

What's your dream?

The California Club



BELINDA JONES

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About the Book

When Lara Richards jets off to glamorous California, the last thing she's expecting is to find her old friend Helen transformed from a clipboard-clasping frump into a shimmering surf goddess. The secret of her blissful new life? The mysterious California Club.

So the offer of guest membership - one wish, guaranteed to come true by the end of their stay - is one Lara and her friends can't resist. Could this be Lara's chance to win her best friend Elliot's heart after ten years of longing? Or does the fact that he's travelling with his brand new fiancée mean that Lara will have to come up with a new dream...?

About the Author

Belinda Jones's first paid job was on cult kiddy comic *Postman Pat*. Since then she has written for a multitude of magazines and newspapers including, *New Woman*, *Empire*, *FHM*, *heat*, *Elle* and the *Daily Express*. Belinda's widely acclaimed first novel *Divas Las Vegas* was voted No.2 in the *New Woman* Bloody Good Reads Awards in 2001 and *On the Road to Mr Right* - a non-fiction travelogue love quest was a *Sunday Times* top ten bestseller. Her new novel *The Paradise Room* is available now in Arrow Books.

Also by Belinda Jones

Divas Las Vegas
I Love Capri
On the Road to Mr Right
The Paradise Room

*To embark on more fabulous journeys with Belinda Jones,
visit her website: www.belindajones.com*

The California Club

Belinda Jones



arrow books

For Tony Horkins

(for showing me just how fabulous unrequited love can be)

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faux-husband James and kitty Cabbage who accommodate my anti-social tapping so blithely.

To Donald Short for the 'kissing M&Ms' concept.

Finally, to Lara, my heroine's namesake - this book is in honour of our twenty-year friendship. (Even if I am hopeless at keeping in touch I've thought of you on every page!)

1

Elliot.

I've been carrying a torch for him so long people mistake me for the Statue of Liberty. In fact just last month I celebrated a whole decade of unrequited love. But now look at me – standing at Heathrow airport about to jet off with His Sexiness for two weeks of swaying palms, candy-coloured convertibles and airbrushed skies.

Shame he's bringing his girlfriend.

Elise. That's right – Elliot and Elise. The two Es. Shouldn't be allowed.

It would all be fairly unbearable were it not for the fact that I am to be joined by two fabulous allies – Sasha and Zoë. They got me through the first meeting with Elise and they can get me through this. Not that this was supposed to be an ordeal. The original plan was a two-week romp over to California to visit our beloved friend Helen and stage a grand sandy reunion of our old gang: the Brighton Beau-Belles. For the record, we comprise one beau (Elliot) and four belles (Helen, Sasha, Zoë and me – Lara). Categorically no Elises.

The five of us were drawn together one brow-moppingly hot summer by The Seaflower – Brighton's most wincingly chintzy B&B. I'm allowed to say that because it belonged to my mother. Belonged. Past tense. As of a week ago it belonged to me. But I may as well continue using the past tense because, before I can so much as change a lace doily, I am about to lose it. That's got to be the ultimate definition of carelessness – losing a six-guest-room building. And I got off to such a great start – inheriting it without my mother

even having to die and just at a time when I fancied a career change. (I'm a Home Stylist which sounds bogus, I know, but in reality I make a decent living shopping with other people's money and providing the finishing touches once the interior decorators have done their darndest. Whether you're after a Regency mud-scaper or Warhol original, an antique Venetian mirror or functioning Sodastream to ruin the look of your Tikki Bar, I'm your woman.)

The thought of getting my hands on the B&B - ripping out every carpet and cornice - thrilled me, as for nearly twenty-two years I've been planning a stunning re-design from the depths of my ever-metamorphosing bedroom. Every year since I was eight, my mum has given me a birthday present of a Room Makeover Kit (pot of paint and a new duvet cover in the lean, younger years, hard cash ever since I was big enough and ugly enough to haggle at flea markets). Each spring I'd create a whole new environment for myself - running the gamut from space-age tinfoil to Zen bamboo. But not this year. This year I'm going to be thousands of miles from home, staying in someone else's hotel, assessing their knick-knacks.

