

CHAPTER ONE

Bring a plate!

The three little words sat so cheerily at the bottom of the invitation.

So simple, so innocuous, so friendly.

So deceitful.

Because it wasn't just a plate, was it, thought Alex O'Rourke as she removed a tray of shop-bought spinach and cheese triangles from the oven. After all, any old clown could turn up to a party with a piece of dining-ware. She had a million plates and platters that did nothing more than collect dust in her kitchen cupboard. They'd love an outing to a party!

She started stabbing at the formerly frozen pastries with a spoon.

'Hmmm ... something smells good.' Alex's husband, James, sauntered into the kitchen and peered over her shoulder. 'Did you make these?'

He went to pick up a triangle and Alex tapped his hand away. 'Of course I didn't make them.' She stabbed again to make divots in the golden pillows.

'What are you doing? You're ruining them. They're perfect. Stop it.' James put out his hand to shield the defenceless triangles.

'They're *too* perfect,' said Alex. 'No one will ever believe I made them. Maybe if I just burn them a little ...' She went to open the oven door but James stood in front of it, arms folded.

'No one cares if you bought them from a shop. You have twins. A full-time job. The neighbours don't expect pastry made from scratch.'

Alex looked at him. Her sweet, supportive husband, trying to be so millennial, while completely failing to understand that some things never changed, like the meaning of that god-awful phrase *bring a plate*, which meant today what it had always meant – that a plate of homemade food was to be produced (exceptions could be made for foodstuffs by a celebrity chef. A Zumbo cake, for instance, could be forgiven) and, as keeper of the social diary, the responsibility for such provision lay in the hands of the woman of the house.

Bring a plate was the phrase that time forgot.

'It's all right for you,' Alex grumbled. 'No one expects you to cook from scratch.'

'But I would have, if you'd asked me. Remember my meatballs?'

Alex nodded. 'Impressive balls.' She tapped her nose. 'And you've given me an idea.' She smiled and kissed his cheek.

'Glad to be of service.'

Alex set about loading the triangles onto a platter, humming happily.

'Er, so what is this idea?'

'I'll tell them that I specifically asked you a week ago to make the meatballs, but you forgot, so rather than having the neighbours go hungry, I ran out and picked up a box of spinach triangles from the supermarket.'

James frowned. 'But that's a lie. You never asked me. If you had, I would have made them.'

'They won't know that. And because you're a man, they'll think nothing of it.'

'But these people are our friends. Cara? Beth? They wouldn't judge you.'

Alex thought of the women who lived in the houses to their immediate right. Beth, two doors up, an incredible homemaker and mother extraordinaire, and Cara, right next door, who managed to be both strong and fragile as she negotiated parenthood all on her own.

'You're right. Cara and Beth would understand.'

'But the rest?'

Alex sighed. Her husband's desire to see the best in everyone was endearing and exhausting. 'They're neighbours. We smile, we wave, we say hello and we get together once a year. They don't know what happens in my house and I don't know what happens in theirs. The one little insight

they get is through what I bring to the party. And you know what they see when a full-time working mum turns up with a plate of frozen pastry?’

‘A woman with an actual life?’

Alex gave him a look. ‘They see a woman who’s put her work in front of her family, values convenience over health, is a little bit stingy, isn’t quite coping, and doesn’t really care if other people’s arteries become clogged with trans fats.’

‘They get all of that from a plate of pastry?’ James looked crestfallen.

‘You have no idea.’ Alex wearily covered the steaming parcels with a sheet of aluminium foil. ‘Here, you can carry them out. It’ll look more like your fault that way.’ She handed over the platter and checked her watch. ‘Where are the boys?’

‘They’re out front playing with Henny.’

Alex whipped around. ‘You left them alone, unsupervised, with a three-month-old guinea pig?’

James shifted his weight uneasily. ‘They won’t hurt her. They love her to death.’

‘That’s what I’m afraid of. Have you seen the way Noah hugs her?’ Alex strode towards the driveway and cursed inwardly. How could she and James have been wasting time discussing pastry when their little boys were potentially monsterring a poor, defenceless guinea pig? If any harm had come to Henny, Alex knew exactly which three little words to blame.

Bring a plate.

Beth Chandler poked the last of the licorice tails into a prune and stood back from the bench to survey her collection of edible mice. So cute, with those little musk lollies as eyes. Twenty-two, she counted – that would be enough for the kids of Cuthbert Close. What was the collective noun for a group of mice? A nest? Yes, nest. A nest of mice for the nest of kids in her street. Perfect.

‘These aren’t for the party, are they, Mum?’ Twelve-year-old Chloe sidled up beside her.

‘What do you mean? The prunes are seedless, if that’s what you’re worried about. None of the kids could possibly choke.’

‘It’s not that.’

‘Then what is it?’

Chloe bit her lip. ‘It’s that they’re kind of gross.’

‘Rubbish. Kids love my mice. We had them at all your parties when you were little.’ Beth wiped her hands on the tea towel.

‘But that was before we knew they were made from prunes.’ Chloe picked one up and held it between her fingertips like a piece of toxic waste. ‘Only old ladies eat prunes.’

