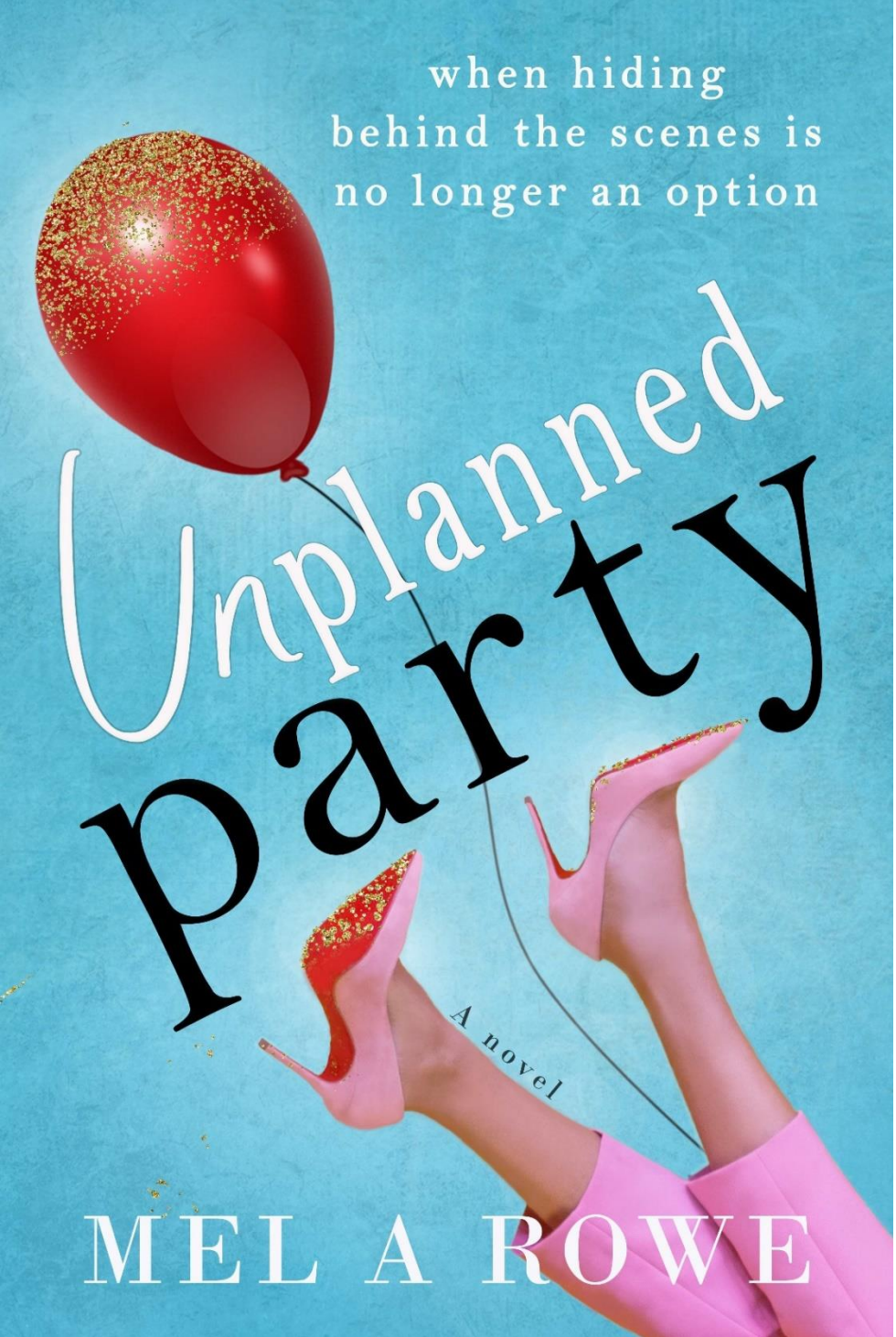


when hiding  
behind the scenes is  
no longer an option



Unplanned  
party

A novel

MEL A ROWE

# UNPLANNED PARTY

By MEL A ROWE

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**The following is written in Australian English.**

For those who have ever had a planned  
birthday party that just ... sucked.

# Chapter 1

Happy Birthday—*not*.

