

ESCAPE TO THE TUSCAN VINEYARD

ALSO BY CARRIE WALKER

*Escape to the Swiss Chalet*

# ESCAPE TO THE TUSCAN VINEYARD

Carrie Walker



*An Aria Book*

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'Feel the fear and do it anyway' Susan Jeffers

This one's for you, Mom. I love you so much xx

# One

Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> July

‘Quick. She’s freaking out,’ Chris said, as he ushered me in through the front door and straight up the stairs. My brother wasn’t great in a crisis, and neither was my dad.

‘Morning,’ I shouted through to the kitchen, where Dad was pacing back and forth.

‘Thank God you’re here!’ he called up, after me. ‘It must be bad, she won’t even let me in to see.’

I wasn’t worried. This wasn’t the first time I’d been brought in on a hair and beauty rescue mission.

‘Abi? Is that you?’ Mum squeaked as I knocked.

‘Yes, it’s me.’ I peered round the bedroom door to find my mum lying in bed, looking terrified. An orange face with bright white eyes, and a rubber duck shower cap covering her hair. A fake tan disaster of Oompa Loompa proportions. Much worse than I’d expected.

‘It won’t come off,’ she said, miserably, holding up her arms. ‘And the toner was supposed to pep up my peroxide, but it’s given me a purple rinse.’

‘Show me,’ I said, gently, one hand on my hip.

She took a deep breath and lifted the orange beak, a large pair of ducky eyes sliding backwards. Her hair was fag-ash grey, with a hint of lilac, and there was no other way to say it – she looked like a drag queen.

‘Mum! What happened? What were you thinking?’

'I told you it was bad!' she wailed, frantically. 'I wanted a fresh look. To reimagine myself for the next ten years. I won't hold on to your father if I don't, you know.'

I thought of Dad downstairs, in his cardigan and slippers, barely a whisker on his head. A man who did *The Times* crossword every morning and took three sugars in his coffee, and tried to imagine a sex-crazed gaggle of OAPs wanting to snatch him away.

'Harry Mason, lover-at-large. You're right, Mum, he's hot stuff, you need to watch out,' I said, with a giggle.

'This isn't the time for jokes, Abigail,' Mum snapped. 'What am I going to do? We've got to be at The Ritz for 2 p.m.'

She peeled back the duvet to show me the full extent of the damage. Her skin was a sickly muddy orange, and she looked an absolute state. I glanced at the clock. 11 a.m. We had time. Chris and I had treated Mum and Dad to afternoon tea at The Ritz for their fortieth wedding anniversary and they'd been looking forward to it for months, but there was no way Mum could leave the house looking like this.

'Did you put the baby oil on like I said?'

'Yes,' Mum said, despondently. 'An hour ago. Will it work? Please, God, say it will.'

I nodded. It would be fine. The oil would get most of the tan off, and I'd do my best with her smoky hair. Worst case scenario, I could spray it gold and re-colour it another day. 'It should have done its job by now, so let's get you in the shower,' I said, pulling a large, yellow bottle out of my bag and handing it over. 'Once you've washed off those top layers, this lemon salt scrub will shift the rest of it. *Elphaba* uses it six nights a week, and if it can de-green the *Wicked Witch of the West*, I'm sure it can de-orange you.'

Mum did as she was told, scrubbing for her life, while I mixed up a colour gloss for her hair.

'Coffee for the worker?' Chris poked his head in and put a mug on the dresser.

'Thanks,' I said, eyeing his fox onesie. 'Interesting choice of day wear, or are you still in your pyjamas?'

'Got it in one,' he said, fiddling with the zip. 'I stayed here last night.'

'Things still rocky with you and Em, then?' I asked, my head on one side. Chris had the worst luck with women. He'd only been living with Em for three months and their relationship was already well and truly on the rocks.

'Kinda,' he said, with a flat shrug. 'Women just don't seem to understand my lifestyle choices, you know?' Chris had been wallowing in a quarter-life crisis for the past couple of years so I could understand why.

'It's working!' Mum shrieked from the shower. 'It's coming off!'

'Brilliant! Now start scrubbing!' I called, taking a sip of my coffee, and smiling at Chris. 'Well, maybe it's time to review some of those lifestyle choices, eh? Check they're still working for you?'