Beth did a quarter turn and drew herself up. ‘What rot. Prunes are for everyone. They’re full of fibre and vitamin K and they’re as sweet as a lolly.’

Chloe dropped the mouse back to the tray and wiped her hands down her sides. ‘They’re disgusting.’

‘What’s disgusting?’ Ethan sat up from where he’d been lying on the couch and removed his earbuds.

‘Mum’s made the prune mice,’ said Chloe.

‘Yeah, sure.’ Ethan went to put the buds back in.

‘No, seriously. They’re here.’ Chloe wrinkled her nose.

‘Oh, Mum, you haven’t, have you? They are all shades of wrong.’ Ethan leapt up. ‘Remember the effect those things used to have on me? I’d be on the toilet for days after my birthday.’

Beth started to wash up the pots and pans that had accumulated during her preparations for the neighbourhood party. As well as the mice, she’d elected to make a range of other treats for the kids, figuring that as she was one of the few stay-at-home mothers in the close, she had the most time to give. And besides, she did enjoy cooking.

‘That’s a complete lie, Ethan Chandler. You were not.’

Her son came to the sink and put his hands on her shoulders. At seventeen, he’d well and truly outstripped her in the height department. ‘Mum, please tell me there’s going to be something else for the kids to eat at this thing. It’s not just prune mice, is it?’

'Of course not,' said Beth in a huff, wriggling out of her son's condescending grasp and opening the fridge door. 'Look, there's fruit kebabs, mini quiches and cheese-and-vegemite sandwiches.' She'd even used her star-shaped cookie cutter. 'Healthy *and* delicious.'

Chloe and Ethan exchanged glances.

'Mum, it's a party. The food's supposed to be ... like ... good, you know?' said Ethan.

'Yeah, like chips and pizza – that kind of thing.' Chloe leant her elbows on the bench.

'I think I know what little children like to eat, thank you very much. I'm not sure if you've forgotten, but I actually raised two of them, and anyway, Cara's little Poppy loves my vegemite sandwiches and Alex's little boys will love the mini-mice. They look just like that new guinea pig of theirs.'

'You really think a kid wants to *eat* their pet?' Ethan shook his head and Chloe giggled.

'They wouldn't be— Oh look, never mind. It's too late now to do anything else, and besides, your father's going to be cooking up some sausages, so there'll be plenty of food if no one likes what I've made.'

Ethan exhaled with relief. 'Phew. Those beef ones are pretty good with heaps of sauce.'

Beth went to open her mouth but thought better of it. They'd find out soon enough that the sausages were of the chicken variety – so much lower in saturated fat than beef or pork.

'Speaking of Daddy, has anyone seen him?'

Chloe smirked. 'I think *Daddy* is in the garden.'

Beth glared and handed her the tea towel. 'Thank you, Chloe. You can finish the washing up for me.'

The near-teenager took it sullenly. 'What's the point in having a dishwasher if we never use it?'

Beth held up a finger. 'Ah, but that's where you're wrong. We have two dishwashers. They tend to moan quite frequently and they cost a lot of money to run, but we just can't bear to get rid of them. You never know, *one* day they might just do the dishes without an argument.' She went to kiss her daughter lightly on the forehead, but Chloe fainted and ducked.

'This family sucks,' she said under her breath.

Beth stopped, stung. This was not her sweet little Chloe. The child who, less than a year ago, had insisted on kissing her at least ten times a day and never walked anywhere without her hand slipped into Beth's. Where had it all gone so wrong? Hormones? Or something more ... Was this somehow Beth's fault? Maybe she'd coddled her children too much? Held them so tightly that now they were springing, like elastic bands, away from her. Beth hurried out of the kitchen and towards the front yard, hoping neither Chloe nor Ethan would notice the flush in her face or the heat in her eyes. But, of course, how could they notice, when her son was too busy nodding away to the music between his ears and her daughter was caught up in cursing the unfairness of her life.

Beth stood at the top of the steps, breathed deeply and repeated the mantra she'd started using when Ethan was only a few weeks old, though back then they didn't call them mantras, just sayings.

This too shall pass.

She closed her eyes. Usually it gave her a sense of peace.

This too shall pass.

But maybe that was the problem. Everything was passing, just too quickly for Beth to keep up.

She breathed deeply one more time and opened her eyes. Living in the 'bulb' end of the cul-de-sac gave her a good overview of the length of the street. The party was beginning to take shape. Lanterns and fairy lights going up. Neighbours pulling out deckchairs and tables.

She made her way towards the garage and stood at the door.

Inside, through the gloom, she could just make out her husband in the corner of the garage, frowning over his phone, the lines on his face accentuated by the screen's eerie glow.

'Oh, there you are. Everything all right?'

Max looked up, surprised, and quickly stuffed the phone back into his pocket. 'Oh, nothing. Just a couple of issues at work. Tony couldn't find some keys for an open house. No drama.' He came towards her through the dim light. 'Everything set for the party?'

Beth made a face and put her hands on her hips. 'Chloe and Ethan say the food I've made is all wrong and none of the kids will eat it.' As she spoke, her stomach contracted with nerves. Perhaps the children had a point. Maybe kids of today had different tastes. More sophisticated. Salmon sushi seemed to be a staple food from what she saw of children at the local food court.

