

## CHAPTER

# 1

‘Hey, Charz ... are you awake, hon?’

Jane stuck her head through the half open door and flicked the bedroom light on as what appeared to be a low flying missile darted passed her and propelled itself onto the bed, his corkscrew tail wagging.

‘I took Bruce out for his morning walk and toilet duties to let you have a little bit of a sleep in,’ she continued, ‘but it’s almost eight o’clock, so wakey-wakey sleeping beauty.’

Her voice reached into Charlize Dawson’s bizarre dream and hauled her out of it. ‘Thanks, Janey. You’re the bomb,’ she mumbled as Bruce’s wet sandpaper-feeling tongue licked her cheek. She half groaned, half yawned while rolling onto her side to avoid the slobber fest. ‘I was just dreaming that Kermit the frog was chasing me with a knife, but then Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger jumped out of nowhere and blew him to smithereens with machine

guns. There was green sludge everywhere, and I'm telling you, it wasn't pretty.'

Jane giggled. 'My god, what drugs did you take before you went to sleep? You sound awful. All gravelly.'

'Obviously not the right kind,' Charlize replied as she hugged her overexcited miniature pug. She removed the lavender-scented eye mask Jane had gifted her last week and blinked frantically, the light feeling as though it was searing her eyeballs.

She gave Bruce a peck on the top of his head and the pug responded by leaping out of her arms and racing around the bed before launching himself on top of her once again.

'God, mate, where do you get your energy from?' She gently ruffled his head, the pooch finally calming beneath her touch, curling up on her chest and closing his eyes.

'So how are you feeling on this fine Friday morning?' Jane asked as one eyebrow rose.

'Like absolute crap.'

Jane smiled. 'In true Charlize style, blunt and to the point.'

Charlize tried to laugh and then groaned. She felt like death warmed up—and at least ten years older than her twenty-five years. Her throat resembled sandpaper, her mouth felt as though it was filled with sawdust and her head throbbed like buggery. And it was all self-inflicted so no sympathy was due. She instinctively rubbed her temples, regretting the champagne she'd gulped over her table-for-one dinner last night. She'd been hoping the answer to her problems would be at the bottom of the glass, and then the bottom of the bottle, and then the next bottle.

Jane had come to her rescue just before midnight. She doubted she would've been able to put one foot in front of the other without her arm wrapped tightly around her waist. A faint memory of her

best friend holding her hair back as she threw up in a garbage can made her grimace.

‘So are you going to bless the world with your awesome presence today, or are you still waiting for Prince Charming to come galloping in on his white horse and rouse you with a passionate kiss?’

‘Oh ha ha.’ Charlize groaned as she gazed towards where Jane leant against the doorway of her spare bedroom, her best friend looking, as always, immaculately dressed and ready for her day’s work as a lawyer.

Jane Galanos rarely ever had a hair out of place and she achieved it so effortlessly—natural flawless Mediterranean beauty on her side—unlike Charlize who had more of a curvy vivacious kind of charm that she felt needed a little extra vavavoom to enhance. She moaned inwardly with how shocking she must look. After basically face-planting her bed at one this morning, her thick curly blonde hair would be in complete and utter disarray and her make-up would most certainly be smeared all over her face.

‘My Prince Charming is too busy kissing Miss Bee-Sting-Lips to worry about me,’ she mumbled as she tried to rub her tired eyes to life, the scent of coffee from the apartment’s kitchen luring her upright. ‘I swear to God if that woman gets anymore Botox in her lips they’re going to explode ... and so are her double D sized boobs if someone bumps into her too hard. I have a very good mind to do that—with my car for that matter—and then reverse over her for good measure.’ She frowned. ‘Just kidding, of course.’

‘Oh, Charz, I’m so sorry, sweetness. Talk about foot in mouth.’ Jane slapped her forehead. ‘I didn’t mean to remind you about Mister Idiot-Features and Samantha.’

Charlize gave her friend a small smile as she blinked back tears. ‘Don’t apologise. I can sort of see the funny side of it.’

She peered down at the princess-cut diamond wedding ring still foolishly on her finger. She just couldn't seem take the damn thing off—and not because it was worth more than her trusty Holden Barina, but because it would cement the fact her five-year relationship with one of Sydney's most highly sought-after plastic surgeons, Alistair Dawson, was ultimately over. She wasn't ready for that kind of finality, especially not when they'd only tied the knot seven months ago.

