

SANDIE JONES

THE GUILT TRIP

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**For Lucy
My daughter & best friend
My life is all the richer with you in it**

PROLOGUE

The policeman, with his slicked-back hair, stands at the bottom of my hospital bed, staring at me intently.

‘So, can you confirm you knew the deceased?’ he says, in heavily accented English.

I nod, but even that hurts.

His eyes narrow as he studies me. ‘Do you remember what led up to this unfortunate incident? Were there any altercations between the guests? Was anything said?’

I almost laugh. Where would I start?

Should I be honest and say everybody was at each other’s throats? That it was only a matter of time before something like this happened? That I wish it wasn’t me who caused it?

The officer is staring intently, waiting for an answer, and I want to scream ‘Yes’ to all his questions. But instead I shake my head in bewilderment and say, ‘No, everything was absolutely fine.’

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‘I can’t find it,’ says Ali, with a slightly hysterical lilt to her voice as she rummages through her bag for the third time.

Rachel feels a hot flush begin to envelop her as she wavers between wanting to believe that Ali’s passport is really in there somewhere, and fast-forwarding to what the game plan is going to be if it isn’t.

She snatches a look at Jack as he stands at the airport check-in desk, patiently waiting for the growing sense of panic that Ali’s creating to be over. They all know that these are the scrapes that Ali normally gets herself into – drama appears to be her friend’s middle name – but right now, Rachel’s sure they could all do without the anxiety that it’s causing.

‘When I asked you in the car if you had everything, you said yes,’ says Rachel, careful to keep her tone light. ‘You checked off everything, including your passport.’

‘I know, I know,’ says Ali, upending her bag onto the polished tiles and dropping to the floor on her knees. She frantically fans through the pages of her current book, empties her make-up bag, and takes her iPad out

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of its case, leaving no stone unturned in her search for the maroon game-changer.

‘I’m sure it was here,’ she says, as tears of frustration pool in her eyes. ‘I’m sure I saw it – I just don’t understand.’

Rachel looks at Jack imploringly, but her husband just shrugs his shoulders as if to say, ‘*This is her problem*’.

‘Might it still be at home?’ Rachel asks gently. ‘What about if we retrace our steps back to the car park, just to check that you’ve not dropped it anywhere.’ She looks at her watch and is grateful that Jack insisted on leaving home earlier than she had wanted to.

‘If the traffic’s bad, I don’t want to be stressing that we’ve not left enough time,’ he’d said last night. ‘*And don’t forget we’ve got to pick Ali up on the way.*’

Rachel had felt a sense of irritation creeping in as he’d fussed around her while she deliberated whether to pack the blue or the yellow dress this morning. She’d bristled at his never-ending need to be somewhere before he’d even left, but now she’s grateful for his eagerness, because if they need to go back to Ali’s place to look for her passport, they may have *just* enough time to do it.

‘If I don’t get on that plane, Will’s going to lose his shit . . .’ says Ali, her eyes desperately searching Rachel’s and Jack’s for an answer they can’t give.

‘Let’s retrace our steps,’ says Rachel, as she helps Ali scoop up her belongings from the floor.

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‘Think, just think,’ says Ali to herself, closing her eyes, forcing herself to focus.

‘What time does check-in close?’ Rachel asks the bemused British Airways clerk.

‘Forty minutes before the departure time.’

‘And I don’t suppose . . .’ starts Rachel, not entirely sure where she’s going with it.

The woman smiles apologetically with her brightly painted lips. ‘I can’t check in the luggage without everyone’s passports.’

‘Okay,’ says Rachel, looking around at the five cases that are standing between the three of them. Only one of them is hers and Jack’s; they’d managed to negotiate their way into sharing a single case, on the strict understanding that it was 75/25 in her favour.

‘You can’t expect me to get everything I need for a four-day trip into one half of a case,’ she’d moaned as Jack had objected to paying the airline an additional thirty-five pounds just for the privilege of actually taking their belongings on holiday with them.

‘Everything you own is tiny. How much room can you possibly need?’

‘But I need to take more things than you do,’ she’d replied, without much conviction because she knew she was going to get her own way. ‘You only need to take one suit and that’s going in a separate carrier, so that means there’s more space for me.’