I was hoping we'd be checking in to the hotel where Helen works as head pastry chef - the legendary Hotel Del Coronado, set on a tiny island across the bay from San Diego. It's where *Some Like It Hot* was filmed and still attracts big movie stars today - in fact the day Helen called to say Russell Crowe had just checked in was the day we finally quit our assorted procrastinations and booked our flights.

I don't know why she's got us staying elsewhere (she wouldn't say why or where) as I'm sure she could have wangled us a reasonable room rate with her keen negotiating skills. That's how she got out to America in the first place, on a business exchange with a tech company in

Arizona. But how she ended up fluffing meringues by the seaside is beyond us all.

Helen was always the executive among us, even at the age of nineteen when she decided to use the B&B as a case study for her Business Studies degree course. That's how we met. It was an auspicious start - within a matter of months she'd taken over from our accountant, neatly trimming back our overheads and plumping up our profits. She was a natural - so smart, so quick, so ambitious - and as the rest of the group began to form Helen easily filled the role of Mother Hen, but never in a clucky, fussy way. It was more that she's the hyper-organized one. At times she can come off a little bossy but she always has our best interests at heart, chivvying us along, intent on us reaching our full potential. Mrs Motivator, we used to call her.

I step out the way of an out-size family struggling with an over-stacked trolley (which will almost certainly topple over and flatten at least one of their three tots before they reach the lifts) and survey the airport concourse for signs of Zoë. I arranged to meet her half an hour early so I could break the news about the B&B to her first. For all her in-yer-face bravado she's going to be the most devastated about losing it. It was her home for seven years, after all.

Zoë turned up at The Seaflower just shy of midnight one Tuesday in June with a face snogged free of make-up and the man responsible for her stubble rash lurching behind her. He was much older - twenty-five, I think. Doesn't sound that old until you consider that she was fifteen at the time. They were both drunk and not the least bit interested in hearing about the coffee-making facilities. The next morning she woke to find him gone, leaving a soggy condom (actually a blessing - teenage pregnancy runs in her family) and an unpaid bill. As a schoolgirl with only a Betty Boop purseful of coins to her name, this presented her with something of a dilemma.

My mum threatened to call her parents but the look on Zoë's face made me intervene. Mum was late for the hairdresser's anyway so she left the situation in my inexperienced hands. I'd seen enough soaps to know that all problem-solving began with a nice cup of tea and so I took her through to our private living area, away from the other guests. I even made use of the teacosy - the kind now the favoured headwear of Enrique Iglesias - and something about the general clichéd homeliness of our kitchen caused Zoë to spill her heart out.

She told me all about her volatile, racist stepfather (who seemed permanently furious with Zoë that her real father was black) and her cowering, in-denial mother. She had no one to stand in her corner and I could only imagine what her stepfather would do if he found out what she'd been doing last night, and with whom. (Not that Zoë knew - she never even got the stubbly chin's name.)

Being five years older than her and having always hankered after a younger sister, I adopted her on the spot. And then my mum did the same for real a year later. The three of us lived in giggly, girlie companionship until the day Zoë decided her destiny lay in Hemel Hempstead. Not an obvious relocation destination for someone hoping to be discovered, but at the time she had a more valid reason for moving - her youngest cousin on her father's side was diagnosed with dyspraxia (formerly known as the clumsy child syndrome) and in her efforts to gather every scrap of information on the subject she so impressed the MD of the Dyspraxia Foundation that they offered her a job at their HQ in HH. It was just answering enquiries and general office admin but considering Zoë had barely attended school she felt this was her big break.

It was a real wrench for me, not least because I felt like she didn't need me any more, but I understood that she had something to prove to herself - her mother and stepfather barely set a skanky toe outside Brighton's notorious

Whitehawk Estate and she has always felt a keen need to not be like them. I reckon the 'Have a Beautiful Day!' mentality of California has got to be the ultimate leap away - must remind her to send them a postcard.

'Lara!' A clattering of mule heels and a jangle of charms announces Zoë's arrival. Since I saw her last, her springy brown curls have been ironed straight and interlaced with multi-coloured extensions hanging in chunky layers past her shoulders like a carwash brush. Gotta love her - she's full-on drag queen glamour 24/7.