'Hmm... maybe. I'm staying here for a couple of days to give her some space, so we'll see how it plays out.'

'Comb this through your hair, Mum,' I said, passing her the gloss. 'Then leave it on while you do one last scrub, and wash everything off.' I turned back to Chris and put my arm around him. 'You need to get yourself organised, bro. No one wants an unemployed, sofa-surfing, liability of a boyfriend. No offence.' I ruffled up his shaggy hair and flicked his ear.

'Ow!' He tried to tickle me, but I dodged him. 'Got it all figured out yourself then, have you, Abs?' he shot back. 'No offence.'

Mum emerged from the bathroom a new woman. Red-raw from all the scrubbing, but that would settle down. 'What are you two playing at? Chris – OUT of my room, please.'

I pointed him at the door with a smug, sisterly smile and looked Mum up and down.

'Much better,' I said. 'And now that the grey is out, we can use my magic blow-dry cream to glow-up your hair.'



There was a hesitant knock and Dad cleared his throat. 'Is it... safe to come in?'

'No! Don't look at me, Harry,' Mum shrieked, holding up her towel and running back into the en suite. It was bizarre to think she still cared what he thought after a lifetime of living together, but she liked him to see her at her best.

'I know I sound like the talking clock, but we need to leave in *one hour*,' Dad persisted.

'It's all right for you,' Mum cried. 'You only have to brush your teeth and you're ready!'

'I'll be done way before then, Dad. I need to get back for Kat's birthday lunch.'

'It's the big one, isn't it? Her thirtieth?' Chris asked.

'Yep, and she's feeling a bit weird about it, so me and Sara have got everyone together as a surprise. I really hope she doesn't freak. Now, *out* please, while I get Mum ready.' I shooed him towards the door. 'Mum, cover yourself in this body cream, and let it absorb while I do your hair.'

'But it's dark green!' Mum said, horrified.

'Yes. To balance out the orange. I can't believe they sprayed you this colour. Who did it? We should report them to the beauty ombudsman.'

'It's my fault. The girl told me to go for the seven per cent shade, but I insisted on fifteen. I could barely tell it had been done last time and I wanted a deep, bronze tan. She did say the darker one was more for... er... fancy dress.'

'Fancy dress as what...?'

'As something very *orange*, Abigail, I don't know,' Mum said, irritated. 'A pumpkin, or a sweet potato. Or a traffic cone.'

'I've seen much worse,' I said, unfazed. 'Remember that time I was working on *Mrs Doubtfire*, and we couldn't find her false nose? I had to fashion one out of an egg carton in the end. It was touch and go for a while, but we got through it.'

Mum whipped off her towel and slathered herself in the green cream. Her skin tone started to neutralise almost instantly,

and the tangerine hues calmed into a healthy summer glow. I breathed a sigh of relief and blasted the hair dryer on, settling into a relaxing rhythm as I twirled and curled her bob into its signature Marilyn bouffant. I could see Mum's panic subsiding as I brought her back from the brink of beauty disaster.

'What would I do without you, Abs?'

'Not much point in two years at beauty school if I can't help my own mother look her best for her anniversary, is there?' My mind flickered. Forty years was one hell of an innings, and it was highly unlikely I'd ever get there now. At thirty and very single, that kind of marriage milestone felt well and truly beyond my reach. Mum's hair was like a cloud of vanilla candyfloss by the time I'd finished – the ultimate blonde bombshell, ready for the red carpet. We couldn't have looked more different as I gazed at her in the mirror. Mum had been channelling Marilyn Monroe ever since she'd seen her in *Some Like it Hot*, whereas my go-to look was the absolute opposite. My wiry frame and thick, brown hair came from Dad's side – although we'd only ever seen evidence of Dad's hair in old photos – and I'd inherited Mum's blue eyes and button nose, but sadly not her cheekbones. Mum loved high glamour and lots of coverage, but I preferred a clean, natural look. I spent every working moment doing other people's make-up; styling actors up and down and dressing them in elaborate costumes, I didn't want to have to do it for myself as well. I liked my routine low-key and low maintenance.

My phone pinged.

**Sara:** I'm having a nightmare day already. Any chance you can pick up the balloons?

Sara was in charge of getting our other friend Kat to the pub on time for her birthday lunch and should have dropped the balloons and flowers off first thing, according to the schedule. How was it 12 p.m. already? Too many things to do, as usual,

but I'd help Sara out and pick up the balloons, of course I would. Another ping.

