometime soon, too, for the random whirl of waves clustered around her face and neck was in need of some taming.

Wearing ripped skinny jeans, a pair of flat strappy sandals and a waist-length leather jacket, she decided to walk to Beaufort House. The weather was too good to miss a moment of it, and capturing its buoyancy in her stride she seemed about to break into a dance as she started off down the street.

As she was turning into the Fulham Road her phone rang again, and seeing it was her half-brother, Mark, she swiftly clicked on. 'Hey you! What are you doing up so early?' she cried.

Susan Lewis

‘My phone went off,’ he grumbled. ‘I was working until four this morning and I’m back on at five this evening, but no one cares about me.’ A sport and exercise student at Birmingham uni, he’d taken a job as a barman at Pitcher and Piano to provide himself with some spending money. His father, Gil, was covering the lion’s share of his other expenses, including his rent and the small car he used to bomb around town. ‘Happy birthday,’ he said with a yawn.

‘Thanks. So Mum called to remind you?’

‘What do you think? Not that I’d forgotten, I just wouldn’t have remembered until I woke up. So, are you back from New York?’

‘Yesterday. Off to Singapore on Wednesday.’ Of course. That was why she couldn’t make a sushi dinner with Greg and the others. She’d better check her calendar to be sure she was up to speed with everything else. Waiting for an ambulance to cut its siren as it pulled into Chelsea and Westminster A & E she started across the road, saying, ‘Any chance of you getting to London sometime soon? I feel as though I haven’t seen you for ages.’

‘Since Christmas,’ he reminded her, ‘but I get that you’re missing me. It happens. I have to deal with it all the time.’

Laughing, she said, ‘So how many hearts have you broken this week?’

‘Lost count, but hey, who’s taking care of mine?’

‘That tough old thing? I think it can take care of itself.’

‘Brutal. How’s Greg? Are we ever going to meet him?’

‘He’s OK. Actually I haven’t seen him since...’ She tried to think. ‘It’s been too long. Did you get to the Six Nations match in the end?’

‘You bet. The bloke’s a genius. I already thanked him for the tickets, by the way.’

‘Great. Did Gil go with you?’

One Minute Later

‘Sure. Then we drove all the way back to Kesterly to take Mum for dinner in case she was feeling left out.’

Vivienne had to laugh.

‘Did she tell you she’s taken up running?’ Mark asked.

‘You’re kidding.’

‘No, I went out with her while I was there. She’s pretty fit, actually, but I guess that’s no surprise when she goes to the gym quite regularly. Dad reckons the running thing is so she can run with you when you go home, or maybe she wants to do a marathon with you?’

And this, Vivienne was thinking, is why my mother is so confusing. She doesn’t mention anything about it to me, but Gil is probably right, she’ll have me in mind on one level or another, because she always has – and if not me then Mark, or Gil, then back to me...

‘Listen,’ she said to Mark, ‘I’ll let you get some more sleep before you have to go back on shift. Speak soon. Love you.’

‘Right back at you,’ and he was gone.

She pressed on towards Beaufort Street, and checked her phone to see if any more texts had arrived in the last few minutes. Several had: more birthday messages from friends and colleagues, also one from Gil, who had no doubt also sent flowers, because he always did.

The only person she knew for a fact she wouldn’t get a call or anything else from on this, or any other day, was her real father, because she never did.

Beaufort House was in the World’s End part of Chelsea, on the corner of Beaufort Street and the famous King’s Road. It was an area that Vivienne found as electrifying as the City where she worked, though for entirely different reasons. The buzz here was all about being social, cosmopolitan, and fabulously multicultural. The restaurants were as diverse as

Susan Lewis

their deliciously exotic ingredients, the fashions as outrageous as they were expensive and the interior design shops as inspirational as a genie's bottle full of crazy dreams. It could hardly be more different to her home town with its unedifying mix of tired terraces, fish-and-chip shops and donkey rides. On the other hand, she was ready to concede that Kesterly had its charms too, just not enough of them to have kept her there past her eighteenth birthday, when she'd launched herself with high excitement and yes, some trepidation on London. Being in the capital had been her goal for as long as she could remember, so too had been studying hard and working her way into a high-powered job that would open doors to all kinds of other worlds, and make her feel as important and accomplished as she'd always longed to be.

It was happening every day, sometimes in small ways, other times in great significant bursts. The headiness of success was as intoxicating as the champagne she and her friends cracked to celebrate it while the satisfaction of knowing she'd bested a rival, or helped seal a long-fought-for merger, was perhaps the greatest kick of all. Though she wasn't particularly aware of how much everyone valued her as a colleague or friend, the way she was greeted as she entered the bustling, airy bar of Beaufort House made her swell with pride and pleasure.

'About bloody time!'

'Happy birthday!'

'Champagne's on you.'

'Someone get the goddess a glass.'

The other five GaLs were already there, grouped around their usual table next to the window, and as a flute was thrust into Vivienne's hand it seemed the entire room joined in a rousing chorus of Happy Birthday.

It was exhilarating and hilarious as perfect strangers bowed

One Minute Later

or raised glasses, and a couple of bar staff shimmied about with more champagne.