'Did you see him?' she yelps, releasing me from an overexcited embrace.

I take a moment to recover - Zoë's hugs always put me in mind of those junkyard compressor machines that can turn a tank into a battered metal sheet in one crunch.

'Did I see who?' I ask, setting my shoulder back in its socket.

'Ian McShane - you know, Lovejoy! - he's over there at first class check-in.'

That's way beyond my viewing range so I have to take her word for it. (Not that we normally give any credence to Zoë's star-spotting - to her every man in a tuxedo is Pierce Brosnan, every grey-haired gent drinking red wine is Anthony Hopkins and every petite brunette eyeing the security cameras is Winona Ryder. Even if we're at the Harlequin Shopping Centre in Watford.)

'He's still a hottie, isn't he?' she continues, leering over at the bushy-browed grin.

I roll my eyes - considering she's only twenty-five, Zoë is partial to a strange array of retro crushes. I blame the repeats on Living TV.

'I think it's a sign!' she decides.

'Of what?' I laugh.

'That I'm going to shag a celebrity!'

‘Well, law of averages, it’s going to happen sooner or later.’

‘I’ll have you know I’ve been very restrained lately,’ she sniffs.

‘No more single fathers, child psychologists or male nurses?’ I check.

‘No, I’ve cut right back!’ Zoë looks pious.

‘Conserving your energy for this trip?’

She nods eagerly. Men of America beware.

‘So what did you want to talk about?’ she tilts her head expectantly.

Suddenly I can’t do it. The timing is all out. She’s hyped up about the holiday and I don’t want to see the work-of-art that is her eye make-up streaking on my account. Maybe it’s best I tell the Beau-Belles about the B&B when we’re all together?

‘Lara?’ Zoë tries to prompt a response.

‘I just wanted to make sure you’d get here before Elliot and Elise – you know how I feel about seeing him with her . . .’ It’s only half a lie – I am genuinely queasy at the prospect.

She gives me an understanding squeeze. ‘Vile creature. I don’t know why he had to bring her,’ Zoë grumbles. ‘Why can’t it just be our gang like the good old days?’

‘Like she was going to leave him alone with four women,’ I huff.

‘Yeah but he’s known us for years, if he was going to get it on with any of us it would’ve happened by now. Oh!’ Zoë clamps her hand over her mouth. ‘Sorry Lara, I—’

‘It’s okay,’ I mumble.

‘Obviously he wouldn’t *you know* with the rest of us. But you . . . you he could shag any minute!’ Zoë gives me an earnest smile.

‘I’ll be lucky if he can hold himself back!’ I try to play along. ‘We might have to do it right here on the suitcase scanner.’

Nervous laughter.

I wish I could convince the Belles that I'm over Elliot so they wouldn't have to constantly feel bad on my behalf, but it's tricky. First I'd have to convince myself.

'At least we can count on Helen to be single!' Zoë takes a different tack. 'Maybe she can hook us up with some naked chefs!'

I chuckle. She may well have some spare – Helen has always found men too disobedient and lax with their promises to take seriously. She once totted up how many hours her sister wasted waiting for the phone to ring or sobbing into her pillow over some skateboarding schmuck and – other than the occasional accidental summer romance – decided she had more productive things to do with her time. Zoë's relationships rarely lasted either, but that's more down to her 'variety is the spice of life' motto.

As for Sasha, she gets more offers than all of us put together but never seems particularly keen on any of the poor blighters. She only goes on dates to prove she isn't aloof and out of fear of seeming ungrateful, because she's heard so many girls complaining they never got asked out. Whereas I long to inspire eternal devotion, she actually finds that infatuated puppy-dog look the biggest turn-off. She once told me it makes her want to give the guy a good slap and screech, '*Stop looking at me!*' Well, if she acted on that impulse today she would have already assaulted half the men in Terminal 4 – as she walks towards us they gawp after her slinky bod and swishy hair like she's hooked their noses with an invisible fishing line.

I look at my watch. 1 p.m. on the dot. Sasha never did learn the diva ways of a supermodel despite nine years in the business and a cereal ad campaign that made her a household bottom. She's given it all up now and is currently between careers, though the first word that springs to mind when you see her will always be 'model'. (Fractionally ahead

of 'vain cow' - not that she is, but you can't help wishing, can you?)