He’d smiled and rolled his eyes as he rationed the

T-shirts and shorts that were in the pile on their bed. 'Why you need to take enough for a month when you're only going for a few days is beyond me.'

Looking at Ali's four cases now, Rachel wonders if it's a *year* she's going for. 'Okay, so here's what we're going to do,' she says authoritatively. 'Jack, why don't you and Ali head back to the car . . .?'

'But . . .' he protests.

'I'll stay here with the cases and wait for Noah and Paige.'

'Why don't *I* do that?' asks Jack.

'Because if you don't find the passport, you've got just enough time to shoot back to Ali's. You'll be quicker than I will and besides, you've already got six points on your licence, so what's the harm in three more?' She winks at him, trying to inject some much-needed humour into the situation, but his jawline is set and his eyes are fixed on the departures board.

'I'll hold the fort and explain the situation to the others when they get here.'

'And what happens if we don't get back in time?' asks Ali breathlessly.

'Then we'll have to get the next available flight,' says Rachel, smiling, although the thought of sitting at Gatwick airport for any longer than is absolutely necessary fills her with a sense of dread. 'It's only Will we've got to worry about – none of your other guests are arriving until late tomorrow, so we've got plenty of time.'

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‘But he’ll be there on his own if we don’t make it out by tonight,’ says Ali tearfully.

‘I’m sure he’s spent worse nights on his expeditions around Asia,’ says Rachel. ‘I don’t think a villa in Portugal is going to faze him.’

‘Jack, would you mind?’ says Ali, turning to face her with her best little-girl-lost look. ‘I wouldn’t know how to get back to the car park if you *paid* me.’

He looks at Rachel as if to say, ‘Are you *really* going to make me do this?’

Rachel doesn’t know why Ali seems to rub her up the wrong way so much. They used to get on really well – at least until they stopped working together. It was Jack who introduced her to his brother Will in the first place, so he only has himself to blame for bringing her into the family. But ever since Will and Ali announced their engagement, it’s as if everything she says and does irritates him.

Even last night, when Ali texted Rachel that she couldn’t sleep because she was sure she heard a noise downstairs, he was unsympathetic.

‘Tell her to handle it herself,’ he snapped.

‘That’s not fair,’ said Rachel. ‘She’s in the house on her own, unused to being without Will, and she’s spooked.’

‘Tell her to ring *him* then – she’s *his* problem now.’

The way he said it struck alarm bells for Rachel, because Jack was usually the first to volunteer to fit a

CCTV camera for his parents or a security bolt for Mrs Wickes next door. She was sure he'd even popped in to check on Ali in the early days when Will was still gallivanting and she was feeling vulnerable. So what had changed?

'She thinks she's heard some glass breaking,' said Rachel.

Jack had stopped doing his press-ups on the bedroom floor and turned to look at her with an exasperated expression.

'She lives twenty minutes away,' he said. 'Do you honestly want me to go all the way over there because she's said she heard a noise?'

'I just know what it feels like when you're on your own late at night,' Rachel said, without answering the question.

'Yes, but thankfully, *you* don't make a mountain out of every molehill, like she does.'

'She doesn't mean any harm by it,' said Rachel.

'Well, let's just hope that this is the *only* mountain she's going to be creating over the next few days.'

As Jack and Ali walk back in the direction they came from, with her half-skipping to keep up, Rachel can tell, just by Jack's gait, that he's seriously pissed off. The ice-cold pint of lager that he'd no doubt imagined having with Noah on the other side of security looks highly unlikely. At this rate, the best he can hope for is a luke-warm can on the plane, *if* they make it back in time.

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‘Hey,’ says Paige as she dashes across the departures concourse towards Rachel, with her husband Noah following. ‘Where *is* everyone?’

Rachel throws an arm around Paige’s back as she pulls her friend in for a brief hug. ‘You wouldn’t believe it if I told you.’

Paige furrows her brow. ‘Is everything all right? Where’s Jack? And weren’t you picking Ali up?’

‘No; likely to be halfway around the M25; and yes, we did.’

Noah looks perplexed as he kisses Rachel’s cheek. ‘So, what’s going on?’

