

The background of the cover features a close-up portrait of a woman with long dark hair and light-colored eyes, looking slightly to the side. She is wearing a large, circular, metallic-looking earring. The background behind her is a tropical beach scene with two palm trees on the sand under a clear sky.

A perfect getaway, a deadly secret

THE ESCAPE

KAREN WOODS

‘Truly a talented author who holds nothing back’

Crissy Rock

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Dedication

*In memory of my mother Margaret Price always missed
and my brother Darren Woods miss you always.*

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Prologue

The setting sun glinted on the water, the lapping waves darkening and reflecting back the neon signs of the beach bars. The heavy gold bracelet on his wrist caught the light as he pushed the drink towards her.

'Go on, another won't hurt. You're a long way from Manchester now, darling, and I won't tell if you won't.'

PART ONE

Chapter One

Jane Morgan stood in front of the full-length mirror and smiled at herself. She looked mint and she knew it, but she made sure she always looked good. That's why all the men were all over her like a rash any time she was out in the pubs and clubs. A ten out of ten, anyone would say. She liked the fact people said she was a great catch, and she worked hard for the admiration. Her long honey-blond hair looked like strands of spun silk and her tanned legs seemed to go on forever. Her friends told her she could have been a model, and on a good day she liked to think they were right. Get her on her good side, she was gorgeous. She applied her shimmering lip gloss and pouted her heart-shaped lips as she looked in the mirror one last time. She was ready.

Tommy Braxton came into the bedroom behind her and hooked his arm around her tiny waist, twisting her to face him. He was a good-looking man too, if you liked the rough-and-ready kind, and Jane knew all too well he had the women lining up.

'Bleeding hell, Tom, watch you don't smudge my make-up. Hours it's just taken me to look this hot. I'm going to have to learn to do it properly myself. I've been at the salon most of the day.'

Tommy rested one heavy hand on the nape of her neck, the cool of it making goosebumps rise on her tanned skin. Then, with his other hand he tickled her side, making her giggle. She felt her heart race, sensitive to his touch. 'Aw, Tom, stop pissing about, will you? The girls will be here soon and I'm still not bloody ready. I need to put my shoes on and all that. I'm always

late for anything they arrange, and they'll have my hide if I'm not ready when they arrive.'

Tommy stood tall and pulled his shoulders back. 'You know what they say, Janey. You should always make time for your fella. Keep the romance alive and all that.' He smirked at her. 'What about a quickie before you go out? I'll be quick, I promise. In and out like a Ninja.'

Jane was unimpressed. She couldn't imagine anything worse at this moment in time. When she was going out-out with the girls, it took her nearly a full day to prepare: an age in the shower, then having her hair done, a full face of make-up professionally applied, lashes topped up, new nails, the list was endless. But he was still looking at her with hungry eyes. They'd not had sex for three days, and she knew what her fella was like. She had to come back with a reason to put him off. 'Tommy, babe, I don't want to rush it. Let's make a date for when I get home later on. I'll make it worth looking forward to.'

He was crestfallen. 'You'll be steaming when you get in, hun. You'll go straight to sleep like you always do. I'll sort myself out if you can't be bothered. Or how about a quick suck? Come on, I won't take long.' He looked pitifully at her, trying to convince her she was denying him his manly needs.

Jane stroked her slender fingers along the side of his face, letting her manicured nails skim down to his chest, and purred, 'Tom, I pinkie-promise you that, when I come in tonight, we will have a proper session together. I'm not really in the mood for getting drunk tonight, anyway. If it wasn't Lesley's birthday, I would have swerved it.'

Tommy smiled. He knew a pinkie-promise was nearly as good as a legally binding contract between him and his Mrs. He rubbed his hands together and nodded. 'Right you are, then. I'll only go for a few beers, then, while you're out. I'll grab us some food on the way home, too, and we can have a scran before we go to bed. You've not made me any dinner, I know. I always come second best when you're going out with your friends. Neglected yet again.'

Jane knew he was only half joking. 'Aw, is my little Tommy getting jealous? I told you from the start that my friends are like family to me, and we have a girl code that we all follow. Mates before dates and all that. Friends are important in this world – you need to know who's got your back.'

Tommy scoffed. 'If it was the other way around, you would be kicking off. If I was putting this much time into not just going out with the lads, but all bleeding day getting ready. Remember the other week when I said I was going to the match with our kid?' He raised his dark brows. 'You went ballistic, telling me I should go and move in with him if I wanted to put him before you.'