'Belles!' she breathes, gliding into our arms and staying there for a full minute.

'It's so good to see you!' I smile and inhale her Scandi-fresh scent.

'You too,' she sighs, still holding life-raft-tight. 'I'm sorry I've been such a recluse lately.'

Sasha's normally the best at keeping in touch but over the past few months she's been uncharacteristically 'absent'. I presumed she just wanted to take some time to de-program herself now that she's an ex-model - you know, let her cuticles grow ragged and maybe cultivate a baby pot belly - but it'll never work, she's beautiful to the core.

'I've been thinking about you all so much.' She's misty with sentiment as her eyes flick between us. 'We've had some good times, haven't we?' she adds with perfect death-bed delivery.

'We're about to have a whole lot more.' Zoë reminds her with a playful nudge.

'Yeah!' I grin to excess in the hope that it proves contagious, but all Sasha can manage is a slight 'let's hope so' smile. She never was exactly a raver but today her meek streak seems more apparent than ever.

'So, how are you?' I probe, feeling the first twitches of concern. 'How's life without the lens?'

'Fine,' she looks uncomfortable but quickly brightens. 'You know how the last time we spoke I said I wished I'd never gone into modeling in the first place?'

I nod. She had a point - there is a certain class to being that exquisite and not doing the obvious thing.

'Have you changed your mind?' I ask.

'Oh no! It just occurred to me that if I hadn't gone down that path we might never have met!'

Beautiful, languid Sasha slipped into the B&B one afternoon in July on a fashion shoot for *New Woman* magazine. I would have stared longer but the photographer distracted me with his rapturous tizzy on seeing my mother's décor: 'This is exactly the level of naff we were going for!' he cheered as I showed him to our flouney four-poster suite. 'I mean, it looked cheesy in your brochure but all these ornamental bells and cross-stitched cushions - it's perfect!'

I thanked him through gritted teeth and left them to it, but within twenty minutes the make-up artist came dinging on the reception bell asking me to call a doctor - Sasha was being violently ill. I thought she'd looked a bit pale on arrival but this was back in the days where all models were supposed to look eerily pallid so I hadn't taken much notice. Turns out she had gastroenteritis and couldn't move from the bathroom. Not even back to the luxury of The Grand Hotel where the rest of them were holed up for the night.

She ended up staying with us for a week, sweating and vomiting and writhing until 'can't take any more' tears slipped down her poreless face. No family swooped in to look after her - they live in Monaco - so Zoë and I took it in turns checking on her. Then Helen became matron to our nurses and by the following Wednesday we were all having a Babycham slumber party in Sasha's four-poster, getting her to regale us with stories of who she'd modeled with and where - from Yasmin Le Bon to a bikini shoot in Peru. Zoë was particularly entranced. 'You've got the perfect life!' she used to tell her. 'All pampering and pandering, *darlings!* and champagne!'

Sasha told us repeatedly that it wasn't nearly as glamorous or as fun as it sounded but we didn't believe a word of it. Proof positive that Sasha led a charmed life came when she was well enough to eat again and we discovered she could indulge her profoundly sweet tooth with no repercussions, whereas Zoë in particular has to watch every Revel. Not that Zoë begrudged Sasha her speedy

metabolism, just like I don't begrudge her the fact that Elliot had a brief crush when they first met. Anyone would. Everyone does.

'Maybe we should be feeling sorry for Elise,' Sasha takes a rather controversial stance as we re-congregate by the telephones to avoid further clashes with the stream of harassed holidaymakers. 'Going away with three girls she hardly knows, to visit a fourth she's never met - she must be worrying about being the odd one out.'

Zoë and I give her a stern 'whose side are you on?' look. 'Sorry,' Sasha demurs.

'Here they come now!' Zoë sounds the alert.

'Oh God!' I take a breath.

'Don't worry, we know what to do,' Zoë reassures me.

