

# Chapter One

OK, Frankie, just focus – you can do this. You’re a professional. You broker deals and negotiate shark-infested business waters every day of the week. Helping your own mother organize a small party to celebrate forty years of happy marriage should be child’s play. All you have to do is work through the list, item by item. It’s not rocket science.

‘So, do you think I should contact people in advance to ask them about the seafood or not?’ Mum ponders, her voice interrupting my thoughts. She’s sitting opposite me, at the other side of the scrubbed-pine kitchen table, tapping her lucky ballpoint pen against her cheek as she thinks aloud.

‘No, I don’t think so, Mum,’ I say lightly. The key is to sound unworried or she might go off at the deep end and lose the run of herself altogether.

‘But what if someone’s allergic?’ she asks, her forehead creasing with anxiety. ‘That would be a disaster. And now that Jenny’s expecting it could be dangerous.’

My brother Eric and his wife Jenny have recently announced that they’re expecting their first baby and Mum has barely been able to contain her excitement – I swear she already knows every chapter of *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* off by heart.

‘Well, if people are allergic to it, they won’t eat it, will they?’ I reason. ‘And Jenny can have something else – it’s not like she won’t have enough to choose from.’ I glance pointedly at the caterer’s menu that lies on the table between us: there’s chicken, beef, a multitude of vegetarian options, six different

desserts (but not crème brûlée because Mum's terrified it will curdle) and four different wines. My mother is leaving no stone unturned or option unexplored in the quest to pull off the function of the year.

'Yes, but do you have to actually eat something you're sensitive to to have a reaction? People who are allergic to peanuts just have to touch one and they could die! What if a guest who has a deadly allergy to seafood brushes against some by accident – you know, at the buffet?' She pauses and squints into the middle distance as if she's visualizing this very scenario in her mind's eye. 'Or there could be some sort of spoon mishap – like a server from the prawns could end up in the salad! Oh, my God – that would ruin everything!'

'Mum, I don't think you have anything to worry about, I swear,' I say, trying desperately to keep my cool and not leap from the table and sprint round the kitchen, screaming hysterically with frustration. Honestly, this party is turning into a complete nightmare. It was only supposed to be a small gathering to celebrate Mum and Dad's ruby wedding anniversary so how has it come to this – discussions about the likelihood of guests accidentally dive-bombing the Marie Rose prawns or the lobster platter and having to be resuscitated beside the salad bar?

Mum is anxiously chewing her lip, clearly not listening to a word I say. 'You know what people are like, Frankie – some will deliberately try to find fault. I wouldn't put it past your aunt Maureen to go into antapalactic shock on purpose.'

'She'd never do that.' I sigh. 'And it's "anaphylactic", Mum.'

'Oh yes she would,' she replies grimly. 'She told everyone she took a funny turn after Dan and Joyce's do – she swore the crab sticks were off. Poor Joyce was mortified. She avoided people for weeks afterwards – *weeks!*'

In fairness, Mum is right about Aunt Maureen – she’s a total cow who devotes herself to making everyone else’s life as miserable as possible, but I don’t want to get into that now – it would only delay things even more and the clock is already against me. As it is, I have approximately fifteen minutes to get out of here if I have any chance of making it all the way to the other side of the city by eight for Antonia West’s book launch – and there are still a million things on Mum’s list to discuss.

‘I don’t want people to have any excuse to complain, Frankie,’ she goes on, her voice getting wobbly and emotional. ‘I want everything to be perfect.’

I take a deep breath. Being married for forty years *is* a huge achievement and I know this party means a lot to her. So, even though it’s driving me crazy, I have to do my best to help.

‘Well, what does Dad think about the seafood?’ I ask, sneaking a quick glance at my watch. Fourteen minutes. I have to leave in fourteen minutes to get to the book launch in time. Antonia will never forgive me if I’m late – I am her agent, after all: she’s entitled to expect me to turn up.

‘Oh, you know what your dad’s like,’ Mum says, a definite tinge of bitterness in her voice. ‘He says he doesn’t mind – he says *I* should decide.’

‘Well, then,’ I say. ‘Let’s decide.’

‘Ah, yes. But he said that about Bali too, didn’t he? He said he didn’t care about *that* either. When we were booking he said it didn’t matter that it might be forty degrees in the shade. But when we got there, who had to listen to him for two full weeks griping on about that heat rash in his privates? Me! Those two weeks felt like a lifetime, Frankie.’