'Just ignore them,' said Max. He turned away from her and began sifting through the gardening tools and sports gear. 'What does it matter? This party's more about the catch-up than the food. The kids probably won't eat anything anyway. They'll just scoot up and down the street like they always do.'

Beth folded her arms. It was all very well for him to tell her not to worry, all he had to do was wheel out a barbecue and throw some sausages onto it. The difficulty level of that was close to zero, certainly much lower than making mice out of prunes.

'I don't want the neighbours to think I don't care. I did promise to provide for the children.'

'And you are.' Max stopped ferreting about under the surfboards and stood still. 'You need to stop worrying. You always do this and you should know by now that it's always fine.' He glanced down again. 'Now where the hell did I hide the barbecue tongs.'

Beth coloured. Max had given her similar pep talks before every one of the kids' birthday parties, events that always brought her panic levels to fever pitch. For a stay-at-home mother, a child's party was a little like a performance review, or a grand final – the culmination of so many hopes and dreams, for the child, that is. But Max was so easygoing, he always treated it like just another day, albeit with a few extra kids involved. No biggie. Beth told herself it was good for her – the laissez faire approach. He was the yin to her yang. The ebony to her ivory. Usually, his pre-party spiels served to reassure her, but this one in the garage sounded more like a rebuke and she was glad of the gloom to cover her flush.

'Will you set up the barbecue on the Pezzullo's lawn?' The house at the end of the cul-de-sac had been vacant for months, thanks to George's job transfer to Singapore.

'Sure, whatever you think,' he said, still ferreting through boxes.

'I think it's the best spot, out of the way.'

'Hmmm ...' Max murmured.

'Are you listening? I said—'

'Here they are!' Max held up the tongs with a self-satisfied grimace, like a dog holding up a bone. 'Now, we're set.'

'Who wants to try a chicken wing?' Cara Pope stopped at the doorway to the living room as two heads swivelled around to face her.

'Meeeeeeeeeeee!' Her daughter, Poppy, leapt up from the piano stool and ran towards the kitchen.

'Hey, little girl, you come back here and finish your scales.' Cara's mother spoke with a rapid-fire delivery.

'Ma, please. It's been nearly an hour.' Cara entwined her fingers behind her back. 'She needs a break, and the party's about to begin.'

Joy bent down to collect her handbag and a pile of sheet music from under the piano. 'You are too soft with that girl,' she grumbled in Korean, which was what she always did when she didn't want Poppy to understand. 'Practice makes perfect.'

Cara bit her lip. 'Come and eat something.'

In the kitchen she found Poppy smacking her lips and wiping sticky soy sauce off her lips. 'Can I have another one?'

Cara smiled and picked up a tissue. 'Just one, or there won't be enough for the party.'

'Little girl, you should wait for your elders.' Her mother tapped Poppy on the shoulder before prodding at a wing.

'Try one, Ma,' Cara encouraged.

Joy picked up a wing and sniffed it before taking a small bite. 'Good,' she said, chewing. 'They need more gochujang.' Her mother went to reach for the fermented chilli paste.

'Wait, Ma. These are for the neighbours. The annual street party. Remember I told you? Poppy's going to wear the hanbok you had made.'

Poppy nodded. 'It's very pretty, Halmi. Thank you.'

Her mother let go of the chilli paste. 'Then it is okay.'

Cara exhaled. 'Would you like to stay, Ma? You're very welcome.'

'Will the lawyer be there?'

'Alex? Yes, and you know Beth, the one who's married to the real estate agent.'

Her mother cocked her head. 'She is the one who asks for my kimchi recipe?'

'That's her. She loves your kimchi.'

'She has a very clean house.' Her mother grunted with approval, her eyes flicking to the dishes piled high in Cara's sink. 'I will not stay for this party. Your father will die of hunger if I am not home to feed him. So hopeless.' She shrugged and sighed. 'What can you do.'

Cara suppressed a smile. Her father had been the one who suggested she stay for the party. *She is too much in this new house*, he'd complained on the phone. Joy always made him ring to let Cara know she was on her way for Poppy's piano lesson, as if she expected the little girl to be ready and waiting with hands poised on the keys for her arrival. *Your mother needs to get out more. She loves this place like a baby, almost like she loves that church. So much praying. I think she will be the first Australian-Korean saint.*

'Oh, okay, Ma. That's a shame you can't stay.' She paused and contemplated how to phrase what she was about to say. 'They'll be closing the street soon, and I would not want you to be delayed ...'

Her mother's eyebrows shot up. 'Closing the street? Woh, these people and their parties. So strange. Why would you want to eat in a street when you all have nice houses.' Her gaze went to the peeling wallpaper above the oven. 'Some are nice.' Clutching her bag more tightly, she patted Poppy on the shoulder and headed for the hallway. 'Goodbye, little girl. Practise your scales twice every day.'

At the front door, she went to remove her slippers and put her shoes back on.

'Need some help?' Cara bent down to pick up the shoes.

'Who do you think I am? An old lady?'

Ignoring Cara's outstretched hand, her mother instead reached for the wall to steady herself, putting her hand right near the wedding photo of Cara and Pete. Joy's gaze went to it, and she shivered, blessing herself, as she always did.