'I know it's been almost two weeks but I still can't get my head around the fact he tried to tell me it wasn't what it looked like. I mean, for Christ's sake, how can finding your husband in bed with his secretary be anything *but* what it looks like?'

Jane frowned and shook her head, her long black ponytail swishing around her shoulders. 'All I have to say to that is Alistair Dawson is a self-centred prick. Always was and always will be. Just because he's six years older than you doesn't make him any wiser. In fact, you're much smarter than him in many *many* ways.'

Charlize screwed her face up. 'You've never really taken a shining to him, have you, Janey?'

Jane grimaced. 'Not really.' She smiled sadly. 'I know he can be charming and I can see why you fell so hard for him. I mean, out of all the women falling at his feet the night of the gala he sought you out and wooed you for months until you agreed to date him, but once the thrill of the chase wore off his true colours started to show through. Then after you were married and he thought he had you hook, line and sinker, he really started being a downright arsehole. You told him from the get-go you had no interest in ever having plastic surgery, and he just kept on pointing out everything he felt you needed doing.' She held her arms wide. 'And I have no idea why because you're perfect just the way you are.'

‘But he can be so nice, especially when we’re all on our own.’ Charlize’s voice was shaking.

‘Oh sweetie.’ Jane strode into the room, her high heels clip-clopping on the tiled floor, and sat down on the edge of the bed. Crossing her long stockinged legs, she removed her glasses and placed them in her lap. ‘Honey, I know he’s apologised over and over, and he swears he’ll never do it again, but I hope you’re going to stick to your guns and not go back to him.’ She reached out and grabbed Charlize’s hand and gave it a loving squeeze, her brown eyes filled with concern. ‘I know you’ve always daydreamed about being married and having a family of your own, but I just don’t think Alistair is the man to give it to you. I tried to let you know how I felt, very gently of course, before you married him, but you were too wrapped up in the notion of walking down the aisle to take any notice. And I wasn’t going to shove my feelings down your throat when you seemed so happy. I mean, who was I to know how things would work out?’

‘Oh Janey, I never thought I was going to be a divorcee, especially so soon after getting married.’ She hung her head. ‘I’m going to end up a lonely old woman with only cats and dogs for company, I can see it now.’ Her heart began to feel heavier than it already was.

‘Oh hon, there’s plenty more fish in the sea, and you’re a bloody stunner if I do say so myself, so I have every faith you’ll find love again. There’s plenty of time for you to live your dream life with a man that actually deserves you.’

‘Stuff that, I don’t want any other fish from the stupid man ocean ... because from my experience they’re all bloody sharks,’ Charlize said grumpily. She tried to run her hands through her matted locks and then grimaced. ‘And I’m a stunner? Really? Have you taken a good look at me this morning? I’m guessing I look like the wild woman from Borneo.’

‘Yeah, you kinda do.’ Janey returned the grimace, and then grinned. ‘But you have a good excuse to look a little worse for wear this morning. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so drunk.’

‘I was pretty bad, huh?’

‘Yup.’

‘Cheers for coming to my rescue.’ Charlize gave her best friend a thankful smile before looking down at Bruce curled up in her lap. ‘I know what you’re saying makes perfect sense, but I just want a little more time to think about everything before I go asking for a divorce.’

‘Whatever you need to do, Charz, you do it.’ Jane reached out and grabbed Charlize’s shoulders as she smiled empathically. ‘I have your back, no matter what. Just remember that, won’t you.’

Charlize sniffled as heavy tears began to fill her eyes and roll down her cheeks. She’d had her life all mapped out. Get married to Alistair, have two kids—one boy, one girl—work from home, maybe find a mate for Bruce, and then live happily ever. ‘Thanks, Janey, it’s just, I’m so confused at the moment and I don’t want to go making any rash decisions because my heart’s telling me one thing and my head’s telling me another.’

‘Well, just remember this: You deserve a man that loves you for the beautiful, kind, strong, intelligent woman you are. I don’t think Alistair is ever going to be that man—he’s never going to change his spots. And the worst thing is, he’s taken away a lot of your confidence and zest for life. This *may* be the first time he’s cheated on you—’ Jane grit her teeth and glanced skyward before bringing her gaze back to Charlize’s ‘—that we know of, but he’s hurt you time and time again with the way he treats you. He’s hardly ever home, and when he is he expects you to do everything for him. When was the last time he did something to show you how special you are? I mean, the guy can’t even make you breakfast. On

Valentine's Day he didn't even give you a card—let alone flowers or chocolates—and you sat at home and had dinner for one while he was supposedly working late.'