Oh, God. We’re going round in circles. That Bali trip was easily ten years ago. I’m going to be here all night at this rate.

If I don't get a move on I'll definitely miss the speeches and if that happens then Antonia will go into a massive strop. And I can't say I'd blame her. She's my top author, one of the very few who came with me when I left Withers and Cole to set up on my own. The least I can do is be supportive.

'Look, why don't we ask the caterers to exclude seafood, then?' I say. 'Better safe than sorry, right? Now, let's pin down numbers – have you got a final figure?'

Thirteen minutes. Hurry up, hurry up.

'Well, yes,' she concedes, still a little huffy about Bali but clearly willing to forget about it temporarily to discuss her beloved guest list – the one she's been fine-tuning for weeks now. 'I've managed to pare it down to a hundred and eighty-nine. My only worry is the marquee. Do you think it'll be big enough? There's nothing worse than being hemmed in – and I don't want the guests to feel like they've been jammed into some flimsy garden tent like squashed sardines –'

'*A hundred and eighty-nine?*' I squeak. 'When did it get so big?'

'Well, I can't go leaving out people, Francesca,' she says, immediately defensive. 'Besides, Dan and Joyce had almost two hundred at theirs.'

'It's not a competition, Mum,' I say, knowing full well that that's exactly what it is. My mother is very close to her brother Dan and his wife Joyce but she's secretly been dying to get one up on Joyce for donkey's years and she won't be outdone.

'Of course it's not a competition!' she says, definitely huffy now. 'Anyway, we have completely different styles – I mean, for a start, I'm definitely *not* having a piñata. Grown adults beating a stuffed giraffe with a stick and then scrabbling around on the floor for cheap and nasty sweets is *not* my idea of an elegant evening.'

'I think it was supposed to be a llama or something actually,' I say, a vision of that night appearing immediately in my head. I don't think I'll ever forget it – the sight of hordes of tipsy senior citizens drinking margaritas and dancing in sombreros is likely to stay etched on my memory for ever.

'What?' Mum says irritably.

'The piñata. I think it was supposed to be a llama, not a giraffe. It was a Mexican theme, remember?'

'How could I forget? Those tortilla chips gave your father terrible indigestion for days afterwards. Anyway, the point is I don't care if that piñata was a dinosaur. I want my party to be classy – and remembered for the *right* reasons.'

'What's this about a llama?' a voice says, and I look up to see my father coming through the back door. Behind him, my two brothers – Eric and Martin – are manhandling a monstrous box between them, edging it through the frame with some difficulty and lots of dramatic groaning.

'What is that?' Mum splutters, her jaw dropping.

'It's the Flame Grill 700,' Dad replies, gesturing at it with his arms like it's some grand prize on a game show and he's the token curvy blonde in the miniskirt trying to sex it up. He's clearly delighted with himself. 'Martin had a friend of a friend who was getting rid of them. It was too good an opportunity to pass up – I got it for half nothing!'

With a final grunt, my two brothers heave the enormous box through the door and leave it next to Mum's beloved pine dresser, where photos of the three of us in our navy polyester school jumpers, with gummy smiles and scraped knees, are proudly displayed side by side.

'It's September. Barbecue season is over,' Mum says, stony-faced.

'Well, that's why it was such a bargain. And I thought it might come in handy for the party,' Dad explains.

'We are not having a barbecue at our fortieth wedding anniversary celebration.' Mum's voice is a funny strangled sob.

'It's only an option,' he replies, patting the box fondly. 'Just in case.'

'In case what?' she asks, her right eye twitching now.

'In case we run out of food – we can throw a few steaks on this thing.'

'Oh, God.' Mum's head is in her hands. 'Frankie, talk to him, will you?'

'Dad, you're having caterers, remember? We're not going to run out of food,' I say, smiling at him, hoping to defuse the situation. If World War Three breaks out I'll never be able to escape. Twelve minutes.

'I only wanted to help,' he says, looking a bit wounded.

'If you want to help you can put that thing in the garage where it belongs,' Mum says.

There's a small silence as they survey each other and the rest of us hold our breath.

'I was trying to surprise you, if you must know.' Dad sniffs. 'But if you don't want it, that's fine. Come on, boys, let's get this thing outside again.'

'Gimme a minute, will you, Dad? That yoke's heavy,' Martin gasps, collapsing into the chair beside me.