Jane sighed awkwardly. 'Yeah, that wasn't my finest hour. It was hormones. You know what I get like when I'm due on. I just wanted a bit of love and affection, that's all.'

'Well, same here, love. So when I ask for a bit of your time, don't give me the lecture about the girl code and the bond you all have and the rules you have to follow. If you're serious about us, then I have to come first.'

Jane could see he was getting agitated, his cheeks flushing.

'Bleeding hell, Tom, why do you always bring this stuff up when I'm in a rush? If you want, when I come in tonight, instead of having sex, we can talk about it.'

Tommy's eyes were wide now. She'd called his bluff and it was clear he wasn't willing to lose his night of passion for love nor money. Quickly, he backpedalled. 'You know what I mean. I just want to be as important to you as your girls. Anyway, I've booked you in for tonight, so don't be too late home. I've got work in the morning, unlike you, so I want a decent night's kip after you've tired me out.'

Jane grinned: it was game, set and match to her. She had her girls' night to look forward to and her fella ready and waiting for when she got home. Then, she could lie in while he got off to work the next morning. Tommy was a grafter, for sure. He lived for his work, and she loved that he was successful. His chain of gyms was flourishing, and it meant they were not short of a few quid. Their friends teased them, called them the Paris and

Tyson of Manchester, but they weren't far wrong. Jane had everything a woman could have wished for: a beautiful house, several holidays a year, a smart car, and designer clothes bursting from her wardrobe. She even had a nice little earner – Tommy had invested some of the gym profits in a little salon that he'd put in her name. She liked being a business owner, even if she never went near the books and left the details to the girls that ran the place. But the one thing she craved wasn't happening: she still wasn't married.

Tommy had always said he would propose when the time was right but, up to now, she remained girlfriend not wife. He kissed her cheek and started to walk out of the bedroom. He grabbed his crotch and chuckled. 'You better be ready when you come in later, you dirty girl.'

Jane burst out laughing and bent to put her shoes on. 'You won't know what's hit you,' she grinned. One last twirl in the mirror, looking at her deep violet dress hugging her curves, and she was ready. She quickly checked her Rolex and headed down the stairs.

It was nearly eight o'clock and the girls had arrived at Jane's in a haze of perfume and anticipation. They'd been friends since school and, despite ups and downs and all of life's highs and lows, the four women still made time for one another. They were sitting in Jane's living room, enjoying a cold glass of wine before they headed into Manchester city centre. Lesley, Katie and Maxine had been her squad for years. Katie sipped her wine and kept her voice low. 'Where's Tommy, then, Janey? Is he in or out?'

'He went out about twenty minutes ago for a few beers with his boys. Dirty bleeder was after a legover before he went out, too. I had to smooth him over until later.'

The girls all laughed out loud as Katie continued, 'He might be a randy sod, but you've got a good one there, J. Did I tell you I've been talking to Jake Pritchard who we used to go to school with? He split up with his wife

about six months ago, and he's been asking to take me out on a date ever since.'

Maxine pulled a sour expression. 'Oh my God, Katie, he was rotten in school, a right scruff, crater face. Rough, in fact.'

'Well, he's not anymore, he's decent. I think he might be after something serious, not just a shag.'

Jane shot a look over at Lesley and raised her eyes to the ceiling. Katie had never been lucky in love and, in her own words, she usually only attracted dickheads who never wanted anything more than a quick knee-trembler after the clubs had kicked out. She didn't mind that part but, as she told her friends, it would be nice if they wanted another date.

Lesley was the sensible one in the group, or so she claimed. But it meant she could never keep her mouth shut and said exactly what she was thinking, giving everyone her advice whether they asked for it or not. 'Katie, you need to stay single for a while and stop looking for a man. Protect yourself a bit. You fall in love too quickly. And, come on, if we're telling the truth here, once they've had your knickers off, you never normally see them for dust.'

Maxine nodded. 'I'll second that. You need to play harder to get. Look at that guy from the rugby club the other week. He was alright, but then you bombarded him with phone calls and texts, and he blocked you. He must have got the ick. No man wants a woman to be that available; they like the chase.'

Katie pulled a face like she was chewing on a wasp. She knew they were right, but she hated admitting it. 'I reckon he was gay, anyway. On my life, he wasn't even really into the sex that night. I invited him back to mine after the club. I'd bought all new sexy underwear and, when I walked out into the bedroom strutting my stuff, he carried on watching the footy on the tv and I barely got a second look.'

Jane could tell this was becoming a therapy session and closed the conversation down. 'Enough of this, ladies. It's Friday night, it's Les's birthday and we should be out painting the town red, so drink up and let's get pissed. Come on, neck those drinks, girls.'