As the fun died down and Vivienne sank laughing into the chair they'd reserved for her, she gasped and laughed again as Trudy pointed her to the pile of gifts at the end of the cushioned bench seat.

'All for you,' Trudy declared exultantly.

'All for one, one for all!' Sachi sang out, her engaging French accent resonating even in those few simple words.

Saavi, whose stunning black hair and exquisite features made her as exotic as the Indian divinity she was named for, began passing the gifts along. Saavi's much older husband ran a global macro hedge fund, where Saavi had recently been promoted to head up the quantitative risk management team.

'How many carats did Greg manage?' Shaz, their Australian derivatives lawyer, wanted to know. Though Shaz mainly worked out of Frankfurt, she was back and forth to London all the time.

'I'm sure it'll be at least seven,' Vivienne shot back, causing another raucous uplift of glasses to toast the prediction.

They'd shared so much during their time at uni that sometimes it felt as though they hadn't had a life before. They never judged one another in negative ways; they did everything they could to support each other, because they understood who they were and what power their friendship gave them.

These GaLs were her family away from home, the rock that kept her safe and strong; the exclusive network that made everything possible.

'Are you in Singapore on Thursday?' Trudy wanted to know.

'I leave on Wednesday,' Vivi told her.

Susan Lewis

‘Saavi, did you hear that?’ Trudy demanded. ‘She is going to Singapore on Wednesday.’

‘Brilliant,’ Saavi responded triumphantly. ‘Email me your details and I’ll make sure I’m on the same flight. Where are you staying?’

‘I’m not sure yet,’ Vivienne replied, ‘but I’ll put it in the email. Oh my God, what’s this?’ She pulled the softest, palest pink something from a satin-ribboned box with velveteen stripes and diamanté studs. ‘Oh, you’re kidding me. Myla silk pyjamas. I’ve always wanted a pair...’

Trudy threw out her hands. ‘How on earth did I know that?’ she demanded in amazement.

Vivienne pressed a hand to her chest as she laughed, then leaned forwards to embrace her friend. She coughed to try and clear the tightness in her lungs and sat down again to open more presents.

From Saavi there were two tickets for a day full of treatments at the Thermes Marins spa in Monte Carlo. ‘Oh wow!’ Vivienne cried, completely blown away. ‘We haven’t been there since we graduated. This is amazing.’

‘Open this one next,’ Shaz insisted, pushing a small silver-wrapped packet into Vivienne’s hand.

Vivienne’s eyes widened with astonishment when she found more tickets, this time for a helicopter transfer from Nice to Monaco.

‘And in this one,’ Sachi told her, ‘you will find a voucher for two return flights to Nice – and a little something else to go with it.’

The something else turned out to be a night at the Hotel de Paris.

‘Now all you have to do,’ Trudi pointed out, ‘is decide which one of us you’re going to take with you.’

‘Oh for God’s sake,’ Vivienne protested. ‘How on earth

One Minute Later

am I going to do that? Can't we get our diaries together and work out a time for us all to go?'

'Best idea I've heard all day,' Shaz concurred, refilling the glasses.

As Vivienne watched and joined in the bubbling excitement she pushed at her chest again, as though the pressure might disperse the ache. She really ought to eat something before downing the champagne, or she'd have another dizzy spell. She reached for a smoked salmon hors d'oeuvre and popped it into her mouth. Delicious, heavenly, so she tried another.

Shaz was asking her something, but for some reason Shaz's voice seemed to be coming through water. It bobbed back to the surface with sudden clarity as she said, 'Vivi! Are you all right?'

Vivienne laughed. 'Of course,' but the room was dipping away and lurching back as though she were on a ship in a storm, and when she tried to lift her glass she found she couldn't move her arm. Everything hurt, she realized, her whole body, and the pain was clenching so hard into her chest...

'*Vivienne!*' someone shouted. She thought it was Saavi.

'Oh my God!' Hands were closing around her arms. 'She's fainting. Get her some air...'

Vivienne's face contorted as she tried to breathe. 'I don't... It's...' she gasped.

'Her lips are blue... Oh Jesus! Vivienne!'

'*Help!* Someone. We need help.'

Vivienne was still trying to breath.

'Let me through. I'm a doctor, clear some space.'

A man's face came into view, blurred and dark and moving close.

'Call an ambulance,' he barked. 'Do it now. What's her name?'

Susan Lewis

‘Vivienne.’

‘Vivienne,’ he said urgently. ‘I’m going to lie you down...’

She was trying to listen, even to laugh, because this was funny wasn’t it, or embarrassing... It couldn’t be real, but it hurt so much...

‘Deep breaths,’ he was saying, moving her roughly to the floor. ‘Come on Vivienne, you can do it. In, out. In, out.’ His fist was banging into her chest.

She tried. In... The noise was awful. Rushing, ripping, breaking... ‘Mum,’ she murmured weakly.

‘In, out.’ The world was going black. He was still banging her chest... ‘Stay with me,’ he shouted angrily. ‘Vivienne. *Stay with me.*’