‘Ali seems to have mislaid her passport,’ says Rachel. ‘They’ve gone back to find it.’

Paige rolls her eyes. ‘Oh God, has it started already?’

Rachel smiles and nods. ‘It’s a bit early in the proceedings, even for Ali.’

‘What did I tell you?’ says Paige, turning to Noah. ‘I said to him on the way down here that something would happen . . . that there was bound to be one crisis or another.’

Rachel looks to Noah, who rolls his eyes theatrically.

‘But you know what men are like,’ Paige goes on, as Noah’s mimicking her behind her back. ‘They’re completely oblivious to it all.’

Rachel nods in agreement, knowing that when her friend is on one of her rants, it’s best to let her get on with it.

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‘As long as she bats those long eyelashes of hers at them, they let her get away with murder,’ Paige goes on.

Noah exaggerates a fake yawn and Rachel struggles to keep a straight face.

‘I’m going to get a coffee,’ he says, walking off towards Costa. ‘Anyone else?’

Paige tuts and smiles. ‘Honestly, what *do* we do with them?’

Rachel puts her arm through Paige’s. ‘Actually, I’m pleased I’ve got you on your own,’ she says, following Noah as he free-wheels Ali’s cases across the tiled floor.

Paige stops walking and turns towards Rachel with a concerned expression. ‘What’s up?’

‘It’s nothing really, but do you remember me telling you a couple of months ago that Jack was being really short with Ali?’

Paige nods. ‘Yes, you were hoping he was going to snap out of it by the wedding.’

Rachel nods. ‘Well, it seems to have got even worse and it feels like I’m forever treading on eggshells. I’m worried he’s going to say or do something that’s going to put a spanner in the works this weekend.’

‘That’s normally my job,’ says Paige, smiling.

Rachel laughs. ‘I’ve come to expect it from *you*, but it’s so unlike Jack to have a bee in his bonnet, especially with a woman who’s not done anything wrong.’

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Paige raises her eyebrows questioningly. ‘You sure about that?’

‘Not on purpose, at least,’ says Rachel. ‘You know what Ali’s like; she can be infuriating, but she doesn’t mean any harm by it. She’s just one of those people who needs drama to survive.’

‘Well, as long as it’s *her* drama and she doesn’t go sucking any of us into it, then she can live it up all she likes.’

‘Exactly,’ says Rachel. ‘But that’s not a reason for Jack to get so riled all of a sudden. She’s always been like this – even when they were working together. He seemed to like her then, so what’s changed?’

Paige shrugs her shoulders. ‘Maybe he’s pissed off because she left his company to go and work for David Friedman.’

Rachel wonders if that could be what’s getting to Jack. Friedman’s entertainment company is a direct competitor to the record company Jack is A&R Director at, but with a much higher profile. Maybe seeing his brother’s fiancée, a member of his own family, changing sides has dented his pride.

She thinks back to the dinner she and Jack had with Will and Ali at the Groucho Club a few weeks ago. Jack hadn’t wanted to go and was unusually quiet all evening until Ali started talking about a new client the company had just signed.

‘He’s so talented,’ she crowed. ‘Every one of his songs

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makes the hairs stand up on my arms. He's going to be huge.'

'Uh-oh,' said Will, turning to Jack. 'Looks like you missed out there, bro.'

'I know who she's talking about,' said Jack tersely. 'It's no great loss to us.'

'Are you sure about that?' said Ali, tilting her head to the side. 'I heard you were going after him with all guns blazing.'

Jack had laughed wryly. 'We gave it some consideration, but we decided our roster is strong enough as it is.'

'I can't argue with that,' said Ali. 'Friedman's may be bigger, but you've got a solid reputation for doing the best by your artists.'

Rachel winced, knowing that Jack was likely to take Ali's well-meaning words as an attempt to patronize him.

'You can't have it all,' Jack said, whilst signalling to the waitress for the bill, bringing the evening to a premature close.

'Indeed you can't,' Ali had agreed. 'And anyone who thinks they can, is a fool.'

'You might be right,' muses Rachel to Paige now as they join Noah in the queue. 'Though, I'd expect Jack to rise above it.'

'I think we're all going to have to display a modicum of patience this weekend, don't you?'