In one hand I feel Sasha's long cool fingers interlacing with mine, the other becomes comfortingly indented with Zoë's chunky, nubby rings. I have every confidence in their support. The ability to decimate a love rival is one of the most crucial qualities in a best friend, and they do it so well. The first time Elliot arranged to introduce Elise to me, I begged them to come too and they were swift to oblige. We arrived early at the chosen bar and positioned ourselves strategically at the back, standing united as though Elliot was a hostage about to be marched towards us by his evil captor. Being irritatingly short-sighted, I was relying 100 per cent on their vision and bitching expertise to get me over this first hurdle.

'She's orange!' Zoë got off to a good start as soon as they stepped through the door. 'Badly applied St Tropez, probably didn't exfoliate before application.'

'What's she wearing?' I asked, heart pounding.

'All black,' Sasha jumped in.

'Audrey classic or cop-out?' I had to have specifics.

'Cop-out, and they're mismatched blacks: trousers washed-out cotton - you know when it gets that greenish

undertone?’

I nodded fervently.

‘Next to purplish-black acrylic cardi.’

‘Figure?’

‘Hmmm . . .’ Zoë and Sasha seemed stumped for adjectives.

‘What? Oh no, it’s good, isn’t it?’ I cried.

‘Hard to tell,’ Sasha did the diplomatic thing.

‘Hair!’ I barked, moving on. They were getting closer and I needed to end on a negative.

‘Looks like she’s growing out highlights,’ Sasha squinted.

‘No, it’s split ends,’ Zoë whooped in triumph. ‘Inch-long fray!’

I could hear Elliot’s voice. My stomach gurned a response. ‘Anything else?’ I hurried them, just seconds to go.

‘Needs a pedicure,’ was Zoë’s last word on the subject.

Today Elise’s trotters come encased in a pair of spike-heeled boots, a long black coat shrouds what did indeed turn out to be an annoyingly good bod and her neck is entwined with a rash-inducing mohair scarf. Welcome to March in the UK.

‘What’s with the leather Gestapo gloves?’ Zoë hisses.

‘They must be new because she’s constantly adjusting them,’ Sasha deduces.

‘They’re giving me the creeps,’ Zoë shudders. ‘She looks like she’s about to strangle someone.’

‘Preferably herself,’ I mutter before realizing that’s not actually possible.

Come on, force out a smile, I encourage myself.

‘Elise! So nice to see you!’ I beam. It turns out my pleasure is entirely genuine – she’s still bright orange.

I press my cheek against her Flash Bronzer but blow my kiss directly at Elliot.

‘Lara!’ he grins as our matching indigo eyes meet. ‘Come here!’ and he pulls me into a hug.

Every time. He gets me every time.

Though he was the last to join our group, I'd known of Elliot the longest. We were at the same university, but with little likelihood of overlapping, what with him head down in computer science, and me swanning round the Art Department in vintage Pucci. I actually caught my first glimpse of him at a gig, drumming for some hopeless student band. I only looked over to see what was making such an ear-tweaking noise but was instantly mesmerized. His tawny hair had a 'just got out of bed' look that made me want to get right back in. (Ironic, really. Now I know that when he does get out of bed his hair is flat to his head and he looks like an owl.)

While the rest of the band floundered round posturing and twanging inappropriate chords he kept a steady rhythm and just looked so laid back. From time to time he'd catch someone's eye, a grin would light up his face and these dimples would appear - ones that made you smile just looking at them. I was smitten. From then on my day was incomplete if I didn't have a sighting of him. I used to loiter in the coffee bar watching him with his mates, wondering what his voice sounded like, what he was saying . . . I'd will him to look over and when he did I'd send him telepathic messages of love. Though he never sent any back, he would occasionally smile. And when he did you'd never seen anyone bound to Mrs Montgomery's art history class with such exuberance.

I thought of a million excuses to speak to him, but in a way I didn't want to. I wanted to keep this perfect state of adoration as it was.

Then one Saturday in mid-August he walked into the B&B. I was just on my way to meet Sasha at the station, but immediately darted behind the reception desk, joining my mother.

'Oh, hi!' he smiled recognition. 'You're . . .'

'From Brighton University. We both go there.' Thank you, Einstein.

‘That’s right!’ he smiled. ‘I’m just here to pick up my parents, they checked in last night. Harvey?’