Maxine downed her drink and started to collect the glasses the friends had used.

Jane shouted over. 'What are you doing, Max? Leave them there. The cleaner is here in the morning, as usual. She will shift them. I'm not paying her for nothing, you know.'

Lesley shot a look over at Maxine. 'We're not all as lucky as Jane, are we? A bloody cleaner who comes in every day and sorts her house out. Bloody hell, what I would give to have a rest and let someone else take over the cleaning duties even for a day.'

Jane burst out laughing. 'It's not my fault I'm successful, is it? Stop bloody moaning. After she's done a tidy-up here, I'll send her over to yours for a deep clean, my treat, so straighten your mush, Lesley, and let's go and party.'

Lesley hugged Jane. 'And that's why I love you...'

Maxine and Katie looked at each other, left out. 'And what about us? We're your friends too. Why does Lesley get a turn with your cleaner and we don't?'

Jane let out a laboured breath and picked up her Gucci handbag from the coffee table. True, she and Tommy paid a mint for a top-tier cleaning service, but it was nothing compared to the dough they both dropped on designer gear. She glanced at her mates, remembered when they were teenagers, trading make-up with each other or borrowing each other's clothes. When had they grown up, moved on to sharing cleaners and caring about how much sleep they got? 'For crying out loud, you can all have an hour or two with the cleaner tomorrow. I pay her top dollar to be at mine every day so I'm happy to share her.'

The four women left the house as they heard the taxi honk its horn outside. Now they knew that they could stay in bed tomorrow and nurse their hangovers in style, tonight was going to kick off. They piled into the cab, snapping selfies and laughing. Jane clambered into the middle seat, flanked by the others. She knew how lucky she was that she was the one with cash to spare and would treat them to all sorts. She'd take them away on spa

weekends, bung them a few quid when they were skint, spread the luck that she and Tommy had. She loved to help the girls out – and she knew that, while they might not be able to pay her back in cash, they did so in something far more valuable: loyalty.

Chapter Two

Katie Dunstan opened her eyes and looked to her side. Who the hell was that next to her? She cringed and reached down onto the floor to find her knickers and something to shove on her top half. It was nearly ten o'clock already and she needed this guy gone before her daughter Jade came home. Jade had been away for the night with her friends in Blackpool and, if Katie knew her, she would want to get back home early to enjoy the rest of the day. Katie sat back down on the bed and smoothed down her bright red hair, pulling her pale legs up to her chest. She coughed a few times, eyes never leaving the man's back. He was well away, snoring. She reached over and gently tapped his shoulder. She couldn't even remember his name. She grimaced. She had been at the STD clinic twice this month already – any more and she'd get a loyalty card. She reached over and nudged her back-warmer. 'Erm, morning, love. Sorry but I've got to get ready and go to work, and my daughter is due home any minute so, if you want, I can make you a coffee or something quick, but then you have to leave.'

The man grunted and rolled onto his back. She could see him now, the night before coming flooding back into her mind. She cringed. She did remember his face now. It was that idiot who had been dancing next to her in the club all night long, hands all over her. She'd told herself she was going to stop doing this, but clearly she'd had her beer goggles on by the end of the night. His hand dug deep inside his black boxers. 'You were a right dirty cow last night,' he chuckled. 'I've not had a shag like that in ages. You made me graft, didn't you?'

Her eyes opened wide, and she felt bright red. What was this guy's name? For the life of her, she couldn't get a handle on it. Barney, Ben, Barry? She was sure it began with a B. 'I had a few too many last night, to be truthful. It was my friend's birthday, and we were drinking before we went out. I should have stayed away from the cocktails. I'm always the same when I mix my drinks. You're lucky you didn't have to carry me home.'

He nodded. 'Same here, love. I was drinking brandy. I never usually swap my drinks, but it was my mate, he was like, 'Come on, Brian, stop being miserable, get a few more drinks down you.'

There it was: Brian. That was his name, great. She knew it began with a B. She didn't feel as bad now the man had a name. She looked over at the time again. He clocked her and could tell she wanted him gone. His dark brown hair was stuck up and she could see the crease marks from the pillow striping his face. Still, at least he was moving now. He pulled his jeans up and, struggling to fasten the button, he breathed in and sucked his stomach in. Katie was watching him from the corner of her eye, trying to avoid conversation: she just wanted him gone. He was still talking. 'So, what's the crack with us then, Katie? Are we on for another date or what? Because, if last night in this bedroom was anything to go by, then I'm defo up for a bit of that.'

