

Extract from “It’s Now or Never”

Chapter 1

‘Are we really related to her?’ I nudge my sister, Lauren, in the ribs.

She looks up from the glass of champagne that she’s staring into, seemingly mesmerised by the bubbles.

‘I can hardly believe it,’ I add.

‘Me neither,’ she agrees, and tips more champagne into her mouth.

Chelsea is gliding across the dance floor in the arms of her husband while her guests smile on benignly.

It is our elder sister’s fortieth birthday party and, as always, she is a vision of loveliness. She’s wearing a floor-length Vera Wang gown in white that’s drenched in Swarovski crystals which burst into tiny rainbows whenever they catch the light.

It fits like a glove, hugging every inch of her tiny frame. Her auburn curls are piled high and her head is thrown back in uncontained and joyous laughter, showing off the delicious creaminess of her throat and her perfect teeth.

Her husband Richard is tall, tanned and has the ruggedjawed looks of a classic romantic hero. He’s something fabulous in the City, is stonkingly wealthy, is kind to small furry animals, remembers to empty the bins and puts the lid down on the toilet when he’s finished too.

‘What star sign is Chelsea?’ Lauren wants to know.

‘Gemini.’

‘And that means you’re the luckiest bitch in the world, does it?’

‘I think it means you’re a good communicator with a sunny disposition.’ With a tendency to be two-faced and selfish on occasions if you believe in the stars, but I won’t tell my sister that.

Lauren tuts and throws back her drink. ‘What are we?’

‘Scorpio.’

‘And?’

‘We’re the most murdered star sign.’

Another tut. ‘Fabulous.’

This isn’t your usual fortieth birthday party. For mine – next year – I was thinking of having an At Home with a few family and friends, a readymade cake from Asda and some balloons – if I could summon up the necessary energy. Chelsea’s birthday party – like the rest of her life – is exquisite.

We’re at the Dorchester Hotel on London’s Park Lane in the main ballroom, along with about 300 other people. Already I’ve spotted Jodie Kidd, Jamie Oliver and Richard Hammond – just a few of the celebrities that our sister counts among her closest friends.

‘Where did we go wrong?’ Lauren asks, as she slides down on her pretty silver chair. She sounds a little drunk. In the same manner that Gordon Ramsay uses a little bad language. Oh – and he’s here too, somewhere.

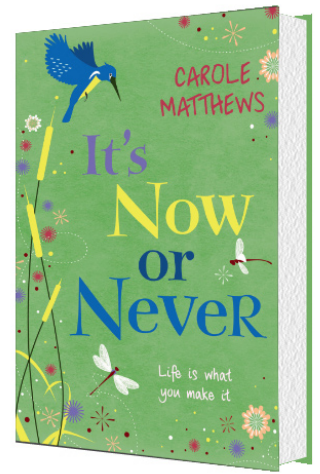
I sigh before I answer, ‘I don’t know.’

Needless to say, Lauren and I haven’t gone down the Vera Wang route of haute couture. I have chosen vintage Next – in other words, a dress that’s at least three years old. Not even a good vintage, I feel. My sister has opted for a little number from Coast that will be owned by her credit-card company for the next year or more and, I don’t like to mention it, but there’s some of the raspberry coulis – from our bitter chocolate mousse with raspberry coulis dessert – down the front of it.

I’m Annie Ashton and my sister, Lauren Osbourne, is the one swaying slightly in her chair next to me. Lauren and I are twins. I’m the elder by five minutes and we have now both recently reached the grand old age of thirty-nine years.

Our sister Chelsea didn’t buy into the whole Life Begins at Forty thing. Her life started when she slipped effortlessly from our mother’s womb and into an existence that has, ever since, been charmed.

Lauren and I, born a scant year later, were breech twins who entered the world bottom first and, somehow, I think that set the tone.



Chapter 2

Lauren stifles a yawn. 'I need to go to bed.'

My sister twirls her long, dark hair languidly round a manicured finger. We have spent our entire lives fighting not to look exactly like each other. That explains my ultrashort pixie crop. Though I did stop short of dyeing it blond – mainly due to the expense rather than a submission of individuality. I'm a little softer round the middle than Lauren – something I blame on my two children, rather than my penchant for cake. Lauren looks more sporty than me – that's because she is. Other than that, we're two peas in a pod. Annoyingly, despite our advanced years, we still find we turn up in the same outfit to parties sometimes. This time, we took the precaution of coordinating our limited wardrobes well in advance by the medium of several dozen text messages. We had no intention of committing our usual fashion faux-pas at such a splendid do.

'The night's young,' I remind Lauren. 'You can't be tired.'