Charlize nodded miserably. 'I know, I know. I've already given him way too many chances.' She smiled sadly as she swallowed down the welling emotions. 'It's just, as much as I could see things going down the gurgler, I haven't wanted to believe our relationship was falling apart. I still have feelings for him, and he knows it. And I hate it. It makes me so vulnerable, and you know how much I hate feeling defenceless to a man.' Charlize wiped her eyes and sniffled. 'Before Alistair, I'd never have let a bloke walk all over me the way he has.'

'Well, you'll just have to find that strength again. And if it takes me giving you a few slaps over the head to snap you out of any crazy decisions, or maybe hiring a hit man to get rid of Alistair forever, you know I'll be there for you.' Jane smiled sassily as she gave her a wink.

Charlize reached out and pulled her childhood friend into a tight hug. 'Thank you, Janey, for putting up with me moping around, for saving me last night, for letting me and Bruce move in with you, and for being the best friend any girl could ever wish for. I honestly couldn't have stayed away from Alistair for this long without you.'

Jane hugged her tightly back and then pulled away while still holding onto her. 'You've saved me from my fair share of bad relationships over the years, so let's just say it's my turn to look after you. You know you can stay here as long as you need to. I love having you around. The place is always spotless and I come home to the most amazing food I've ever eaten.'

'So you're just using me for my OCD cleaning habits and my amazing culinary skills.'

Jane grinned. 'Yup.'

Charlize playfully slapped her mate. 'I love you.'

'I know, you told me that about a hundred times on the way home last night ... or should I say, slurred it a hundred times.' Jane smiled as she regarded her friend with kind eyes. 'I love you too, Charz. But I'm worried about you. Please promise me you're going to try and pull yourself together. You don't want this affecting your career. You've worked way too damn hard to let it all go belly up over a man.'

Charlize traced an X over her chest with her finger. 'Cross my heart. I'm going to do everything I can to pull myself together. And I will try my best to ignore Alistair's phone calls and texts until I know exactly what I want. I'm not going to give him a chance to sweet talk me into running back to him because he's very good at that.'

'Good. Try and spend some time on yourself. In my opinion, unless you have a man that's going to treat you like his queen, they're just not worth it.'

Charlize smiled as she rolled her eyes. 'Yes, Miss I'm-Waiting-For-The-Right-One.'

'Well, one of us has to stay on the straight and narrow.'

'I'd rather live life on the edge, it's more fun there.' Charlize hung her head backwards over the bed, regretting it instantly when the room began to spin. She quickly motioned for Jane to help her back up as Bruce leapt from her lap and to the floor. He sat and eyed her with his head cocked to the side.

Jane reached out and grabbed Charlize's hands, yanking her back up the right way. 'And boy oh boy haven't I learnt that the hard way over the years? The amount of times you've gotten me into bloody trouble.' Jane giggled as she shook her head. 'My theory is you have more chance of landing flat on your face if you're balancing on the edge all the time. I like to keep my feet planted firmly on the



ground, thank you very much. That way I know where I stand and what to expect.'

'Like I said, no fun.' Now sitting again, Charlize poked her tongue out and then rolled her eyes, smiling playfully. 'Anyhoos. I suppose I better get up and get myself looking decent. I have a meeting with the boss at ten. I'm nervous as hell he's going to grill me because I haven't been focused on my work these past couple of weeks.' She jumped from the bed, her singlet skew-whiff and her matching boxers riding up her bum. 'Right. Plan of attack is: nice hot shower, a clean outfit, greasy fried eggs on toast, plenty of coffee and then off to catch the train because my car is still parked at the restaurant you saved me from.'

'I'm sure Jasper understands you've been hurting badly, and therefore not yourself lately.' Jane stood and straightened her already immaculately ironed knee-length skirt. 'I can give you a lift if you like. I'm heading straight to the courthouse so I'll be going past your office block. We'll go and grab your car after work.'

Standing at her wardrobe with Bruce at her heels, Charlize chose a black suit and then knelt down to pick matching heels. Bruce joined her in her quest for footwear, hindering more than helping as he jumped from one heeled shoe to another, knocking most of them over in the process. Charlize couldn't help but laugh. 'Thanks Janey.' She turned and smiled at her friend. 'What would I do without you?'

'I'd hate to think.' Jane said with a smile as she turned in her heels.