'Such bad luck.' She shook her head and gave Cara a look that asked her for the thousandth time why she chose to stay in the broken-down old cottage that was saddled with no dishwasher, and the curse of a death of a man in his prime.

Cara kept silent.

Shoes on, Joy was out the door in a hurry. No goodbye. No *I love you*. Not even a *See you next week*. Just gone.

'Bye, Ma. Thanks for the lesson,' Cara called, and her mother waved without turning around. Further down the street, she could see Beth and Max, setting up the barbecue on the Pezzullos' front lawn, and Alex's twins playing in the driveway with their new guinea pig.

Waiting for the little lawnmower engine of her mother's ageing Daihatsu sedan to come to life (Joy believed in good appliances over good cars), Cara allowed herself to shift focus from the street and back to the photo of her and Pete. She stepped closer, rubbing a speck of dust off his grey-green eyes, then flinched as the car emitted a tinny beep of farewell. Her mother's way of saying goodbye.

CHAPTER TWO

'More bubbles, ladies?' Beth started to pour, not bothering to wait for answers from her two neighbours, because she already knew exactly what they would say.

Alex would say yes because she always said yes to alcohol, and given the excitable nature of those twins, Beth didn't blame her. Cara, on the other hand, would say *no* because she was self-conscious of the flush that rose in her cheeks when she drank even one glass of champagne,

something about Koreans not having a certain type of enzyme? Beth wasn't certain of the biological reason but always assured Cara it was virtually unnoticeable.

She passed a full glass to Alex.

'You could at least *pretend* I might have said no,' she protested, then took a sip. 'God that's good.'

Beth held out a small glass to Cara. 'Are you sure you won't have just a little more?'

Cara pressed her fingers to her cheeks. 'I look like one of those scary porcelain dolls, don't I? Like I let Poppy put blush on me or something.'

'Not at all,' Beth patted her arm. 'It's like you've just had a brisk walk.'

'Or, you know, a shag.' Alex took another gulp.

'Alex!' said Cara and Beth in unison.

'What? It's true. And it's less offensive than saying you look like a *doll*,' she snorted.

'But there are children around.' Beth's eyes zoomed to Poppy, Noah and Jasper, flying up and down the close on their scooters.

'... Yes, hanging off our every word, aren't they,' said Alex drily. 'Personally, I think we could all do with a little more shagging in our lives. At least Cara *looks* like she's getting some. These days, the closest James and I get to sexy-time is watching Nigella cook a chocolate cake. The way she licks her fingers ...'

'A bit unhygienic, really when you think about it ...' Beth trailed off, trying to remember the last time she and Max had had 'sexy-time', as Alex put it.

'Oh, no.' Cara shook her head. 'I love Nigella.' She sat forward in the chair, her eyes bright. 'My mum doesn't like cooking at all but she used to watch when her English wasn't so good. You don't need to know the words to follow what's happening.' Cara drew her knees together and clasped her hands. 'But I just think she's amazing. So sensual. So ...' She looked skywards. 'So ... free, and loose with a dash of this and a pinch of that. No recipes and exact measurements, just pure instinct. I would never have gone into food styling if it wasn't for Nigella ... and Pete, of course ...'

Beth gazed at the younger woman beside her, still looking towards the heavens, caught in her memory. She lightly touched her hand. 'Speaking of your mother. Where is she? I thought I saw her car earlier.'

'Oh, she had to go home.'

'Probably just as well.' Alex rested the flute on the arm of the chair. 'No offence, but she doesn't seem a street party kind of person.'

'Oh, that's true,' said Cara.

'I suppose she's had more important things to worry about in her life. Such a strong woman.' Beth returned the champagne bottle to the ice-bucket at her feet.

'Very strong,' Alex nodded. 'I'm not sure she approves of me.'

'Oh, no, you're a lawyer. She loves all lawyers.'

'I don't know why. Most people think we're money-grabbing bastards.'

Cara gave a small smile. 'You're supporting your family. She likes that.'

'Then she must really disapprove of *me*! I don't support my family at all.' Beth tried to keep her voice light.

'Oh, no, you give your *life* to your family. That's important too, as much as money.' Cara paused. 'And you make kimchi. That's most important of all.'

The three women laughed. Food, again. Somehow, their conversations always came back to it.

'Oh, I always love this party,' Cara remarked, settling back again in her chair.

The three of them fell silent and tuned in to the sounds of chat, laughter and music coming from the sixty or so people dotted in groups about the close. The young couple at number six had brought out their portable speaker and made a special playlist of laid-back summer beats that were electronic enough to appeal to the kids, but not too heavy to turn off the adults. Someone had produced bats and a ball for a game of backyard cricket at the southern end of the close and shouts of *howzat* and *got 'im* punctuated the music. Each one of the twenty-five houses in the street had strung either lanterns or fairy lights along their front fences and they were starting to twinkle with the sun now nearly set behind them. Beth had even put them along the Pezzullos' empty home, just to maintain consistency in the bulb of the cul-de-sac. A light breeze tickled at the fig trees, making them sway and murmur, but the night was otherwise balmy. Like stepping into a warm

bath. No one was quite sure who'd begun the tradition of Cuthbert Close's End-of-Summer Street Party. Beth thought it might have been the old couple at number three, who'd moved out in the early 2000s when the wife died and the husband developed dementia. Such a lovely family; their children, now fully grown adults with families of their own, still turned up each year to the party – the last Saturday in February – to reconnect with the neighbours they remembered as kids. That was the thing about Cuthbert Close, once you'd lived there, you never really left.