Emma slammed her van door shut and sighed at her silhouette darkening its white panel. She was reminded of Fiona from Shrek—the *ogre* Fiona, and nothing like the birthday girl she was supposed to be. She'd rather be back in bed ignoring the whole damned day. But couldn't. Her family and friends were waiting, her mother's shiny red sports was car parked beside her.

'Delivery vans park in the laneway, easier to unload back there,' called out the man, exhaling cigarette smoke as he strolled along the pathway from the beach side of the small cove.

*Typical, still being treated like staff.* 'Sorry, I'm not delivering today. I'm here for lunch at Neptune's.'

'Oh, my bad. Just saw the van.'

How could anyone miss her work-van? It was big and white with *Parte'* written in pink champagne bubbles spilling from a bottle. It stood out like a clown parked amongst the

luxury cars, while their equally sleek owners indulged in Sunday lunch.

‘Hey, I’ve heard of your business. You did the Mad Hatter’s dinner party for my sister-in-law.’

‘Thanks, it’s a popular theme.’ Emma smiled, she loved theme parties. Used to love that one too, but it had been overused by the masses like a song saturated on the radio. Kind of like her kettle, still hanging on for grim life, straining to boil her that perfect cup of coffee in the morning.

‘I’m Neptune’s owner. I’ll walk you over.’ He ditched his smoke in the bushes and popped a mint.

‘Sure.’ She recognised the look. *Here comes the pitch, to push a party his way.* Emma didn’t mind, she loved her job and was always looking for the perfect party venue.

Sneaking in through the kitchen with the manager, she listened to his pitch as he made her a complimentary drink at the bar. The packed restaurant had a glistening view of calm azure seas to one side, with assorted luxury yachts moored on the other. It was a gloriously warm day outside, yet she was inside, talking shop, staring out at a million-dollar view.

She frowned spying her older sister, Helen, seated beside their mother, Irene, at a table across the room. Her friend Victoria sat opposite, wearing dark sunglasses, with her hair styled between an up-do and her I-just-got-out-of-bed look that

she still made chic. Beside Victoria was Emma's immaculately dressed assistant, Benjamin.

Emma narrowed her eyes at the table itself that held a neat posy nestled amongst the cutlery and glasses set for service. There were no garish presents wrapped in ribbons. No streamers. No party hats. Nothing to show it was her birthday lunch. *Thank God.*

She eyed the exit to her *Parte*' van which had an even better view of the beach. Could she run away with her van and not face her own party?

Emma sighed, and with drink in hand, she made her way through the restaurant towards her table, praying they didn't sing and pop confetti bombs in her face.

She approached the table as their voices greeted her, and she politely waited for them to notice her. She was well-trained to never interrupt guests.

'I hope Emma hasn't forgotten,' said Victoria, pushing up her dark sunglasses and sipping on a Bloody Mary.

'No,' said Benjamin. 'I reminded Emma last night when she dropped me home. Even though she kept saying, *don't remind me, don't remind me.* I reminded her.'

'Emma has always hated her birthdays,' said Irene.

'How come?' Benjamin asked.

'When Emma started school, we threw her a party,' said Irene. 'Silly me, I'd accidentally written the wrong date on the

invitations so no one came. Emma never wanted another party after that.'

'And now the babe makes a living throwing fabulous parties,' said Victoria.

'I love my birthday. I throw a big party every year and tell people what presents I want. Which reminds me, no one got any gifts involving a gym membership, or some gym equipment-workout-thingy, did we?' Benjamin arched his eyebrow, waiting for their responses.

'God no.' They shook their heads.

Irene tucked her sleek silver bob behind her ear. 'Good, otherwise Emma will think we're all picking on her.'

Trying to catch the light on her ring, Helen tilted her head so far over, her gold dangle-earring rested on her shoulder. 'Well, we are talking about the butterball.'

'Don't say that about your sister,' said Irene, frowning at Helen beside her.

'It's true. The other day I was finishing my scrapbooking project about me as a child. In every photo, there's Emma as this big, blobby butterball.'

'Emma hasn't been gifted with the figure we have. She's your grandmother all over.'

'Figure-shmigure. If Emma didn't shove a chocolate bar in her mouth or swig on a beer all the time, she'd never have a problem. You know, Emma was always eating, she never played

sport or went anywhere. She'd just sit there, eating Mum's butter biscuits, doing all her craft-crap in the kitchen,' said Helen, talking to the rock on her finger.

Benjamin and Victoria rolled eyes at each other and snatched up their drinks. '*Emma*,' they chorused.