Katie stood up and pulled her blue t-shirt as far down over her legs as it would go. She remembered what she'd told the girls last night, how she wanted a man who'd come back for more. But now it was a reality she just wanted peace and quiet, wanted her space. 'Brian, I want to be straight with you. Last night was a one-off. I've just come out of a relationship and I'm concentrating on myself at the moment. If I'm being honest, I've had enough of men to last me a lifetime.'

'Yeah, but that was them. And this is me. We had a good laugh last night, didn't we?'

She figured it was easier to agree with him to get him out of her house, so she nodded and led him to the bedroom door. She couldn't remember getting home, never mind laughing with him, but now wasn't the time to

mention that. 'We did have fun, but I have a lot going on in my life and it wouldn't be fair on you. Honest, sometimes I think I'm damaged goods.'

'Maybe I should be the judge of that. Listen, I like you. It's not just the sex. Let's go out again, for food and maybe a couple of drinks, and see what happens. If it's not for you after a second date, at least you can say we tried.'

Katie clenched her jaw. Why did she have to finally bed the one guy who didn't cut and run? He'd put her on the spot now, and all she wanted was for him to leave her alone so she could get back in bed and sleep off this hangover from hell. 'Yeah, give me a ring, then. I have a busy lifestyle, so you have been warned.'

'Put your number in,' he urged, waving his phone at her. Katie typed hurriedly and passed it back, only thinking too late she could have put a false number in. Brian took it from her hands and leaned in for a kiss. Katie quickly moved away. There was no way she was kissing anyone in the morning until both she and they had brushed their teeth. Death breath was not what her hangover needed right now. He stood looking at her again.

'Brian, honest, I need to rush. I've got to get ready and be in work within the hour.' Katie dashed around making the bed to hurry him along.

'I'll wait, if you want, and I can drop you off in the taxi.'

'No, thanks,' she replied. Why could this guy not take the hint?

'Where do you work?' he asked as he finally started walking down the stairs, Katie following right behind him, to make sure he actually left.

'Asda, on the checkouts. I've been there for years. It's not for everyone, but I like the people I meet, and it pays the bills and that's what it's about, isn't it?'

Brian jerked his head forwards. 'It sure is. I think I told you I'm a taxi driver, so if you ever need a lift anywhere, give me a bell and I'll grab you. Here's my details.' He reached inside his black leather jacket and pulled out a business card.

Katie grabbed the card and held the door open with a forced smile. 'See you again, then.' Brian turned as he left, as if he was going to say something, but no sooner was he out of the front door than she slammed it shut. She

stood with her back pressed against the hallway wall and let out a laboured breath. 'Christ,' she mumbled. Of course, she said she wanted a man in her life, she liked the idea of it, but not the reality, not Brian. He wasn't a bad bloke, she admitted, but he didn't make her pulse race. She ran back up the stairs, grabbed her phone from the side of the bed and hit 'call'.

'Bleeding hell, Lesley, how on earth did you let me go home with that guy? I woke up this morning and couldn't even remember his name. How bad is that?' Katie knew that, although her friends were straight talkers, they never judged her. They'd seen each other through first boyfriends and break-ups, dodgy hook-ups and wild nights. The men changed, but one thing never did – she could trust her friends to see the funny side in anything. Soon she was screaming laughing as she lay flat on the bed talking about the night before.

'Hold on, Les, someone's knocking at the front door.' She jumped up quickly and went to the bedroom window. If it was Brian who'd forgotten something, then he was getting blanked. Katie peeped from behind the cream-coloured blinds, still on the phone. 'I can't see who it is, Lesley. If it's him, I swear to you now, I'll one-bomb him.' Katie was listening and looking out of the window. 'Oh, it's the cleaner that Jane promised. Proper legend she is for doing that. My head's banging so much the thought of running the Hoover round makes me want to die. Has she been to your house yet?'

Katie ran down the stairs and smiled as she let the woman in. She'd met Letty before at Jane's house and she was eager to let her inside to get cracking. She'd seen the miracles she worked at Jane's, ironing, changing beds, cleaning windows, cleaning the cooker. Jane never lifted a finger. 'Hiya, Letty. It's a bit of a mess, but I know you will work your magic on it all. Will you be able to change my beds, as well? What with one thing and another, I've not had a minute to do anything.' Katie had thought she might feel awkward having someone in her house, doing the jobs she usually did, but she was feeling so rough that the thought of help was a godsend.

Letty smiled at Katie, realising she had a call on hold. 'Yes, no worries. I'll do downstairs first, then I'll work my way up to the bedrooms.'