'It's calm now, but I hope the butterfly hasn't flapped its wings.' Alex gestured to the white wall of cloud building far away in the south, the setting sun appearing to line it with gold thread.

'What do you mean?' said Cara, curious.

'You know, the butterfly effect. Chaos theory. A butterfly flapping its wings in the Amazon causes a tornado in Texas. Last thing we need tonight is a storm.'

'Just ignore it and look the other way.' Beth inclined her champagne glass towards the sky directly above them, which was completely clear and resembled a pastel colour-wheel of pinks and purples. The clouds didn't worry her. She'd checked the forecast. The southerly wasn't predicted for hours yet, by which time the party would well and truly be over, and while some people made a habit of never relying on weather forecasts, Beth tended to have more faith. She trusted people, even meteorologists.

'That sky looks good enough to eat,' said Cara, following Beth's gaze.

'Like sherbet,' said Beth.

'Or a grapefruit martini,' said Alex.

'A berry-swirled Eton mess,' said Cara.

'Is that the one with crushed-up meringue and cream?' asked Beth.

Cara nodded. 'I do a version with raspberries, blueberries and blackberries folded into the cream. And a little dash of Cointreau.'

'Fat, sugar, and booze? All food groups covered. You win.' Alex tapped her champagne glass in applause.

'You should put it on your website thingy,' said Beth, reaching beneath her chair to produce a tray of cheese and crackers.

'It's called Instagram, Beth, and Cara's got a gazillion followers last time I checked,' said Alex. 'Ask your kids. I'm sure they're on it. Every teen is, maybe not for the gastroporn though.'

Beth made a face. 'I know they're on Instagram, but they tell me it's all about Snapchat now. I can't keep up.' She offered the tray to Alex. 'Truffle cheese?'

'Thank god the twins are too little for it all.' Alex cut herself a wedge. 'That said, a couple of their school friends already have their own iPads. Five and six years old. Ridiculous.' She passed the tray to Cara. 'Poppy doesn't have one, does she?'

Cara shook her head. 'Oh, no. But she helps me a little with the Insta posts. Holds the lights and things when I'm styling new dishes in the shed.' She pulled out her mobile phone and started tapping away. 'I need to text myself a reminder about that Eton mess. I don't think I've done it yet.'

'But don't call it Eton mess,' said Alex. 'Call it something different.' She gulped her champagne. 'Like Summer Sunset.'

'Sounds more like a cocktail than a dessert,' said Beth, looking towards the sky for inspiration. 'Summer Fling.'

'*That* sounds more like a cocktail than Summer Sunset. And very adulterous.'

The women fell into a thoughtful silence.

'Oh, yes, maybe I have it.' Cara clicked her fingers. 'Summer Street Party.'

'Summer Street Party,' said Alex slowly. 'Berries, cream and meringue. A party in your mouth. I like it.'

'Maybe we could do it for your anniversary, Beth?' said Cara.

Beth's stomach flipped a little at the mention of the party. Six weeks to go until she and Max would celebrate twenty years of marital bliss in front of eighty family and friends. Cara had agreed to help with the catering but Beth had started to wonder if she was biting off more than she could chew, or cook.

'Twenty years, Beth ...' Cara trailed off in admiration.

'That's more than you get for murder,' remarked Alex.

The women laughed and settled in to chatting companionably about their all-time favourite desserts. After five minutes of discussing chocolate fondants, artisan gelatos and trifles, Alex's stomach let out a large growl.

'Is it time to eat yet?' She patted her belly. 'It may not look empty but I can assure you it feels it.'

Beth checked her watch. 'How about I rustle everyone up and ask them to put their platters out? Let's hope we don't have twenty trays of party pies, or spinach triangles.'

'What's wrong with spinach triangles?' said Alex stiffly. 'Your note said to *bring a plate*. You didn't say anything about not bringing spinach triangles.'

'Spinach triangles are absolutely fine.' Beth patted her shoulder. 'Did you make them?'

'Of course not. James was supposed to make his world-famous meatballs, but he forgot, so I raced out this afternoon to the supermarket on an emergency spinach-triangle mission.'

Beth couldn't hold back a tiny sigh of relief. Even by her own admission, Alex was a terrible cook and Beth had almost considered issuing her with a version of the invitation that omitted the request to bring a plate. The poor woman already had enough on hers. 'Excellent, excellent. And Cara's done her chicken wings, so we'll definitely have *some* variety.'

'Perfect. I'll get the serviettes and the paper plates,' said Cara.

But as the women went to rise collectively from their deckchairs, a thunderous, mechanical rumbling came from the end of the street.

'Goodness, what is *that*?' said Beth, craning to see.

It was a removal truck, turning with a dinosaur-swing into Cuthbert Close.