*Damn.* She'd been busted trying to escape. After overhearing that crap, she wanted to be as far away from them as possible. Had she blended in so much like a staff member that no one noticed her sooner?

Emma took a deep breath—it was time to sprinkle some glitter onto her freak flag and smile.

'Hi, everyone.' Emma kissed her mother's cheek. She then air-kissed Helen, leaving enough room for a drone to do cartwheels in the space between them. Benjamin bounced to his feet and hugged her. Then taking her seat, Emma draped an arm around her best friend's shoulders, inhaling Victoria's signature fragrance, Chanel No 5. 'Hello, beautiful.'

Victoria peeked over the rim of her sunglasses and crinkled up her nose. 'And that's why you're my friend.'

'Hungover?' Emma asked Victoria, resembling Holly Golightly in a Breakfast at Tiffany's re-make.

'Not anymore.' Victoria raised her spiked tomato juice in one hand, unlit cigarette in the other. 'Glad you could make it, babe. Otherwise, I was about to discover what a Bloody Mary could do for your sister's complexion.'



‘Why waste a fine spirit on the soulless?’ Emma mumbled to herself. ‘Are you ready for your tour of South America, Mum?’

‘Why can’t I go on a holiday with my toy-boy paying for it all?’ whined Benjamin.

‘Because your perfect partner is a man, who’s too busy keeping politicians in line to take a holiday this time of year,’ said Emma. ‘Do you need me to water your plants while you’re away, Mum?’

Her mother nodded. ‘Yes, please. You can stay there, you know?’

‘And give up my luxurious getaway in the treetops?’

‘You live in a shed,’ spat out Helen with her nose screwed up.

‘It’s a classy shed,’ Benjamin said with raised chin.

‘Must be, for Benjamin to grace the peasants with his presence,’ said Emma.

Benjamin wagged the tip of his finger at Emma like it was a dancing worm. ‘See—did I ever tell you I have the best job, working for the best boss in the world!’

‘You know I pay you to say that, right?’

‘You don’t work,’ scoffed Helen, inspecting the prawn poised on the end of her fork.

‘Don’t.’ Emma patted Victoria’s hand to reduce her friend’s bitchy comeback to a mutter.

‘Waiter, I need another one.’ Victoria held up her near-empty glass and turned to Emma. ‘Are you drinking?’

‘No, I’m driving, and I promise to not throw any wild parties while you’re away, Mum.’

‘Talking about holiday preparations,’ said Irene, ‘I had my first Brazilian the other day and now Mitchell won’t leave me alone.’

‘MUM.’ Helen cringed, and Emma slapped her palms over her ears.

Once upon a time, Irene was a wife and mother who’d devoted herself to her family. She baked the best butter biscuits which she kept in the jar beside the band-aids, for those bad days. For Emma, that was every day.

Then Irene discovered orgasms, and her sexual appetite blossomed overnight. Thankfully, after Emma moved out.

Gone was the mousey hair kept in a bun and the conservative outfits. Gone were the house and the station wagon. In their place was a sex loving, party-hard, world-travelling woman who was lapping up life in a modern townhouse as chic as her sports car.

Was Emma going to end up like her mother when she hit menopause, or had she skipped straight over to old maid status?

‘Look.’ Helen displayed her perfect manicured finger holding a ruby and diamond ring. ‘My darling husband gave me an eternity ring. Isn’t William adorable.’

‘Haven’t you already got an eternity ring?’ Emma remembered, because Helen had shoved it under Emma’s nose every chance she got.

‘I can have more than one, can’t I?’ Helen arched a perfectly plucked eyebrow. ‘Jealous much?’

‘It’s nice.’ Emma tried to smile, instead she sneered at the glamorous, stay-at-home mother, whose job was to get in your way in the supermarket whenever you were in a rush. Not in suburbia, but in millionaire-alley. Helen’s rug in the laundry was worth more than Emma’s *Parte* van.

Helen was little miss-perfection. She’d been the most popular in school and was now the perfect mother, and perfect wife to William. But she was the worst older sister on the planet. Helen made Cinderella’s stepsisters look positively angelic.

‘*Uh, I forgot*—I’ve got a new ring too.’ Victoria held out her left hand that displayed a large diamond solitaire.

‘You’re engaged!’ Emma squealed, and the other diners stopped and stared.