'Yeah. I'm bollixed too,' Eric agrees.

'Right,' Dad says, scowling at them both. 'Well, I'd better make some room in the garage then.'

The minute he's gone, Eric pipes up: 'Any chance of some grub, Ma?' He gives her his best boyish grin.

Mum jumps to attention and my heart sinks. Now she'll be waiting on this pair hand and foot and I'll be even further delayed. I glance at my watch. Eleven minutes. Crap. 'Of course, love,' she's saying. 'You must be starving, lug-

ging that thing around. I don't know what your dad was thinking of!

'What's on?' Eric asks nonchalantly, as if he's in some high-street deli and can just order the daily special.

Mum already has her head stuck in the fridge. 'Turkey? Coleslaw? I could make you a nice sandwich,' her disembodied voice says.

'Are there any chips going?' Eric asks.

'Of course, pet!' she replies, clearly in her element now. There's nothing she likes more than to cook for her 'boys'.

'Go on so, count me in,' Eric says, as if she's twisted his arm.

'Me too,' Martin agrees.

'So, sis,' Eric turns to me, 'to what do we owe the pleasure?'

I stick out my tongue at him, almost automatically. What is it about being in the company of my brothers that makes me feel like a fourteen-year-old again?

'Yeah, what are you doing in the suburbs, Frankie?' Martin smirks. 'Is it some sort of special occasion?'

'Very funny,' I reply. 'I was just leaving, actually.'

'What?' Mum's head is out of the fridge like lightning.

'Yeah, Mum. I have a work thing to get to, sorry. I meant to tell you earlier.'

There – I've said it. Hopefully, now her sons are here, she'll be distracted enough to let me off the hook without too much palaver.

'But we haven't finished the list yet!' she protests. 'We're not even halfway through.'

'What list?' Eric asks.

'For the party. Your sister is helping me with the final details. Or she was.' She gives me an injured look.

'Oh, yeah, the party,' Martin says, like he's just remembered. 'I meant to talk to you about that, Ma.'

‘Martin, please don’t tell me you can’t come – I gave you the date months ago!’ she wails.

‘Actually, I was going to ask you if I can bring someone,’ he replies casually.

There’s a millisecond pause before she reacts. ‘Of course you can, love!’ she squeaks, beaming at him, barely concealing her excitement at this news. ‘We’ve plenty of room – the more the merrier!’

‘Great,’ he says, kicking off his shoes.

I can see that Mum is about to spontaneously combust with curiosity – Martin hasn’t dated anyone since he broke up with ‘Honor the guard’, her of the hefty shoulders and unusual-verging-on-freakish thick neck, and it’s clear she’s dying to know all the juicy details. But she also knows that if she presses him she’ll get nowhere because prising information from him is like getting blood from a stone – it always has been. Even when we were kids he’d clam up about the simplest things. Silent but deadly – that’s Martin when he wants to be cagey.

‘Well, Frankie,’ Eric asks, turning to me, ‘are *you* bringing anyone to the party of the year?’

It’s now suddenly so quiet that you could probably hear a pin drop on the twenty-five-year-old kitchen lino – the one I remember being fitted by two men in blue boiler-suits when I was little. All three of them are looking at me. Mum is practically holding her breath, I can tell.

‘Why don’t you mind your own business, brother dear?’ I say, smiling tightly at him. He’s done that on purpose, the smug married git, I could bet my life on it.

‘Would you like me to set you up on a blind date?’ he asks, all innocence. ‘Mikey Grant still asks after you – I only met him the other day.’

‘Ah, little Mikey.’ Mum sighs fondly. ‘He’s a lovely fellow.’

‘Mum, I am not bringing Mikey Grant to your party, thanks all the same.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with him, Francesca,’ she says, her head bobbing. ‘He’s a very nice chap. He does everything for his mother.’

There’s a definite undercurrent there, but I ignore it. ‘Mum. He’s four foot eleven.’

‘Don’t be so sizeist, Francesca,’ Martin laughs.

‘Yeah – good things come in small parcels.’ Eric is snorting.

‘Shut up, knob-head,’ I say, glaring at him.

‘It would be nice to have someone to bring, though,’ Mum says. ‘Eric will have Jenny and now Martin has someone too . . .’