The party is in full swing and the sounds of 'It's Raining Men' pound out from the disco. There's some dishy actor whose name I can't remember from *Holby City* camping it up on the dance floor. The DJ is someone edgy and famous but, as I live my life under a rock, I've never heard of him.

'Let's have a boogie and see if we can bag you a celebrity boyfriend.'

'I've already got a boyfriend,' Lauren reminds me.

I look around, theatrically. 'So where is he?'

'That's mean,' my sister says.

It probably is.

To fill you in, Lauren's boyfriend of five years was invited but couldn't make it at the last minute. This is a regular occurrence. The small problem is that Jude Taylor has the inconvenient encumbrance of a wife and two children, which makes spontaneous socialising with his long-term girlfriend somewhat tricky. Clearly, whatever excuse he'd fabricated to be absent from the marital home on a Saturday night didn't pass muster when push came to shove.

The reason my twin looks so toned is that she spends a lot of time in the gym pounding the treadmill out of sheer frustration.

'I want to go back to the room,' Lauren insists. 'Jude said that he'd call and I'll never be able to hear my mobile in here.'

'That's because we're at the world's most fabulous party,' I tell her. 'And everyone is having a great time.'

'Everyone but us.'

She's right. I'm also miserable due to a lack of male company. And that's because my husband has – point blank – refused to come. Greg hates this kind of thing. He'd rather have hot needles poked in his eyes than put a suit and tie on outside of office hours. The thought of being in a room filled with beautiful people doing beautiful things would make him go cold with dread. So, instead of coming to my sister's high-end, celebrity-loaded knees-up with enough champagne to float a ship, he's chosen to go night fishing on the Grand Union Canal with his exceedingly dreary mate, Ray. That's all he ever wants to do.

In twenty years of marriage, I have learned more about coarse fishing than I ever needed to. I could tell you the benefits of Dragon Barrel Pellets over Yellow Pop-Ups, if you cared to listen – or the differences between a waggler and a feeder rod. Call me sceptical, but carp, Greg frequently tells me, are very intelligent fish. I do not share my husband's passion for fishing or his views on the tricky carp – but that doesn't stop him from regaling me with many tales of their wily ways.

We did have a tiny bit of a row before I left. If I remember rightly, I said something like, 'I'm so sick of my small, dull life. This is the only excitement I've had in years and you're not prepared to share it with me. You're a selfish bastard and if you're not coming I'm going to have a great time without you. I have to put up with all kinds of things for you and your stupid fishing, and yet you won't compromise when it comes to my needs. Well, that's it! I'm off.'

And Greg, I think, closed the door quietly behind him as he left. He didn't even tell me to enjoy myself.

'What a morose pair we are,' Lauren says wearily. 'Let's clear off.'

'Chelsea will be upset. We rarely see her these days.'

'Our dear sister won't even notice that we're gone.'

Lauren's right again. Chelsea is too busy socialising with all of her rich friends to notice if we slope away. It makes me sad that we're not closer to her, but Chelsea now lives a crazy jet-set life, splitting her time between the UK and Dubai where her husband is for most of the year. She's just swooped in for the party – if not on a private jet, then certainly first class.

‘Don’t drag me away, Lauren,’ I plead. ‘Let’s have some fun.’ I might just find myself a celebrity boyfriend. See what Greg would think to that.

‘I’ve got a headache coming on,’ my sister whines, and gives me her most pitiful pout.

So we head for the door – Lauren a little unsteadily.

We pass a table groaning with champagne and Lauren grabs a bottle and two glasses and we take those with us to continue the party on our own.

As we stand and wait for the lift, Lauren takes out her mobile phone. ‘Damn,’ she says. ‘I’ve missed Jude’s call.’

Quickly, she checks her voicemail and there’s a whispered message that I can just about overhear – even though Lauren tries to press her phone close enough to her ear so that she thinks I can’t.

‘Sorry, I couldn’t make it, darling,’ Jude’s smooth tones coo. *‘But you know how much I love you. I’ll speak to you as soon as*

I can.’

I don’t even bother checking my phone as I know that Greg won’t have bothered to call me. He wouldn’t coo sweet nothings even if he did. My husband is not a cooey sort of man. I’m more likely to get sweet FA than sweet nothings.

Lauren hangs up.

The desperation in her tired smile makes my heart want to break.

‘He said he loves me.’

I just can’t help a disbelieving tut at that. It’s out before I can stop it. If he loves Lauren so much, then where is he tonight, eh? Answer me that.

‘He does,’ she insists crisply. ‘And one day we’ll be together. You’ll see.’

‘I have to admire your optimism, sis,’ I say, as gently as I can.

Then, as we wait to be whisked away from the ball and back up to our bedroom, I marvel at how Lauren can be so optimistic despite the odds being stacked against her. I also take time to wonder where my own optimism has toddled off to.