**Sara:** And the flowers? So sorry!!!

Hmm. I'd need to get home and turnaround in an hour, but I should be able to do it.

**Me:** Yes of course, no worries. See you there at 4 p.m. xx

I'd better get a move on.

'Feeling better?' I asked, as Mum finally smiled at herself in the mirror.

'Yes thanks, love. Much. I thought I was going to have to wear a balaclava there, for a minute.'

'Not ideal in this weather,' I said, glancing outside. It was the hottest summer on record, for the fourth year running, and had been unbearable for weeks. 'Ready for your make-up?'

'Always. My favourite part!'

I switched my ring light on and tilted Mum's face towards the window, cleansing, then toning with a cotton pad. She was merciless in her skincare regime, and it showed – I only had to brush on a tiny amount of foundation and her peachy skin turned instantly luminous. You'd never have guessed she was knocking on sixty.

'Shall we try a *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* look?' I asked, bringing up the photos on my phone.

'I'd love that!' Mum beamed. 'Can I have the extra-long eyelashes?'

'Go on then. Seeing as it's a special occasion.' I rifled around in my bag for the red lipsticks and metallic pencils. 'Look straight at me,' I said, as Mum flashed her eyes in my direction. I steadied my hand, and smoothed a pale, gold eyeshadow over her lids with a smudge of violet around the edges. Her eyes looked

enormous even before I'd added a slick of eyeliner, and three coats of mascara. Marilyn would have been proud.

'Trowel it on, love,' Mum said, with a chuckle. 'Let's turn some heads.'

'Trying to keep Dad on his toes?' I quipped, spritzing her with setting spray.

'I just feel so much better when my hair's done, and my face is on. You know that. But yes, it's important to keep the flame burning. It's too late to send him back now!'

'*Half an hour, Anna,*' Dad shouted up the stairs.

'Although sometimes I wish I could...' she said, rolling her eyes.

She didn't mean it. Mum and Dad were life-long lobsters, classic old romantics, and staunch believers in regular date nights as the key to their marital success. I did Mum's make-up at least twice a month for her dates with Dad, and they were always off out somewhere, to an art gallery, the cinema, the pub for dinner – occasionally London Zoo. They made time for one another, which was lovely, but it was just as lovely for me and Mum to have a regular mother-daughter slot in. She was always so happy when I'd finished doing her make-up – and her delicate features and supermodel cheekbones deserved to be showcased.

'OK, I think I'm done,' I said, dusting on a final touch of bronzer, and spinning her round to face the mirror.

'Ooh, Abi!!!' Mum said, wide-eyed and beaming. 'You've outdone yourself! I don't look half-bad, do I?' She studied her face from every angle, then held up a second mirror to admire her hair at the back.

'Stunning, as always,' I said, blowing her a kiss and packing my things away.

'Thank you, my darling. Thank you for dropping everything for your dear old mum. I know you've got a busy day sorting out Kat's party.'

'I've always got time for you, Mum.'

We made our way downstairs, where Dad was waiting in the hallway, wringing his hands like an expectant parent, with Radio 2 blaring in the background. His eyes softened when he saw us.

‘Wow!’ he whispered. ‘Anna.’

‘What do you think, Dad? Some like it hot, eh? Forty years on.’

‘Still as beautiful as the day she walked down the aisle,’ he said.

Mum blushed and gave him a twirl. ‘Do you think?’

Dad nodded proudly, and Chris wolf whistled. ‘Looking good, Mum.’

Click, swipe, Uber on the way. Eight minutes. Excellent. The day was running away with me, and I had to get home, get ready, and get over to the pub as quickly as possible.

‘Thanks for coming over, love,’ Dad said, giving me a hug goodbye.

Chris held his hand up for a high five. ‘Big sis’ saving the day as always.’

‘No worries, love you all. Have a great time!’

‘Happy birthday to Kat from us,’ Mum said, giving me a kiss.

The Uber driver came hurtling down the road and screeched to a halt outside the front door.

‘Abi Mason for Islington?’