'If that guy thinks he's coming down here, he can think again.' Alex put her hands on her hips and surveyed the oversized vehicle, looming at the entrance to the close, the top of it scraping against the lower hanging branches of the figs as it paused at the corner. 'Must have taken a wrong turn. I'll set him straight.' Alex started striding down the street.

'I'll send Max up. He's got the closure permit,' called Beth. Apart from co-ordinating the food, she'd volunteered her husband to organise the council permit allowing them to officially block the street to traffic for the night, not that there was strictly any need. After all, a dead end meant no through-traffic, and all the neighbours would be in attendance at the party with no need to drive anywhere. Still, better to be safe than sorry.

Beth hurried through the crowd to locate her husband, eventually spotting him deep in conversation with Alex's husband, James, both of them oblivious to the commotion at the end of the street.

'Max, we need you,' said Beth, a little breathlessly. 'Sorry to interrupt, James.'

Her husband pulled a face. 'Can it wait five minutes? James was about to tell me what brand of sneaker I should get for the marathon.'

'No, it can't wait,' said Beth with as much patience as she could muster. 'Didn't you hear the truck? It's trying to get in, and Alex has gone down to stop him but she might need the permit.' She pointed up the street to where Alex was gesticulating animatedly at the truck driver.

'My wife will sort him out, quick smart, don't you worry about that,' said James in an admiring tone. 'She is a force to be reckoned with.'

'Yes, of course, but still I'd like to have the permit handy, just in case. Max?' asked Beth. 'Where is it?'

'Well, I, um ...' Max dropped the tongs to his side and his expression went from one of irritation to one of embarrassment. 'Ah, well, you see ...'

'Max, where is the permit?' Nervously, Beth put her fingers to her lips. 'Please tell me you got it.'

'All right, so, when you asked me to organise the street closure, things were going crazy at work and it got to a couple of days beforehand and I thought how about I save everyone a few bucks by not getting the permit? It's not like we ever really need it.'

Beth's heart sank. He hadn't organised it. She knew her husband. To him the glass wasn't just half full, it was consistently as full as an Alex-sized glass of champagne. As a real estate agent, he was expert in putting the most positive spin on everything. Derelict houses were 'an opportunity to capitalise', apartments that looked straight into a brick wall 'offered complete privacy and seclusion', and gardens that never saw sun were 'low maintenance' because nothing ever grew there.

'Well, we do need it,' said Beth.

'I can fix this. Leave it with me,' said Max.

James shifted awkwardly. 'I'll give you a hand. Make sure my wife doesn't punch someone.'

Max drained the last of his beer and went to hand the empty bottle to his wife. 'Could you please, Beth?'

'Take it yourself, Max.' Beth turned and stomped away towards the truck, not bothering to wait for her husband. Along the way, Cara snuck in by her side.

'What is happening? You're upset.' Cara linked her arm into Beth's.

'Max forgot the permit.'

Cara sucked in a breath, then let it out again before speaking. 'Oh, I'm sure it's all a misunderstanding, as Alex said. After all, who would move house on a Saturday night?'

From a distance, they heard Alex's voice, rising above the truck driver's. 'Look, I don't care whose house in this street you have to deliver this furniture to, you cannot do it tonight because we have a permit that says it's closed to traffic from 4 pm until 11 pm.' At that moment, Alex turned and spotted James, Max, Beth and Cara. 'Ha! And here comes the man with the paperwork. Show him, Max. Show this man that he is not allowed to drive his ridiculous truck into the middle of our street party.' Alex folded her arms and stuck out her chin.

'G'day. Max Chandler's the name.' He thrust out his hand and gave his best real estate agent smile to the driver. 'Seems we have a little problem here.'

Max started talking quietly to the driver and Alex sidled up to Beth and Cara. 'What is he doing?' she hissed. 'Why hasn't he thrown the guy out already?'

'Oh, we don't actually have a permit,' said Cara in a low voice.

'Why the hell not?'

'Because my darling husband forgot,' said Beth tightly.

As Alex opened her mouth to speak, Cara briefly shook her head in warning, before squeezing Beth's shoulder. 'We'll sort it out.'

'Cara's right,' said Alex. 'This bozo driver will not ruin the party.'

'Max! Max Chandler! Is that you?' A woman's bright and breezy voice came from behind the truck.

'Who's that?' asked Alex.

'No idea,' said Beth, watching as a tanned blonde woman dressed in a long and strappy white linen dress floated towards them from the equally white and shiny SUV parked behind the removalists' truck.

She greeted Beth's husband with a warm handshake. 'I thought it was you.'

'Charlie, welcome to the neighbourhood. And this must be Talia, is it?' Max offered his hand to the teenager who'd sidled up behind her mother. Beth took in the girl's jeans and t-shirt. Freckles, wide cheeks, spectacles. Twelve, maybe thirteen, at a guess.

'Charlie Devine, meet my wife, Beth. And our next door neighbour Cara, and Alex and James O'Rourke, who are two doors down.'

'Pleased to meet you all.' Charlie gave a dazzling smile and peered past them, down the street. 'I hope we haven't interrupted anything.'

