# Escape to the Northern Lights

ALSO BY CARRIE WALKER

*Escape to the Swiss Chalet*
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CARRIE WALKER




An Aria Book

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For you, Dad.

Creative, poetic, romantic and full of imagination.
Always dreaming the big dreams.

The best dad in the world
and the apple of Carrie Walker's eye.

'You and me against the world, kid.'

Always and forever xxx

# One

## Friday 28th August

'Sara? Can you hear me?'

Unfortunately, I could, but I was mid-way through answering an email and determined to clear my inbox before the working day *officially* started.

'Ignore me till nine,' I said. 'I'm a figment of your imagination.'

Bobby huffed loudly as he scribbled on a Post-it and slapped it on my screen:

*Partner meeting moved to 2 p.m.*

'Has it? Why?' I shouted after him as my mobile buzzed.

'Ask me after nine,' he drawled, flipping me the bird. Dickhead.

**HIIT me up** Group Chat

Abi: Just landed. Can't wait to see you girls. Still on for dinner later?

Kat: YES. Always yes.

My desk phone started ringing and I could see it was reception.

*For the love of God.*

I cradled the handset to my ear as I typed. 'Hey, Pete.'

'Morning! The cab's here to take you to court.'

'Already? He's early – can you ask him to wait?'

'Will do.'

My stomach growled and I searched my drawers for snacks. Red Bull and coffee would only get me so far. I needed a proper, protein-rich breakfast, but had to settle for a packet of Frazzles and a loose Polo.

**HIIT me up** Group Chat

Me: Count me in. It's Mark's week for the dogs so I can stay out late. Promotion meeting later, so I might have good news.

I could barely acknowledge the possibility that it was within reach. That today could mean the triple F: financial freedom forever. The partners at CSH made more money in a year than most people earnt in a lifetime and this promotion would be like a lottery win if I got it. After all the sacrifices I'd made, the weird jobs I'd worked through university, all the beans on toast and Super Noodles I'd eaten, the decision was now made, and it was either me or Bobby. Heads or tails. If they chose me, I'd be the youngest appointed partner in the history of CSH and the second woman, after our HR partner, Cheryl.

I'd been on the promotion fast-track for two years now and had thrown everything I had at it. First in each day, last out, working crazy hours and weekends; even more so since splitting up with Mark. Work had been the obvious way to fill the void. Criminal law was all-consuming, and I'd lose myself for hours, researching, preparing and scenario planning. Spending time in other people's messy lives, so I didn't have to think about my own. Then as soon as one case finished, I'd take another, sometimes two. Filling my boots with as much work as I could handle.

Promotion to partner had been the only thing I'd ever dreamt of. It was my living, breathing dream. And today it might finally happen. I was ready for it. I craved the recognition and I'd more than earned it. My career could at least have the decency to skyrocket if the rest of my life was going to fall apart.

'Come in, both of you. Come in,' Antony said, opening the boardroom door. The partners were sat around the chic, concrete table, with Antony at the helm and Cheryl by his side. Twelve pale faces with half-smiles and disinterested stares. But they wouldn't put me off. This was *actually happening* and I was going to enjoy every single second of it. I flashed them a winning smile while Bobby cleared his throat.

'Thank you for joining us at such short notice,' Antony said, folding his hands in front of him. 'We are mindful of you waiting to hear the partner promotion news and wanted to talk to you together.' I leant forward, ready for the gold confetti to fall from the ceiling.

Cheryl nodded gently, as if Antony was reading off a script. Surely we weren't both being promoted. Were we? I glanced at Bobby with excited eyes.

'Due to a number of factors, we've unanimously voted *not* to add another partner to the board at this time.'

My stomach lurched. *No.*

'I know this will be a huge disappointment to you both, but it isn't a forever decision. It's just for the time being.' He smiled benevolently, as if he'd revealed a fabulous surprise, as opposed to handing the pair of us a double-ended shitty stick.

I'd officially been dumped by work *and* my husband in the same calendar year.

'When will the next review be?' I asked, deflated.

'There's no definitive timeline,' Antony said. 'It could be as soon as next quarter. We'd like to see you both land a high-profile win and then we can look at it again.'

It didn't make sense. The boardroom was hot, and I zoned out as he carried on talking. I'd heard all I needed to hear. One more minute of Antony's patronising pity-faces and I'd be in tears.