‘That’s me, thanks!’ I got in and threw my bags on the seat, leaning against the headrest with a sigh. Thank God for cabs. I was tired and achy and glad to be on my way home. I watched the three of them in the rearview mirror as we sped off. Chris on the doorstep in his strange, fox onesie, which couldn’t be doing much to help the Em situation. Dad in his standard date uniform of navy cords and a starched, white shirt, and Mum dressed to kill, looking like a film star. They were quite the trio.

I tied my hair up in a topknot and had a quick check through my phone. Three missed calls from Sara, six likes on Hinge (or unhinged as Chris called it) and one recurring name coming through on WhatsApp.

**Pete:** Hey Abi, not sure if you're getting my messages, but I'm back at The Langham for a few days. I'd love to see you again.

Four messages in a row, none of which I'd replied to. He was keen. My mind flashed back to that night I'd met him in the sauna. The hiss of the coals as he'd doused them with water. The air, almost too hot to bear, as we'd accidentally touched and then somehow started kissing. The *Les Misérables* crew had bought me a spa day at The Langham, and I'd bumped into him there – quite literally – on my way back to the changing rooms. It was nearly closing time and I'd decided on one last sauna before I went home – little did I know I'd find a big, handsome, *naked* man in there, lying legs akimbo on the bottom shelf.

*'Oh my... God! I'm so sorry...'* I'd said, frozen to the spot, as he leapt up and covered his nethers with a towel.

*'No, no, my fault entirely, I thought I was the only one down here.'* He spoke with an American twang. *'We sauna naked in Arizona, so I was making the most of it. Don't leave on my account – I'll make myself decent.'*

*I decided to stay.*

*'Peter Freeman... call me Pete,'* he'd said, with a sexy smile.

It had been nearly a month of no replies, but the messages kept coming. It was time to nip it in the bud.

**Me:** Hey Pete, back so soon! I'm in Ibiza for the next couple of weeks, sorry to miss you. Maybe see you next time you're in town? Ax

That should do it.

The taxi pulled into my road, and I was glad to be back.

'Thanks,' I said, jumping out and digging around for my keys. I ran up the path as my fifty-something neighbour burst through the front door in his running gear. He jogged on the spot, as I swept straight past him.

'Morning, Ned!' I called, catching the door before it clicked shut.

'Good night was it?' he shouted after me as I ran up the stairs.

I laughed. 'Up early this time, not out late.' *Cheeky git.*

The familiar smell of orange blossom welcomed me home as I wrestled my way inside with all my bags – there was no nicer feeling than walking into a freshly-cleaned flat. The black and white lino in the hallway was like a chessboard through to my small, neat lounge, with its bay window, fluffy rug, and IKEA sofa bed. And my oversized disco ball twinkled hello as I unzipped my boots, gave them a quick buff, and put them back on the shoe rack. The flat had cost me everything I had, in more ways than one, and it sometimes felt bittersweet to look around the place I now called home. I'd never have been able to afford even this tiny shoebox without Josh, so in a way, he was still here looking after me and keeping me safe. I threw a load of washing on and jumped in the shower to get ready for the party. Conditioning my hair and shaving my legs, then slapping on a load of moisturiser. I gave the shower a quick clean on the way out and balled up all the hairs that had wiggled out onto the floor. There was no one to unclog the drain if it got blocked up, and prevention was better than cure.

Ned had the right idea, but my daily 5k would have to wait. I put on my sparkly dress and put the kettle on to make myself a green tea. I spotted a couple of smears on the kitchen counter as I waited, so I whipped out my rubber gloves to give it a quick clean, rearranging the photos on the fridge and kissing the big one of Josh in the middle, like I always did when I got home. The latest postcard from Holly was stuck on with a magnetic bottle opener – a photo of her and her boyfriend Xavier, toasting me from their restaurant. She'd been living in Italy for two years now, and while they'd flown by for her, it had felt like forever to me. I missed her terribly. A fleeting visit back to London at Christmas wasn't nearly enough time together, and having my

best friend in Tuscany was great for easy holidays – not that I ever took any – but not so great when I needed a shoulder to cry on, an ear to bend or a plus-one for a wedding.

My phone started bouncing around the coffee table like a jumping bean as I buffed up the fridge with my Minky. I reversed out of my rubber gloves and flopped them into the sink, running over to snatch it up.

‘Hi, Phoebe!’

‘Alright, sweets? This is your pre-job courtesy call.’