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Rachel smiles. ‘She’s getting married,’ she says, without needing Paige to elaborate.

‘She thinks *every* day is her wedding day,’ says Paige, laughing. ‘I knew it was going to be bad, but I didn’t realize we’d be treated to The Ali Show before we’d even got on the plane.’

‘Anyway,’ says Rachel, eager to change the subject. ‘How’s Chloe? Was she okay about being left on her own?’

‘Oh, she thinks this is the best thing that’s ever happened to her,’ says Paige. ‘Don’t you remember being sixteen and having the house to yourself? She gets whipped up into a frenzy when we go out for the *evening*, so to be left at home on her own for four days has got her spinning like a whirling dervish.’

Rachel can’t help but laugh at the thought of demure Chloe being left in charge. If she knew her goddaughter at all, she’d be sick with excitement at the thought of an empty house, yet end up doing nothing with it. Rachel’s son, Josh, on the other hand, did exactly the opposite. When she and Jack left him home alone for the first time, he’d seemed so nonplussed that they were worried he was just going to stay locked in his bedroom playing video games for the entire weekend. At least they had been until they saw an open invitation on Facebook when they were thousands of miles away in Santorini, and realized he’d arranged the party of all parties.

‘If that girl has a do, I swear to God . . .’ says Noah, smiling.

‘You can’t call it a *do*,’ admonishes Paige, as she orders their coffees.

Rachel smiles. ‘I think the correct term these days, if you don’t want your kids to laugh at you, is *gathering*.’

Paige laughs. ‘You make it sound so posh with your pronounced “th”. I think you’ll find they don’t even call it that now, it’s been shortened to “gav”.’

‘How’s Josh getting on?’ asks Noah. ‘Does he seem to be enjoying uni life?’

Rachel nods. ‘I think so, but I’m not sure the work’s really started yet. It seems that freshers’ week has extended into a month, because all he’s done so far is go out to events and parties.’ She stops and holds her hands up. ‘Sorry, gavs.’

Noah smiles. ‘But he’s settled into his digs? He gets on with his flatmates?’

‘Well, I’m not sure he’s been sober enough to work out if he likes them or not,’ says Rachel, laughing. ‘Every time I speak to him, he’s either on his way out or in bed with a hangover.’

‘Those were the days,’ Noah says, ruefully. ‘It feels like only yesterday.’

‘That freshers’ week was brutal though,’ says Rachel. ‘I don’t know if my liver could take that again.’

Noah laughs heartily. ‘What are you talking about? You were the biggest Larry Lightweight out of all of us.’

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‘Er, excuse me,’ says Rachel, pretending to be affronted. ‘I think you’ll find I kept up with the best of you.’

Noah looks at her with raised eyebrows over his double espresso. ‘What proves that theory wrong is that you remember that we first met at the freshers’ ball.’

‘Yes, we walked back to our halls together,’ says Rachel.

‘Yet I don’t remember meeting you until at least a month later,’ says Noah. ‘So, I think that clearly demonstrates how sober *you* were, and how pissed *I* was.’

‘I can remember many a night where you got me out of a fix because I was too drunk to look after myself.’ Rachel says it as if it’s a badge of honour to prove how cool she really was, but she can tell by the mischievous look on Noah’s face that he’s about to kibosh her claim.

‘That’s because that’s what you get like after two beers,’ he teases. ‘Don’t fool yourself into thinking that I wasn’t off my head when I was holding your hair back while you vomited. I’d had ten pints by then and was *still* able to hold it together.’

‘Children, children,’ says Paige in her best schoolmarm voice. ‘That’s quite enough bickering.’

Noah pokes his tongue out and Rachel throws a packet of sugar at him.

‘So, what’s the plan if they don’t make it back in time for the flight?’ asks Noah.

‘Can we all go home?’ asks Paige hopefully. ‘I’ve got a ton of work I could be getting on with.’

‘Don’t be so bloody ungrateful,’ scolds Noah, laughing. Rachel tracks Jack on her phone. They’ve been gone over half an hour, but don’t appear to have left the airport.

‘I’ll give him a call,’ she says. ‘See where they’re at.’

‘Got it!’ shrieks a vision in pink from across the concourse.