‘Ah yes, room 5, would you like me to call them for you?’ My mother dealt with the business in hand.

‘Thanks,’ Elliot nodded.

‘This is my mum,’ I whispered while she was on the phone.

‘And here’s mine—’ he motioned to a grey-haired lady coming down the stairs. She was at least twenty years older than my own mother. ‘And my dad.’

He was even older, but both of them had transparently sweet dispositions.

‘Pleased to meet you!’ they twinkled at me, revealing strong Mancunian accents that had somehow eluded their son.

‘This is . . .’ Elliot went to introduce me but faltered, realizing he didn’t know my name.

‘Lara!’ I leapt in.

‘Pretty name, that!’ the dad noted.

I flushed with delight and gave my mum’s elbow a squeeze for making such an excellent choice.

‘Is this your first time in Brighton?’ I asked, sounding ridiculously prim.

‘Ooh, yes, dear and we’re loving it!’ Mama Harvey cooed.

‘Elliot’s taking us on the pier today.’ Papa Harvey puffed up.

‘You watch yourselves on that helter-skelter!’ my mother teased.

They chuckled delightedly and tootled on their way.

I couldn’t believe it. Elliot and I had gone from never having spoken to meeting each other’s parents in a matter of minutes. (My mum is both parents to me, Dad being long gone.) This boded well.

‘Do you want to do a bit of dusting while you’re up there?’ my mum said, nudging me when they’d gone.

I looked at her, still fizzing as if I had Alka-Seltzer swirling through my veins. 'What?' I squeaked.

She raised her eyes to the ceiling then winked. 'Let me know when you're ready to be scraped down!'

I grinned back at her then ran out the door, yelling, 'I've got to go and meet Sasha!'

I couldn't wait to tell her my news. Better yet, I got to relive it all again an hour later when we met up with Zoë. She seemed even more excited than me - if such a thing were possible - and she's been my number one *Elliot 4 Lara* cheerleader ever since. Sometimes I think I can't give up on him till Zoë does.

Anyway, when Elliot came back to drop his parents off that evening, he left a message about a gig he was playing Sunday night and all four of us girls went along. He loved that, having his own personal harem, and over too many bottles of K cider we decided he could be the one Beau to our exclusive collection of Brighton Belles. His girlfriend of the time didn't approve so he finished with her. I was in heaven. Until he got another. And then another.

I soon learned that his girlfriends would come and go but his Belles could never be replaced. We'd claimed the best part of his heart, I used to tell myself. It was us he introduced to his parents, not any of these dippy two-month flings.

Mr and Mrs Harvey became regulars after their first successful visit and I'd grill Elliot to find out all the little treats they were into at the time, then plant them in their room so that they'd coo, 'Oh, Lara, you do spoil us!'

I loved it. They felt like the grandparents I'd never had.

So it was utterly devastating when Elliot's dad passed away, aged eighty-three, just two years ago. I don't ever remember feeling that sad before. Convinced his mother would die of a broken heart, Elliot moved back to

Manchester to be closer to her. But within a year she was gone too.

At first I spoke to him every day and went up to stay whenever I could but pretty soon Elise was dominating the scene. I didn't feel I could put my arms around him in front of her. I never felt comfortable when she was in the room - she always seemed to be watching me, willing me to leave, I could feel it. Elliot was withdrawn at the time anyway, and with her blocking my every move I couldn't really reach him. What could I do? She was there in Manchester, I wasn't. So I stepped back and ached for his pain from the sidelines.

We've been speaking a little more since this trip was confirmed but it's not the same. I wonder if it ever will be again.

'Are we waiting for something?' Elise queries.

We look blankly at each other. Someone to take charge, apparently.

'God, isn't it weird not having Helen here to organize us?' Sasha shakes her head.

'Elliot, you'll have to be Dad!' Zoë nominates him.

'You're joking!' Elise titters. 'He hasn't even changed up his money yet *and* we missed out on an Apex train fare because he forgot to book a week in advance - hopeless!'

I hate it when couples make sideswipes in public. Is she trying to prove that she knows him better than us?

'This way, troops!' Elliot deliberately points away from the ticket desks.

We laugh and drag him into position in the cordoned-off line.

