

# Chapter One

**Saskia**

“We’re going to be late!”

Theo, my boyfriend—sorry, *husband*, I’ve got to get used to saying that—is calling me from the bedroom. My suitcase is on our bed, and my clothes are scattered everywhere; I can’t decide among three swimming costumes. There’s the one with the high-cut legs, the one with the scallop neckline, and the red one Theo likes, but my case is crammed full, and I can’t fit them all in.

“Come on, Sask,” he says, appearing in the doorway. He’s been packed for ages—he’s always like that—and he’s right, we are going to be late if we don’t leave for the airport in the next ten minutes.

“Got your passport?” he asks me, and I nod, point to my handbag. “Right there. Can you help me shut this case? You might need to sit on it.”

I close my eyes and grab one of the costumes at random, shoving it into the side of the case, the material slippery between my fingers. Theo grins.

“Good choice. You look great in the red.”

He dutifully sits on top of the suitcase and I just about manage to zip it up, wincing at the effort. Anyone would think

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we were going for a month, not a week, but I've never been a particularly light packer.

"Have you heard from the others?" I ask him, and he nods.

"Yep, they're already on their way. We're meeting them at Terminal 5. So—you ready?"

I take a final glance around the room, checking I haven't forgotten anything. Swimming costume—check. Sun cream—check. Sunglasses—check. Silk shawl for when we go to the temple, like it said in the guidebook—check. Phone charger and adapter—check. I've also got some sleeping pills and an eye mask for the plane, in case I need to relax, and a couple of books so that I can maybe try to do a bit of reading while I'm out there, when we get to the beach.

"OK," I say, grabbing my handbag as Theo picks up my case and pretends to drop it because it's so heavy. "You're hilarious. Now let's go."

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The cab drops us off outside Terminal 5. It's a gray January day in London, overcast and cold, and I feel a shiver of excitement run through me when I think about the sunshine waiting for us on the other side of the plane journey. England in the winter is miserable—it feels like ages since I've felt the warmth of the sun on my face. I can't wait. This morning when we got out of bed, there was ice on the roads outside, dead Christmas trees dotting the pavements like discarded clothes, their trunks split, pine needles scattering the tarmac. The whole city has a gloomy air, and it feels great to be escaping it, to be flying toward sun and sand and sea.

"Thanks," I say to Theo as he heaves my case out of the boot,

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and he loops an arm round my shoulders as the taxi drives off. I inhale the smell of him—clean, calm, familiar. Sometimes, I can't believe he's real, and that he's mine. If you'd told me five years ago that I'd be married to a man like him, I wouldn't have believed it. I wouldn't have thought I deserved it.

My breath mists the air as we walk into the airport, a little gray ghost forming in front of my mouth, but Theo's arm is nice and warm around my shoulders. I like the way my head tucks neatly beneath his arm; he's a fair bit taller than me, but it's always felt safe rather than intimidating. The double doors slide open automatically for us and we head inside, immediately met with a cacophony of noise.

Inside the terminal, it's packed. I scan the huge room for our friends, Lucas and Holly, but there are so many people that it's hard to make anyone out. A bunch of teenagers push past us, heading in the direction of the Wetherspoons in the corner, and Theo raises his eyebrows at me.

"Fancy it?"

I shove him on the arm. "No way!"

The last time I set foot in a Wetherspoons was a long time ago; in another life.

"There they are," Theo says and then I see them—Lucas and Holly—coming toward us, each pulling a suitcase.

"You're here!" I say, opening my arms to them, and I wrap Holly in a big hug, her long brown hair tickling my cheek as we embrace. She looks great; she's wearing a strappy black top with a loose white cardi over it, and black jeans with pink trainers.

"Comfy clothes for the plane," she says, gesturing downward. "It was hard to dress this morning, wasn't it? Being so cold here and knowing we'll be going somewhere hot."

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I nod, smile. “You look lovely, though. Nice shoes.”

“Saskia, how are we?” Lucas says, pulling me in for a bear hug, and I kiss him on the cheek, feel the scratch of his beard against my skin.

“You going for the unkempt traveler look already?” Theo teases him, slapping him on the back, and Lucas grins good-naturedly. He’s taller than Theo, by about a head, with dark swept-back hair and brown, almost black eyes.