'Well, actually you have,' said Alex with an equally dazzling smile. 'It's our annual street party, and usually we get a permit to shut the street to traffic but it seems someone forgot this year.' She glanced sideways at Max. 'Then again, we don't often get people moving in on a Saturday night.'

Charlie's eyebrows furrowed while her lips remained in a smile. 'Yes, we had planned to be here much earlier but the truck had some mechanical trouble in Brisbane.'

Beth clasped her hands. 'You've driven all the way from Queensland? In one day? Oh, you poor things. You must be exhausted. Come and sit down. Have something to eat. A drink perhaps? We're just about to have dinner.' She gestured to the tables set up further down the street.

Charlie shook her head. 'Thank you, Beth. That's so kind, but we really need to get this lot unloaded.'

'Of course. Maybe we can help.' Her brain did the calculation. There was only one empty house in the street. 'You're moving into twenty-five, I presume?'

Charlie confirmed with a tight nod. 'We're going to be neighbours, I seem to recall Max telling me when we signed the lease.'

'Wonderful.' Beth hid the small hurt in her voice. Max had been trying to sell the Pezzullo place ever since they left for Singapore. Clearly, they'd changed tack, renting it to the Devines, but why hadn't Max mentioned it?

'Is that ... is that a barbecue on my lawn? I can get my removalists to help clear it all away, your tables, too, if you like?' Charlie looked over her shoulder to the burly men, leaning quietly against the truck and enjoying a smoke. 'And we'll take down those fairy lights, obviously.'

Her voice was friendly enough but Beth had a sense that she was being told what to do, rather than asked.

'Mum, why don't we let the guys have a break and something to eat, and we'll unload later.' Talia Devine hooked her hand through her mother's arm and Charlie's smooth face collapsed into worry lines.

'Are you sure, darling?' The woman fingered her ear lobe, drawing attention to a massive set of diamond earrings. Beth had never seen bigger. 'I thought you'd want to get settled straight away, set up your room.' The concern in Charlie's voice was genuine, and Beth softened. Of course a mother wouldn't think twice about driving through the middle of a party to get her child settled into a new house. Relocating a teenager was a huge wrench, especially when it was to an entirely new city.

'I don't mind waiting, it's cool,' said Talia.

'All right, sweetie, as long as you're okay with it.' Charlie patted her daughter's hand. 'That's really thoughtful of you.'

A little bit over the top, thought Beth, then scolded herself. Who was she to judge? She was a stay-at-home mother who'd made a life, a good life, out of servicing her children's needs. She could barely criticise others for doing the same. And it was nice of the daughter to offer to wait.

'Thank you, Talia. That would be wonderful. One hour, okay? That'll give us just enough time to serve up the dinner and clear out of your way,' said Beth. 'And I'll have to introduce you to my Chloe. She's just started high school at St Therese's.'

Talia smiled. 'Oh, cool. That's where I'll be going, too. But I'm fourteen, so a couple of years ahead ... Year Nine,' she explained, and Beth hid her surprise. Talia was older than she'd thought. Just small for her age.

'We meant what we said about joining us for dinner. You're more than welcome,' said Cara.

'There's enough to feed an army,' said Alex. 'Beth always does an incredible job getting us all organised.'

'Thank you but I think we passed a supermarket near here, so we might go there and pick up some supplies,' said Charlie smoothly.

'Oh, please don't,' said Beth. 'I can give you some milk and bread for the morning, and I probably have a cheese and bacon quiche in the freezer somewhere for tomorrow's lunch if you'd like.'

Max cautiously put his arm on Beth's shoulder. 'My wife declares a national emergency if there's no food in the house.'

National emergency ... That's a bit much.

Charlie paused. 'That's very sweet of you, but we follow a strict kangatarian diet.'

'Sorry?' enquired Beth.

'Vegetables and kangaroo meat, and a little fish sometimes. If it's wild caught.'

'That's a new one,' muttered Alex, soft enough for only Cara to hear.

'Talia's kangatarian as well?' asked Beth.

'Mostly.' Talia grinned. 'But bacon is pretty hard to resist.'

'Oh, you are so right,' said Cara.

'Maybe I could bring one round for Talia, then?' asked Beth.

Charlie exchanged glances with her daughter. 'Whatever she likes.'

'That would be awesome, thanks, Mrs Chandler.'

'Wonderful, but please call me Beth. Now, come and have something to eat, and meet the rest of the Cuthbert crew. There're some sushi platters, somewhere. Salmon and tuna, that might be suitable for you, Charlie? Or green salad?'

The woman gave a tight smile and started to follow Max down the close, her arm around Talia's waist.

Beth, Alex and Cara fell in behind them.

'Who does this woman think she is, barging into our party with her ridiculous truck and her made-up eating habits?' hissed Alex.

'Kangaroo meat is actually very low fat and high in iron, so it could be very healthy,' said Beth. 'Provided you include legumes.'

'I think I know that woman from somewhere,' said Cara, producing her phone.

'Now that you mention it, she's kind of familiar to me too.' Alex squinted into the distance.

Cara held her phone up. 'Here she is. Charlie Devine – wife of the Primal Guy, Ryan Devine.'

'The primal who?' Beth peered at the shot of a muscle-bound couple doing something that looked like tight-rope walking no more than a couple of feet off the ground between two trees. *Slack-lining is how we chill*, read the caption.