My watch flashed to flag my blood pressure, then vibrated as another email came in.

'Thank you, Sara, Bobby,' Antony said, dismissing us. 'We've got a couple more points on the agenda to discuss, so if you wouldn't mind leaving us to it.'

I followed Bobby out, completely thrown. I had a banging headache and my eyes were fuzzy. I needed a cheese sandwich. We walked down the corridor in silence until it was safe to speak.

'What the hell was that?' I hissed, ready to scream.

Bobby was fuming. 'This place is fucked. That promotion had my name all over it.'

'Or mine, more likely.'

'As if you're ready to be a partner,' Bobby sneered.

'What would you know? You've been trying for five years and still no joy.'

He quickened his pace. 'The timing's always been off,' he blustered. 'It's complicated being promoted to partner, you know.' He pulled his trousers up over his gut and tucked in his tie.

'Yeah, well, I don't like to be on the losing side.' I flopped into my chair and turned to face my computer, frown already in place. *Just get through the day. Then get through next week*. And then I was off on annual leave. I hadn't wanted to take it, but now I knew this was the situation, I was grateful it was booked.

My gilet fluttered in the wind as I made a beeline for Hicce to meet Abi and Kat. Coal Drops Yard was buzzing with people, the fountains lit up in a rainbow of colours, and fairy lights strewn across the square. King's Cross had transformed in the two years I'd lived with Mark in Chelsea, but I still managed to orientate myself in the right direction, like a hungry homing pigeon.

The maître d' beamed as I walked in. 'Good evening, Ms Pearson!' he said, with an exaggerated bow.

*Ouch*. That was going to take some getting used to. I glanced at my wedding rings and faked a smile. I hadn't taken them off yet, but this was the problem with being a regular – people got to know you, and it was difficult to pretend.

'Hi Franz!' I said, handing over my gilet. 'Looking handsome, as always. I'm meeting some friends.'

'Of course,' he said, peeking through the blue feathers. 'The ladies in the corner are waiting for one more.' He pointed to the back of the restaurant, where Kat's blonde locks glowed gold against Abi's mahogany blowout. The LA lifestyle suited her.

'That's them,' I said, waltzing over and giving Kat a kiss. 'Evening, girls!'

'Here she issss! How did it go?' Abi asked, reaching for a hug and searching my face for good news.

I shook my head. 'Not today. '

Kat groaned. 'Bastard. I'm so sorry, babes. Did he say why?'

'Apparently I need another significant case under my belt.'

'What?!' Abi said with a frown. 'There's no more room under your belt.'

'White wine?' Kat asked, pouring me a glass. 'It's chardonnay I'm afraid. Sorry.'

'It's all I deserve.' I laughed, then covered my glass. 'Not too much. I'm taking it easy on the booze.'

'Are you? Why?' Abi's frown deepened.

'My blood pressure is off the charts,' I said. 'My nutritionist has put me on a strict regime of green powder and pomegranate seeds.'

'Well, *my nutritionist*, AKA my mother, says one glass won't hurt,' Kat said, topping me up.

'How long are you back, Abs?' I pivoted. It was so lovely to see her smiley face.

'Two whole months!' she squealed. 'Tony's filming in Brazil and the neighbours are dog-sitting. I'm taking Mum

to see *Hamilton* tomorrow, then I'm available for brunch, lunch and dunch for the foreseeable.'

'LA ain't all it's cracked up to be, eh?' Kat shimmied her shoulders. 'Tottenham girl, back for a hit of the London Badlands.'

Abi giggled. 'There's just *too much sun* in California, you know?'

'Uh-huh.' Kat nodded. 'I've heard it's a hot mess.'

'And the showbiz parties are tiresome. Swimming in the infinity pool, swanning around in the Jeep – it's doing my head in. Give me the pissing-down rain any day.'

'Stop it! Like we weren't already jealous! *I* want to swan around,' I groaned. 'Even my watch is telling me to relax these days. Can we please do a life swap?'

'Your watch is an idiot,' Abi said. 'Relaxed has never been your thing.'

'Which is why you're such a good barrister,' Kat added. 'If you were all chilled out, you wouldn't be half as pernickety.'

I took a sip of vinegary wine and shuddered.

'*Particular*,' Abi covered quickly. 'A woman who knows her own mind.'

'If only I knew how to calm it down.'