“I’m so excited,” Holly says, clapping her hands together. “A whole week in Thailand. It’s going to be incredible. And just what I need after the Christmas I had at my mother’s house.” She rolls her eyes and Lucas rubs her arm sympathetically. I know Holly’s family can be a bit of a nightmare, she’s mentioned it before. Something to do with her mum’s drinking. I had Christmas with Theo’s family this year—or *my* family, I should say, now that we’re actually married. It was lovely—their house is huge, a big, Victorian built in west London. Three stories. His dad had bought a crazily expensive bottle of champagne, which we had first thing, even though he’d already given us so much for the wedding. It was actually one of the best Christmases I’ve ever had, though I don’t say that to Holly right this second. I don’t want to be insensitive.

“You’ve got all the bookings, right?” Lucas asks Theo, and he nods, waves his iPhone in the air.

“All on here, don’t worry about a thing. I’ll send you your boarding passes now.” He taps the screen and our phones ping in unison as the images come through to our WhatsApp group, inventively named Thailand 2024.

“Perfect,” I say. “Now, I could do with a coffee. Have we got time to stop at Pret?”

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“I’ll come with you, you guys figure out where we’re heading,” Holly says, and she links her arm through mine.

“Back in a minute,” we tell the boys, then head off toward the café.

“So how *are* you?” she asks me. “How are things, how was Christmas?”

“All good,” I say. “We were almost late because I couldn’t decide which swimming costume to bring but hey, that’s the worst of my problems at the moment, so I’m doing pretty well. And Christmas was lovely, thanks. Theo’s family are great.”

“What did you go for, swimwear-wise?”

“Red,” I say. “A classic look.”

“Can’t go wrong with red,” she says, and I grin at her, relaxing into the familiarity of our relationship. It’s so wonderful to be part of a friendship group like this. I count myself lucky every single day.

“Let’s get an airport selfie, just us two,” I say to Holly, and before she can protest, I pull out my phone. We push our heads together, grinning, and I take three—I’ll check them later, work out which one looks best. Maybe put a filter on them too. I check how many likes the pic I put up of Theo and me in front of the Christmas tree has got—forty-four so far—and quickly tap the heart sign under a couple of other pics that pop up on my Instagram feed before shoving my phone back into my pocket. I get a rush of adrenaline every time I see the number of likes go up.

“Two cappuccinos, please,” Holly says to the girl behind the counter in Pret. “Did the boys want anything?”

“We forgot to ask,” I say. “Let’s just get them a coffee too. I’ll drink extra if they don’t want it.”

“You’ll be bouncing off the walls,” Holly says, but she

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changes the order to four and we wait for our hot drinks over to one side.

“What are you most looking forward to?” she asks me, her head tilted to one side so that her hair falls down across one shoulder. She’s got lovely hair, thick and glossy, and she’s one of those women who doesn’t need much makeup—naturally clear skin, that English rose complexion. We’re polar opposites in terms of our looks; I’m blonde with blue eyes, and I tend to wear quite a bit of makeup, painting it on religiously every day. I think of it as my armor, I suppose. Theo’s mum got me a nice new lipstick for Christmas, I’ve brought it with me to wear out for dinner in Bangkok.

“Lying on the beach, to be honest,” I tell her, picturing it—it feels like so long since I really relaxed and did nothing, and the thought of stretching out on the golden sand, digging my toes in, and closing my eyes against the hot sun is glorious. “You?”

“Oh, I want to explore,” she says, picking up our coffees when the waitress calls our order. “The food markets are meant to be incredible in Bangkok. I love Thai food.”

“Let me help you,” I say, taking two of the coffees, and we make our way back through the busy airport to where the boys are standing, under the departure boards, talking. As I watch, Lucas laughs at something Theo has said, throwing his head back. It’s lovely seeing them so happy together. This trip is going to be amazing. I know it.

“All set?” Theo asks and I hand out the drinks, wincing slightly as one of them spills and burns my fingers.

“Let’s go,” Lucas says, pointing toward the escalators over on the right. “Check-in is up here, I think. Time to get rid of your knife stash, Hol.”

“Ha ha,” she says, rolling her eyes at me, and I smile at

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her. "Only another week to put up with!" I say. "Just grin and think of the cocktails."