‘Ooh, lemme see,’ said Benjamin, eyeing off the ring.

‘No, let me.’ Helen reached across the table.

‘*Ow*. Helen, the ring is attached to my hand that’s attached to my arm, you know.’

‘Wait, for it. I’m sure she was a jeweller in a past life,’ said Emma, grinning at Benjamin over Victoria’s back.

Helen crouched in for a close-up of the ring. ‘Great cut, clarity, setting. It’s a keeper.’

‘I’m wearing it, aren’t I?’ Victoria tugged her hand free and resumed her seat.

‘Have you decided on a wedding theme or anything?’ Benjamin asked. ‘Simon and I are still working out ours. I want over the top, yet Simon wants conservative, so some of his co-workers can attend.’

‘Why would you want a politician to go to your wedding?’ Victoria asked.

Benjamin rolled his eyes as he smoothed over his brown hair. ‘For the gifts, duh.’

Emma grinned at him. ‘Are you going to dress as Tina? You’ve got the legs for it.’

‘No.’ Benjamin sighed as his shoulders sagged like a deflating balloon. ‘My days of drag-queening-cabaret are over. I’m practically a married man.’

‘I’ll never get married again,’ Irene said.

‘I’m happily married, thank you,’ said Helen, polishing her new ring on the napkin.

‘I’m ...’—*the only single person sitting at the table.* Emma snatched up her water and drank it dry. What she really wanted to do, was slink low into her chair and disappear under the table.

‘Well I’m not married, yet. I haven’t thought about the wedding or anything, except ...’ Victoria sat straighter and pointed her unlit cigarette at Emma. ‘Babe, I’m locking you in to do my hen’s night. I’m thinking boat, booze, and boys.’

‘Oh yeah, we’re on board for that.’ Emma grinned, the ideas already starting to formulate.

‘What about the wedding?’ Helen asked.

‘Oh, yeah, that too. I’d love your help with the wedding,’ said Victoria, taking a drag of her unlit cigarette.

‘Emma doesn’t do weddings,’ said Benjamin.

Emma refused to look at her family as she said, ‘Brides, and dealing with the mother of the bride, it’s all too emotional. I deal in fun, not horror-movie-memories.’

Helen cleared her throat, turning away from her mother. Irene wiped the tip of her nose, refolded her napkin, and clasped her hands on the table. Neither of them looked at Emma.

‘But ...’ Victoria pouted.

‘I do love hen’s nights. We’ll get your name in the paper for that one, shall we?’ Emma winked at Benjamin who’d leaned forward nodding. She loved her ever-eager party-hard offsider who was perfect in their party planning world.

‘When is the wedding?’ Helen asked.

Victoria plonked her elbow on the table, and lowered her sunglasses. ‘Listen, Helen, does being a fake-blonde interfere with your hearing? I just said, we only got engaged last night.’

‘How did Paul propose?’ Emma asked.

‘Babe, I’m so-so sorry I didn’t call you and blab all, but ...’ Victoria paused to puff on her unlit cigarette. ‘I got home, annoyed about working on a Saturday, while Paul’s laid out on the couch watching football, with a beer in hand, and his crap everywhere. It’s his one annoying habit. He’ll come home, take off his tie and jacket and throw them over the dining-chairs. By the end of the week they’re everywhere. I refuse to put them away now, and they build up until he has none left in the closet and starts using the lounge as his dressing room.’ Victoria paused again to sip her cocktail.

‘And?’ Benjamin asked with wide eyes.

As the Queen of her own court, Victoria put down her glass and her lips curled into a sly smile. ‘That’s when I lost it. I grabbed all the clothes he’d left lying around and dumped them all over him. He was lying on the couch laughing at me from beneath this pile of clothes, when this jewellery box fell out of his suit jacket and onto the floor. So Paul, still lying on the couch, picks up the box and asks me if I wanted to lower my standards to his depth, and join him in a low-life partnership—’

‘No candlelight dinner?’ Helen asked with her face screwed up. ‘No flowers? No fancy proposal?’

‘Paul was planning to take me out to dinner, but I didn’t want to go out. I’ve been out every night this week for work.’

Helen winced even more as if sucking her way through a thousand lemons. ‘How rude! Where’s the effort?’

‘He didn’t need to,’ said Victoria. ‘If Paul puts up with me and my many over-demanding moods, I can put up with his lazy habit of not putting his clothes away. Why not make it official and claim my right to the title of nagging wife?’