‘Standard,’ I replied. Phoebe was my brilliant agent and a force of nature when it came to her clients. And I was no exception.

‘I know it’s Sunday, but just checking you’re ready for tomorrow?’

I felt a tingle of excitement that my first ever day on a film set was just one more sleep away. Phoebe had landed me my most exciting job to date and we were both *beside* ourselves. Transitioning from theatreland to Hollywood had been on our collective wish list for a while now, but neither of us had been completely convinced it would ever happen.

‘Yes, Fairy Godmother, I’ve sharpened all my pencils, and my bag is packed. In fact, I’m so ready, my make-up trolley has been sitting by the front door for the past three days.’

I’d been working as a make-up artist for eight years now, and desperately trying to find a way to crack into the world of film, having done pretty much every West End show as well as the TV circuit. But this was my big break. I could feel it in my bones. LATV were filming their new blockbuster in London this summer – *Moonmen* – and they’d needed a make-up assistant at short notice. The girl who had been booked had broken her arm, and Phoebe had managed to get me in. I’d half-wondered if Phoebe had broken the poor girl’s arm herself, she’d been that keen to land me the job. I’d be assisting the person getting the actors into their moon heads. Part make-up, part wardrobe. And who better than the person who had done that exact job on



*Phantom*, *Wicked* and *Shrek*. AKA me. I could turn anyone into anything, and I loved watching the transformation each time. Finally, a chance to get on the Hollywood make-up map.

'They've got an army of make-up artists as you can imagine, but only the two of you getting the Moonmen into their heads,' Phoebe said.

'Any idea who I'll be working with?' I asked.

'Yes... I've got it written down here somewhere.' There was a clatter as Phoebe dropped her phone, ferreting around for her notes. 'She's called Lizzie or Lily... no, here it is – Lucy. Lucy Rowan. Doesn't ring any bells. You?'

'No, never heard of her,' I said, feeling nervous. I hoped she'd like me.

'Well, you'll meet her tomorrow. In fact, you'll meet everyone tomorrow as it's an all-cast day. Even Blake Thomas, you lucky cow.'

'Blake, who? Haven't heard of him, either.'

'Yes, you have! You'll know him when you see him. He's the main guy on *Outlaws*. The really fit cowboy.'

'Nope. Never seen it.'

'How can you *still* have not seen *Outlaws*?' Phoebe said, exasperated. 'You need to keep up, Abs, otherwise you'll lose all track of cultural references.'

'There's too many must-see TV shows these days – how do people find the time?'

'By getting their priorities right, Abi, that's how! Trust me, you'll miraculously find the time to watch *everything* Blake's ever been in once you meet him. You can stare at him all day on set, and then zoom in on his face when you get home on Netflix. Or is that just me?'

'Erm... I think that's just you. I didn't have you down as a star gazer. I'll see if I can get you a signed photo if you like?'

'I want a lot more than that,' Phoebe said. 'I should probably swing by the set tomorrow, in fact, and make sure you're... OK.'

'Nice try.' I laughed. 'I'm not sure agents are allowed to hang around, littering the set. Give me a few weeks and I'll get you in.'

'Thanks, darl, you're a peach.'

'Anyone we know in the wider make-up team?' I asked, hopefully. It would be nice to see a few familiar faces on day one.

'Not on the list I've been given. You know how cliquy the film lot are. Most of them flew in this weekend from New York, apparently. The new *Avatar* movie has just wrapped, so they've come straight here from that. But there's nothing to worry about – once you're in, you're in. You'll make friends quickly enough – you always do.'

I hoped so. I had butterflies at the thought of a whole new gang to get to know. I loved meeting new people, but I wasn't so keen on the part that came after that. Which was why first dates worked so well in my favour – I could just have fun and be whatever version of myself I felt like being on the night, then let it go. Sure, I'm into scuba diving. No way? I've been to Kilimanjaro! I LOVE horror films! They didn't need to know too much about the real me because it wouldn't go any further. Dipping my toe in the dating pool and then running scared before anything could get serious. It was easier that way – no complications, nobody's feelings got hurt. But I always gave them my full attention while I was there, the VIP Abi experience – whether we went for drinks, dinner, or occasionally more.

My phone gave another ting.

**Pete:** Shame. Enjoy Ibiza and I'll look you up next time I'm in town xx