'Oh, he's a lifestyle guy. All about the hunter-gatherer way of life. Lots of meat, kangaroo, I suppose, and veg. No grains. No carbs. Crazy intense exercise. He's huge on Instagram and he sells green smoothie powders and that kind of thing. I think his wife is in the business too.' Cara tapped at the screen. 'Oh, yes. Here's a better shot. The Primal Wife. Former dancer, and now wellness educator.' The next photo was a close-up of Ryan and Charlie, arm in arm, with matching sixpacks.

Alex took the phone. 'I know that guy. What a goose. The daughter seems nice. Poor thing, with parents like that.'

'Don't be too harsh, Alex. Give the woman a chance,' said Beth.

'I wonder why the Primal Guy isn't with them,' remarked Cara.

'Maybe moving house doesn't quite fit the brand. Bit too mundane. He's probably off building a grass hut somewhere,' said Alex.

'I'm going to sign up for his newsletter,' said Cara, typing away.

'Sign me up too. I love cyber-stalking the neighbours.' Alex checked over Cara's shoulder.

'I'm sure, in time, all will be revealed,' declared Beth. 'After twenty years of living in this street, I've learnt that it's almost impossible to keep secrets from your neighbours.'

'I don't know. I reckon most people in this city would have no idea of their neighbour's first name,' said Alex.

'Oh, but that's not true for us,' said Cara. 'I can't imagine ever leaving this place.'

'They'll have to carry me out of here in a box,' said Beth.

'I've told James that if he wants to move, he'll either have to divorce me, or get me fired so that the bank repossesses.'

Walking in the middle of the trio, Beth linked her arm through Cara's, and then through Alex's. While she made a point of being friendly with everyone in Cuthbert Close, the two women by her side were special to her. In so many ways, they were different. Different ages. Different marital status. Completely different in fashion. Yet, they clicked. They balanced each other. It was chemistry, and perhaps a shared love of bundt cake.

'Even if I'd had a choice, I could never have picked two more lovely neighbours.' As Beth spoke, a strong breeze blew up the close, causing her skirt to flap around her legs and threaten to fly higher, into her face. She let go of Alex and Cara to pull it down. 'Oh my goodness, where did that come from?' Just as she'd settled herself, there was another gust, more powerful than the first. Leaves skittered across the bitumen and a couple of small branches tumbled to the ground.

'Holy shit, that southerly blew up fast,' said Alex, looking skywards.

Beth walked ahead, quickly. 'I think we'd better hurry with the—'

The wind interrupted her. Howling up the close, the turbulent air buffeted the women, causing them to stumble. There were shrieks from the kids as tablecloths and lanterns went flying. In the distance, Beth saw Max put a protective arm around Charlie as a beach umbrella came flying towards her. Meanwhile, James threw himself over the trestle table to stop it from becoming airborne, Alex's twins cowering under it along with little Poppy. A flock of squealing cockatoos flew across the sky and the trees let out groans as they were battered sideways.

From above came a cracking rumble of thunder. Beth turned. Mountainous clouds loomed behind her, thick and grey and pregnant with rain. Lightning forked across the sky, white with heat, and the ground almost sizzled as big, fat raindrops started to fall.

Spotting Ethan and Chloe taking shelter near the garage, Beth started to run. 'Don't just stand there, take what you can,' she yelled to them, filling her arms with platters and cutlery, whatever she could grab off the tables. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Alex and Cara doing the same.

'Take it all to my house,' she shouted over what was now driving rain, sweeping over the close in thick, heavy sheets.

Ten minutes later, saturated, but at least indoors, Beth despatched Ethan and Chloe to the shower, and distributed towels to her drowned-rat neighbours, now dripping onto the floorboards.

They quivered silently in a huddle near the French doors, gazing out onto the now deserted street, the houses across the road barely visible through the fog of rain.

'Such a shame. All that effort everyone put in. I feel awful,' said Beth, sensing that as chief organiser of the food, she was also somehow responsible for organising decent weather. Just as Max had failed to get the permit, she'd failed to get the sunshine. But who would have anticipated such a freak storm? In twenty years, she'd never known the Cuthbert Close End-of-Summer Street Party to be rained out before. The last weekend in February was always guaranteed perfection.

'There's always next year, I suppose,' said Alex gloomily.

'Mummy, can't we go and jump in the puddles, please?' the twins beseeched her.

'Absolutely not.' Alex folded her arms and watched as the removal truck started to make its way down the street. 'Well, the Devines got what they wanted, at least.'

'They won't try to unload in this, will they?' James put his arm loosely on his wife's shoulder.

'I suppose I should give them a hand.' Max came up beside them.

Beth patted his arm. 'Wait till it's settled a little. I'm sure it will blow over soon.'

'I hope the cottage won't leak like last time.' Cara raked a finger through her daughter's rain-flattened curls. 'This rain is so violent.'

They stood and watched, the stunned silence in Beth's living room broken only by the beep of the reversing truck and the loud beat of torrential rain.

Across the way, Charlie Devine ran out to the truck under the cover of a pristine white umbrella.

Like a moth, Beth thought. *But prettier.*

A butterfly.