‘He called you a nagging wife?’ screeched Helen, who’d forgotten to add the sweet to the sourness in her expression.

‘All the time, and long before Paul moved in four years ago. But he did get on one knee, considering he was halfway there already, and proposed as colourfully as a word-playing journalist can. Then we made our own special night ... if you get my drift.’ Victoria grinned from behind her cocktail glass.

‘So, you humped like rabbits on the couch,’ Irene said. ‘I like couch sex. Although, give me a good rocking recliner any day.’

‘MUM!’ Helen and Emma cried out.

The waitress collected their dishes, scraping assorted seafood shells into one bowl as she made her way around the table. With shaky hands, she balanced the finger bowls onto the mountain of discarded seafood shells.

‘We’ll have our dessert now,’ Irene said to the waitress.

‘Certainly.’ The waitress leaned forward to collect Emma’s plate, when a customer bumped her from behind. ‘*Oh no,*’ she cried out as the large bowl full of assorted seafood

shells, fishy finger-water, prawn heads, oyster shells, squeezed lemon rinds, and parsley garnish fell all over Emma.

‘*Shiit!*’ Emma sat frigidly still as cold liquid trickled through her scalp, dribbled down her neck and back, with the large metal bowl landing in her lap ... *empty*.

Liquid oozed into her cleavage. In front of her face, tangled prawn heads swung from her hair. Limp parsley hung off her ears, and a wedge of lemon landed in her cleavage. Her lap resembled the leftovers of a buffet table used as ammunition after a food fight.

‘I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry,’ sobbed the waitress, picking off oyster shells clinging to Emma’s shoulders.

‘DON’T—*touch me!*’ Emma clenched her teeth, in fear of thumping the waitress. She didn’t want to breakdown before a live studio audience where all eyes were on her. Many gasped in shock, mirrored by her mother. Others were as horrified as Benjamin and Victoria in their silent-horror-movie poses. While some were on the verge of laughter, led by Helen—of course.

But Emma never made a fuss. Ever.

‘Excuse me.’ She stood up, creating a tsunami slide of prawn juice, fish scales, and crab shells that spilled across the floor. With wet dress held outwards and pink prawn heads swinging from her hair, Emma walked past the room full of people. Refusing to cry, she cast her eyes downwards and raced for the loo like an over-garnished sea-hag.



At the row of sinks, Emma rinsed herself off. The harsh lighting only highlighted her mess in the wall of mirrors. The door swung back so hard against the tiled wall as Victoria stormed inside. ‘That waitress should be fired.’

‘It was an accident,’ Emma said, tossing more paper-towel into the bin. ‘I’m not having someone fired over this. Not over me.’

‘But it’s your birthday and look at what she’s done.’

‘I’ll live.’ Was misery missing her company today? *Oh, wait, did rock-bottom leave a message too?*

‘The Manager is giving you a free meal for the future.’

‘I’m not coming back here in a hurry.’ Facing the mirror, Emma wiped off her makeup, exposing her pale skin that highlighted her washed-out mop of hair. Her dull, over-sized eyes stared back, as she chewed on her fat bottom lip. She hated her birthday. ‘I’m going home to shower before I start attracting flies. Tell everyone I’ll catch up later.’ Emma headed for the nearest exit as Victoria followed.

‘But we have cake and presents.’

‘Save it for next year.’ *Or never.*

‘I’ll call you later?’

‘Sure.’ Emma paused at the front doors. ‘Hey honey, congratulations on your engagement. Give Paul a hug for me too.’

‘I will.’ Victoria shared a sulky pout and limp wristed wave.

Emma acted as dignified as possible, trying to pretend it was perfectly normal to walk down the road with wet-patches in hair and clothes on a sunny Sunday afternoon.

She rummaged in her bag for her car keys as she approached her parking spot.

Instead, she stood in a vacant space turning full circle.

It wasn’t a tow away zone, and her mother’s sports car was still in the same spot.

‘Where’s my van?’

In the marina’s car park there was an assortment of luxury cars, motorbikes, SUV’s, and four-wheel drives that suited the yachts moored behind them. But no white work-van.

‘Sweetie, why are you still here?’ Benjamin called out, bouncing beside Irene.

‘I think my van’s been stolen?’ Emma held her keys in hand ready to unlock the door.