It's funny, most of the people around us are also about to go on the trip of a lifetime and yet they couldn't look more wretched if they tried. It's the queuing that does it - knocks the holiday spirit right out of you.

Whereas the rest of us shuffle forward in an absentminded fashion, Elise appears to be one of life's tailgaters, nudging

Elliot every time he lets more than an inch elapse between him and the man in front. 'Mickey, I don't know where you are half the time!' she tweaks his chin.

I close my eyes. I'd forgotten their pet names for each other - Mickey and Minnie, because their first snog was at a work outing to EuroDisney. Can you stand it?

Sasha and Zoë are talking but I switch back to my eavesdropping on the Es.

'And you won't like the bacon out there, it's just the streaky bit - all dark and crispy,' she fusses. 'But the good thing is that if you order a Coke or Sprite they'll keep topping it up for free. And sometimes you won't have to order a drink at all because they bring iced water to your table automatically. Mostly I just drink that.'

'Have you been to America before?' I find myself asking, even though she wasn't talking to me.

Elise nods in a smug fashion.

Great. That's all we need: someone to go, 'I know!' every time we pip with excitement at a new discovery.

'Yeah, I lived out in California for a while,' she breezes.

'Really?' I try not to look too impressed. I didn't know that. But then I know very little about this woman. Probably because I never asked - I didn't want the precious space in my head filled with details about her.

'How come?' Zoë's now joined the conversation.

'How come what?' Elise plays hard to get.

'How come you lived in California?'

She opens her mouth and then closes it. It seems there's no simple answer to that.

'Oh, it was just something I wanted to try. Mickey - we're moving again!'

Elise links arms with Elliot and turns her back on us. Subject closed apparently.

The girls and I exchange a suspicious glance. We so should have hired a private detective when she first came

on the scene. All we'd have to do now is flick through her dossier and we'd know exactly what she'd got up to.

'Let's see your passport photo.' Zoë reaches forward and taps Elise on the shoulder. 'Airport ritual.'

Good ruse. There could be a clue within!

Elise looks reluctant.

'Don't be shy.' Zoë extends a palm. 'I've seen all the others.'

Clamping her hand over her typed information, Elise holds the passport open at the photo page, keeping it well out of snatching distance. Definitely hiding something. Her age, for one thing. Elliot said she was older than him but I don't know by how much. I study her face a little closer desperate for her to squawk, 'They're not crow's feet, they're laughter lines!' so I can give her a sour look and reply: *Nothing's that funny.*

'Next!'

That's us. We scuttle forward to the desk.

'Hi, I'm Brendan!' The pupils of the chap behind the counter dilate wildly at the sight of The Model. 'We do have some space available in first . . .' he addresses (or should that be undresses?) Sasha, mentally booking her on a flight to Temptation Island.

'I'm with my friends - there's five of us altogether,' Sasha informs him.

His face falls.

'Unless you can upgrade us all, I'd rather just stick with economy,' she says, simply.

Brendan is clearly crushed that she won't now be beholden to him.

'Well, if you're sure. Let's see if we can at least get you by the exit - that way you'll be able to stretch out those lovely long legs of yours.'

'Can I get the seat next to her?' Zoë pips. 'I have unusually large boobs.'

Brendan looks up with a start.

‘It’s like wearing an airbag,’ Zoë continues. ‘Nobody can get by me if I’m in a normal row. I mean, these seats have 32-inch leg room but I’ve got 36D boobs. You try getting your tray table down—’

‘Yes, yes, madam. I’ll see what I can do,’ Brendan scrabbles to regain his composure.

‘Me and Mickey don’t mind where we sit, as long as we’re together.’ Elise morphs into her girlie-whirlie alter ego, snaking her arm around Elliot’s.

Urgh, get a toilet cubicle, I cringe, silently praying I’m not seated next to the Es. I don’t think I could take eleven hours of passive nuzzling.

Brendan looks up from his clicking. ‘We have a band of four with the extra leg room and I can seat one of you in the row directly behind.’

‘You don’t mind, do you, Lara?’ Elise gives me a look, equal parts patronizing and dismissive.

‘Oh, can’t she sit with us?’ Zoë wheedles, craning to peer at Brendan’s screen.