‘Blimey,’ says Paige as Ali, dressed head to toe in a magenta jumpsuit, toddles towards them in towering heels, holding her passport aloft. ‘Woo-hoo! We’re back up and running.’

Several people in the busy coffee shop turn their heads in her direction. Such is the Ali effect. But Jack, Rachel can’t help but notice, is trailing several steps behind, with a face like thunder, pretending not to know her.

‘Where was it?’ asks Rachel.

‘It had somehow dropped into the footwell in the car,’ says Ali breathlessly. ‘It must have fallen when I was checking I had everything. Ironic really.’ She turns to Paige and Noah. ‘Sorry, I’m such a klutz. Hiiiiiii.’

She makes a show of greeting them like long-lost friends, with exaggerated cuddles and air kisses, before loudly proclaiming how exciting this all is as she jumps up and down and claps her hands together.

Rachel has to stifle a giggle at Paige’s bewildered expression: everything about it screams, ‘*Get me out of here*’.

She can’t help but feel guilty; if it weren’t for her encouragement, Paige wouldn’t be here, and knowing

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the part she's played to cajole her best friend into doing something she'd rather not do, momentarily sits heavy on her chest.

When Will had come over to see them a few months ago to ask Jack to be his best man, they'd both been surprised to hear that Noah and Paige had made the proposed guest list. Not that they weren't good friends of his – Will and Noah often got together for a game of golf, much to Jack's chagrin, as no matter how hard he tried, hitting a little white ball with a long stick just wasn't his forte.

'I thought you said you wanted to keep it intimate,' Jack had said.

'Yes, there's only forty guests,' said Will.

'But Paige and Noah are more our friends,' said Jack. 'I don't think they'd be offended if you didn't invite them. Plus, you're asking them to take four days out and travel to another country. I know Noah's taken on more work at the university and didn't you say Paige had a big case coming up?' He'd looked to Rachel for back-up.

She'd been about to nod in agreement, but then she'd been struck by how a weekend of imposed purgatory could be turned around if Paige was there too. Instead of spending four days making small talk with strangers, they could eat, drink, dance and pretend they weren't responsible mothers for once. Suddenly, and selfishly, Rachel could see its potential.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ she’d said. ‘Noah and Paige really like Will and Ali, so I’m sure they’d be flattered to be asked.’

Jack had looked at her with raised eyebrows, silently questioning whether they were talking about the same Paige, who was always so quick to denounce Ali’s shortcomings.

‘Why did you have to push for Noah and Paige to come?’ Jack had said later, after Will had left.

‘Because it might be an opportunity to spend some time with them,’ said Rachel. ‘We haven’t been away together for a while, and faced with the prospect of spending four days with your family, they might be just the distraction we need.’ She laughed to soften the side-swipe. ‘We could all get a villa together and make a holiday out of it.’

Jack groaned. ‘Why can’t he get married here, where we’d all only have to endure each other for the afternoon before going home?’

‘Don’t be such a miserable old sod,’ she’d said, going up to him and wrapping her arms around his neck. ‘Noah and Paige are our friends.’

‘I’m not talking about *them*,’ he said. ‘I’m talking about my bloody *family*. Boxing Day takes enough grit and mettle to survive – why would Will want to impose *this* on us?’

‘Because. He’s. Not. Been. Here. For. Most. Christmases,’ said Rachel, punctuating each word with a kiss on Jack’s

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lips. ‘So, maybe this is his way of making up for it; a chance to get the family to spend some quality time together.’

‘But four days in Portugal,’ he moaned, sounding like a spoilt child.

‘Oh, for God’s sake!’ Rachel laughed. ‘Listen to yourself. Your family will be there. I’ll be there – if Noah and Paige come, we’ll have a good laugh.’

He’d looked at her petulantly.

‘You never know,’ Rachel had said. ‘You might actually enjoy yourself.’

Now, as she looks at his obvious frustration and the strained greeting he gives Paige and Noah, she feels she’s manipulated them *all* into doing something they don’t want to do.

‘Okay, we’d better get checked in,’ Jack says briskly, grabbing hold of two suitcases and wheeling them away.

Rachel abandons her half-drunk coffee as she follows him – and a sense of foreboding – across the concourse.