Why is it always like this? Despite all I’ve achieved in my career, no matter how high I climb or how hard I graft, all my family ever want to know about is my love life. Like a man should be the thing that defines me. Like we’re living in the eighteenth century. They don’t value what I achieve in work. I don’t think they would care less if I bagged the next J. K. Rowling or was crowned literary agent of the year. It seems that they just want to see me settle down and have babies. It’s been even worse since Jenny got pregnant – I love babies as much as the next person, but that doesn’t mean I want to hear my biological clock ticking like a time bomb every time I pop in for a cuppa with Mum.

This is exactly why I’ve never told them about my relationship – about Gary. It’d be far too complicated for them to process. They just wouldn’t understand. Plus, they’d have me married off and pregnant in a second.

‘There must be *someone* you could drag along,’ Martin says, smirking at me.

‘I’m far too busy for all that, Martin.’ My hands are itching to smack him.

‘Ah, yes, and how *is* the Rowley Agency going?’ he says. ‘Made your first million yet?’

‘Not yet,’ I reply sweetly. ‘Any day now, though.’

That’s a big fat lie, of course. The truth is, I’m struggling. Really struggling. But it’s not like you can just start a business from scratch and expect it to go without a hitch, is it? There are bound to be little hiccups along the way. Like constantly exceeding your overdraft limit, or missing your rent payments. My head starts to buzz, as it always does when I think about the mess I’m in: the agency is in trouble – serious trouble. I can’t let my family know that, though – not ever – and they won’t have to because I’m going to fix it before anyone can find out the truth.

‘Good, good,’ Martin says. ‘And Con Air is going great too – just in case you’re wondering. The name’s really worked – despite what some people thought.’

Martin set up an air-conditioning business a few years ago, and even though the company has what I think is possibly the stupidest name in history, he’s actually managed to become quite successful.

‘I’m delighted to hear that blowing on people is so lucrative,’ I say, checking my text messages again. I really have to get out of here.

‘Do you ever leave that thing behind?’ Martin asks.

‘I need it,’ I say. ‘It’s called being available.’

‘You’re addicted to it,’ Eric says.

‘Yeah, it’s not a BlackBerry, it’s a CrackBerry!’ Martin guffaws, and they both fall around the place laughing.

‘What’s so funny?’ Mum says, reappearing from the larder with the deep-fat fryer.

‘Mum, I hate to break it to you, but I seriously think these two morons were swapped with my real brothers at birth,’ I say.

‘We think Frankie is addicted to her BlackBerry – it’s a CrackBerry, geddit? Like crack cocaine?’ Eric is wiping tears of laughter from his eyes.

‘Eh?’ Mum looks completely confused.

‘Mum.’ I wave my phone at her. ‘They’re teasing me. They reckon I spend so much time with this – which, by the way, is an iPhone, you idiots – that it’s a full-blown addiction. Isn’t that right, boys?’

My brothers grin happily, delighted with their wit.

‘Oh, you two are such jokers.’ Mum chuckles, getting down the oil from the cupboard. ‘But, Frankie, they have a point – you never let that phone out of your hand.’

‘I run my own business – I have to be contactable twenty-four/seven, remember?’ I argue.

No matter how often I explain this I don’t think she’ll ever grasp it properly. Yes, my iPhone is important – OK, vital – in my life, but there’s nothing wrong with that.

‘Well, it wouldn’t kill you to put it away once in a while,’ she goes on. ‘Give yourself a break. Work isn’t the be-all and end-all, you know.’

*Except it is to me.* Right on cue my phone buzzes. It’s Helen, my assistant – a.k.a. the worst PA in Ireland – telling me that Antonia wants to know where I am. *Crap.* Out of the corner of my eye I see my brothers exchange another look with Mum as I punch in my reply: a lie telling her I’m almost there.

‘Mum, I really have to go,’ I say, pushing back my chair and grabbing my bag. ‘I’ll call you tomorrow, OK? Tell Dad I said goodbye.’

‘Don’t you want some chips, love?’ Mum asks. ‘Or some nice coleslaw? I made it this morning.’

‘No, thanks. I’m fine.’ I peck her on the cheek.

‘All the more for us,’ Eric and Martin say in unison and gleefully high-five each other.

'You two are a right pair of tossers, do you know that?' I sigh.

'Ah, now, blood is thicker than water,' Martin says.

'Yeah, you love us really!' Eric whoops.

I'd rather love you from a distance, I think, as I gallop out of the door, checking my messages as I run.