‘It’s a very busy flight!’ he snaps, shooing her away.

‘It’s fine,’ I mumble, nudging Zoë. ‘If you recline your seat back you’ll practically be in my lap anyway.’

‘Are you sure?’ Sasha checks.

‘Honestly. I’ll be watching the movies most of the time.’ As I squeeze a smile I get a horrible sinking feeling. It’s going to be me that’s the odd-one-out.

Round One to Elise.

Brendan hands us our boarding passes.

‘OK, all set and that’s two vegetarians: Sasha Williams and Zoë Harriott.’

‘I didn’t realize you’d gone veggie, Zo,’ Elliot queries.

‘I haven’t. I’m not lacto-intolerant, kosher or vegan either, but those people always get their food served first so I thought, for a change . . .’ Zoe shrugs.

‘Did you know there are more vegetarians in Brighton than any other place in Europe?’ I announce.

‘Really?’ Sasha coos. We love a fascinating fact.

But Elise has no interest in our smalltalk. ‘Shall we meet up again at the gate in an hour?’ she cries.

Unbelievable – she’s trying to get rid of us already!

‘What’s everyone doing?’ Elliot takes the more sociable approach.

‘Well, you’ll make a beeline for Dixons,’ Zoë makes the obvious prediction for The Gadget King. ‘Sasha will be in W.H. Smith, looking for a book for the flight.’

I know, a model who reads: shocking isn’t it?

‘And Lara and I will be in Duty Free!’ she cheers, then remembers she’s got a letter to send before we get airside.

‘It’s actually a job application,’ Zoë confides as we two go off in search of a postbox. ‘The closing date is while we’re away.’

‘I didn’t realize you wanted to leave the Dyspraxia Foundation.’ I frown.

‘I don’t, but with this new job there’s a chance I could go on to become a celebrity PA!’

It’s ironic really, Zoë has by far the most worthy job of all of us and yet she’s the one who deep down always yearned to be a finger-clicking, hair-swishing diva. Lately she’s modified this wish to fit the current celebrity-ravaging climate, deciding that working *alongside* a star would mean a good deal of the perks without any of the wild accusations in *heat* magazine that she’s losing her hair/man/mind etc. Not a bad plan in theory, but I’ve a feeling the reality would be a nasty wake up call, and then what dreams would she be left with?

‘Do you know where this new company is based?’ I ask, hoping she’ll move back to Brighton.

‘West London, so at least I’d be more in the swing of things,’ she notes. ‘Of course it’s irrelevant, really . . .’

‘Why’s that?’

‘Well, seeing as I’m about to get discovered by Hollywood!’ She does a little twirl and I giggle back at her.

Zoë stops short of the queue at Passport Control and turns to face me.

'It could happen, couldn't it?' There's genuine hankering in her voice.

I look into her maxi-lashed eyes and smile. 'Why not?'

Why is it so hot in airports? I can't believe Elise stayed wrapped up the whole time we were queuing - I guess it's not just her eyes that are made of flint. I juggle my bags and coat and bottle of water as we approach the security check.

'You go first, Zo,' I nod ahead, still in a tangle.

Zoë steps forward through the archway, instantly setting off the bleeper.

'Bugger!'

Retreating, she clunks her charm bracelet and fake Gucci watch into the plastic tray then tries again.

It beeps again.

'Do you think it's my belt buckle?' She rattles her midriff.

'Worth a try,' I shrug.

She tugs her belt through the loops of her Earl jeans and coils it into the tray.

Still she beeps.

The security man beckons her over and, starting at her heels, strokes her aura with his bleeper-wand, mentally eliminating possible causes as he goes - no steel toecaps, no ankle chains, no pins holding her knees in place following a serious netball injury, no bellybutton ornamentation and definitely no nipple rings - he lingers a while to make absolutely sure and moves on with visible disappointment. As soon as the wand reaches ear level it bleats frantically.

Zoë raises her hand to her scalp in confusion, then blanches and looks back to me with an, 'Oh God!' expression.

I frown back a 'What?'

She's already removed her earrings and unless she's had a ton of Goldie-style caps since I saw her last I can't imagine