'You haven't had a lot of time for calm recently,' Kat said. 'Defending half the criminal minds of London, a wedding in Greece, moving house – twice.'

'And now the divorce…' I whispered, forcing down more wine. 'I've nearly gone full life cycle.'

Kat winced. 'You have. No wonder you're stressed. Anyone would be.'

'The flat is a state as well,' I said, thinking about the empty space waiting for me at home. I'd only been

back in it a month, but it looked how I felt. Unloved and used up.

'I can help with that,' Abi said, clapping her hands together. 'Me and my paintbrush! Let's mood-board some ideas and choose some new colours.'

'You're a sweetheart, Abs, but you can't waste your holidays painting my flat. I was going to ask your mate Jimbo to decorate it for me.'

'Oh, well, he'll do a great job. But I'm happy to help too. I love painting and I'd get to hang out with you. Win, win! I can even do you one of my murals.'

I thought about the beautiful cityscape Abi had painted in Tony's LA living room. The canals of Venice full of tourists: couples being serenaded on gondolas, St Mark's Square with an opera singer mid-aria and tables of people eating breakfast al fresco. It perfectly represented Abi and Tony. Venice was where they'd finally got together and the mural was totally *them*. Intricately painted details and metallic flecks that gleamed in the sunshine. It was magical. But what would my mural be? What was *me* enough to have it painted on my walls? A Deliveroo driver balancing a pizza box on his handlebars? The inside of a courtroom? Not exactly great inspiration.

'Honestly, Abs, it's cool. I've already decided to use the same colours I had at the house.'

'At Mark's house?' Kat asked, slowly raising her eyebrows.

'It was my house too when we decorated it.'

'Of course it was – sorry.'

'What about trying a new look?' Abi said, gently. 'Something that doesn't remind you of him. There are

so many cool wallpaper designs to choose from. Or you could paint the whole flat one colour? Sunshine yellow is very in?'

I didn't want to piss on her chips, but I wasn't about to panic-vomit colour all over my flat. 'I'd rather stick with what I know for now. I haven't got the brain space for anything new, and I don't want to hate it.'

'Fair enough.' Abi squeezed me tight. 'If you change your mind we can just paint over it and start again.' Her peppy cheerleader vibe was kind and comforting.

'Keep things easy for now,' Kat said, looking into my eyes. 'All these little steps will get you there eventually.' Wherever *there* was.

'Thanks, guys.' Tired of having all the attention on me, I changed the subject. 'How are things with you, anyway? PR on the up?'

'Same, same,' Kat said. 'Work is up the wall, and my sex life is woeful. I've been on three terrible dates with an actuary, and I've got a coffee in with a hot-bod builder tomorrow.'

'I thought you'd been through all the builders on Tinder?' Abi said.

'He's new. Separated,' she said with a wink. 'Oh, God, sorry, Sara – me and my big mouth.'

'What? Don't be sorry. It gives me hope there'll be men on the market when I get round to dating again,' I said. 'As long as Mark isn't on there.'

Kat and Abi exchanged a look.

'Er… and what was that?' I asked.

Kat took a breath, and my heart sank at her worried eyes. 'I wasn't sure you'd want to know.'

I rolled my eyes. 'Tell me everything *immediately*.'

'I haven't seen him on there, myself,' she said. 'But my sister has.'

I laughed in shock. 'What? She can't have done. When?'

'Yesterday.' Kat held up a photo of Mark inside a Tinder frame, handsome and grinning behind the wheel of his boat. I felt sick.

'Mark, 35, Real Estate,' Abi read aloud. 'Is he American these days?'

'He'd like to think so. Too many episodes of *Selling Sunset*.'

I zoomed in on his profile. 'Six-foot-one? Hmm. Maybe in heels.' I sighed. He looked so handsome, so full of life. Show me a girl who wouldn't swipe right for those dimples. 'Relationship status: separated. Has children: no. Wants children: no.' My heart raced as I swiped through the screenshots and Kat topped up my wine.

'At least he's being honest this time,' Abi said. 'Three years too late.'

'Do you think he was lying to me, at the start?' I asked, feeling miserable. 'That he never wanted kids?'

'Either that or he was going along with it because he loved you so much,' Kat said.

'I'm such an idiot.' I handed back her phone. 'He's already moved on and I'm avoiding unpacking in case he has a change of heart. What's wrong with me?'

'Absolutely nothing,' Kat said, twisting the end of her blonde ponytail. 'You are the cat's cahoonas, baby.'

'Obviously not.' I closed my eyes to hold back the tears, but they found a way out anyway.

'Babes! Don't cry!' Kat said, grabbing my hand. 'You're smart and fun and cool. And you'll meet someone a thousand times better than Mark *the estate agent*.'

'You will,' Abi agreed. 'A handsome hunk who'll give you everything you want.'

'I can't believe he's already out there, advertising himself to the world.'

'False advertising,' Kat quipped. 'That photo is at least five years old.'

I could feel the wine softening my resolve and reached for some bread. 'It just feels so fast. I'm still in the denial stage. Or is it grief? I'm certainly not in the over-it stage, yet. Is that bad?' I buttered a wedge of baguette and covered it in salami.

'Not at all! Take it at your own pace. You don't *need* to be at any stage, any time, ever.'

'Of course I do! If he's out on dates, then I should be too. On the hunt for a Magic-Mike type to throw in his face.'

Kat laughed. 'Let me know when you find one – I'm in the market for one of those, myself.'

'The classic rebound shag.' Abi nodded wisely.

'Yes!' I said, eyes shining. 'Ideally with a global megastar.'

'Or Mark's boss,' Abi suggested.

'That's more your *revenge shag* territory,' Kat said, sounding like a used car salesman. 'In which case you'd be better off with his brother – or his dad.'

I shook my head. The whole thing was too surreal.

'When was the last time you went on holiday?' Abi asked. 'Would it help to book a few days off work?'

'I've got a fortnight off the week after next, but I'm dreading it. The thought of going on holiday alone, like

a sad old spinster, is too much. I haven't even booked anything yet.'

'What are you talking about?' Abi said. 'Solo travel is the best! You can do whatever you want, whenever you want. Sleep in, read books, eat ice-cream all day – indulge yourself entirely.'

'Hmm, that does sound nice, I guess. Mark did tend to be quite bossy on holiday. He wasn't one to deviate from his itinerary.' I thought back to our last holiday where we'd played tennis in the rain, because it was in the plan.

'This time you can make it all about you, but there's no rush to decide,' Abi said.

'Sorry girls, I don't know what I'm doing. I can barely decide what I'm having for breakfast these days, let alone organise a holiday. Dad has been looking after the dogs on my weeks while I sort myself out, but everything feels hard, you know? I need a spa day. Or spa week, or month, until I feel better. A full body massage and some healthy food. Actually – unhealthy food would be better. And bottomless margaritas.'

'Hang on – I'm getting *déjà vu*. I had this same conversation with someone recently.' Abi massaged her temples to summon the memory. 'Yes! It was Emma Stone.'

'The actress?' Kat piped up.

'The very one. She was in make-up telling me about the most unbelievable forest retreat she'd been to in Norway called… flying something. No, hang on, I'll think of it… fiery something.' She snapped her fingers. 'Firefly!'

'Interesting.' I picked up my phone and typed in 'firefly', 'retreat' and 'Norway' and up it came. Firefly Forest, a family-run retreat nestled among the fjords, close to the

*Folgefonna* glacier. Two hours from Bergen. *A hidden gem* was scrawling its way across the homepage, followed by a carousel of stunning Norwegian scenery. Drone shots winding through the fjords showcasing the lush greenery either side. Wooden lodges tucked in among the conifers, camouflaged by the forest. Reindeer chilling in the sunshine, huskies sledding through the snow and wild swimmers in enormous waterfalls decorated with rainbows. It looked calm, clean and fresh. Idyllic.

Abi was still talking. 'Yeah! She said it was like nothing she's ever experienced before. Amazing treatments, hot springs and Michelin-star food.'

'Really?' I said, swiping through the photos. It was beautiful, but I wouldn't have pegged it as an A-list hotspot. It was probably one of those places only the PRs knew about. I tapped through to the booking page to check out dates. Sold out, sold out, sold out. Of course it was.

'Ever heard of it?' I asked Kat, who was piling up a cracker with brie.

She shook her head. 'I can ask at work though and get you some other recommends?'

A spa trip wasn't a bad idea at all. I wouldn't feel strange being there on my own and I could hide behind my sunglasses. People might mistake me for a reclusive celeb. I could do that. Hmm, yes… I could absolutely do that.