‘Oh, snap. I’ll call the police.’ Benjamin, being the ever-efficient offside, whipped out his mobile phone.

‘It isn’t your day, is it, honey,’ said Irene.

‘Mum, it’s meant to be my birthday. *The day.*’ But it was all turning to crap. Okay, her kettle didn’t die this morning, which was a bonus. But it was still a crappy day. She was covered in sticky prawn grit that smelled, and as an added

bonus, she was starting to itch. ‘Am I allergic to seafood today? Because I don’t think this new oceanic perfume is agreeing with my skin.’

‘Who would want to steal a van?’ Irene asked.

‘Who knows,’ replied Benjamin, ‘but the police are on their way.’

‘So much for my fast getaway.’ Emma spied the wine bottle in Benjamin’s hand and reached for it. ‘Thanks. I’ll take that drink, now I’m not driving anymore.’ She sat on the curb at the end of the vacant car lot where her van had once stood, cracked open the bottle, and took a deep drink of the white wine. No glass, no savouring, and no pinkie in the air, but at least it was cold, wet, and alcoholic.

‘You can’t sit there and drink,’ scoffed Irene.

‘Unless you’ve got glasses in the car Mum, I believe I have the right to celebrate my birthday any way I please. Want some?’ Emma held out the bottle.

Irene shook her head. ‘I’m driving.’

‘I’ll indulge. Who knows how long it’ll be before the police arrive.’ Benjamin bounced to sit beside Emma on the gutter. He took a sip from the bottle, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. ‘Hey, does this make us a couple of winos?’

‘Gutter tramps, maybe?’ Emma and Benjamin snickered at each other.

‘What are you’re doing?’ Helen’s jaw dropped as she raised her sunglasses, Victoria was standing beside her.

‘Am I missing something?’ Victoria waved her unlit cigarette at them like a wand.

‘Emma’s van’s been stolen, and we’re commiserating,’ said Benjamin.

‘No, I’m celebrating *and* commiserating.’ Emma took another mouthful of wine. ‘Keep frowning like that sis and you’ll get lines on your forehead that even Botox won’t fix.’

‘Well, you can’t have a *carpark party* without presents. Here’s mine.’ Victoria exchanged a red envelope for Emma’s wine bottle and sat beside her on the kerb.

‘I didn’t want gifts, just lunch ... that I’m wearing.’ Emma giggled, it was either laugh or cry.

Emma opened her card that held a voucher to a beauty parlour. ‘Thanks Victoria, but, unless you want to smell like Neptune’s after-party, don’t get offended if I don’t hug you.’

‘Here’s mine.’ Benjamin handed her the same coloured red envelope. It was another voucher from the same beauty salon for a manicure and pedicure.

‘Nice.’ Emma grinned.

‘My turn.’ Irene’s red card was for a facial, and Helen’s was for a haircut.

‘Wow, thanks, everyone, I love it. At this point,’—Emma glanced at her ruined dress—‘I could do with a full makeover.’

‘Don’t I know it. Right, I’m going home now. Bye.’ Without a backward glance and with head held high, Helen toddled off in her heels.

‘I’ll go fetch more wine,’ said Benjamin as he crossed the road.

‘Ask if they’ll share some glasses,’ called out Irene.

‘Don’t bother, it’s a gutter party,’ said Emma. ‘Brown paper bags are optional.’

Victoria swallowed another swig of wine. ‘Sorry about your birthday, babe.’

‘Hey, it’s not all bad. I get to have that drink with you.’

‘True. Mind you, it’s usually done the other way around. First you get drunk, *then* you sit in the gutter. Preferably not in daylight.’

‘You should get out more.’ Emma grinned, sharing the bottle between them. They were the only people outside enjoying the water views, even if it was from the car park.

‘Police are here,’ called out Benjamin, carrying another bottle of wine while waving at the police car. ‘I hope they’re cute. Gotta love a man in uniform.’

The police car parked before the vacant spot Emma's van had once occupied. Two uniformed men got out and spoke with Benjamin and Irene.

'He's cute,' said Victoria, passing the bottle to Emma.

'Which one?' Emma asked, taking a mouthful of wine.

'The one with the stripes on his shoulders.'

'The one frowning at me?'

'Miss Toplin?' The officer approached, removing his sunglasses.

'Emma, please.' She arched her neck right back, he was so tall, and Victoria was right, he was handsome. *Ugh*—rephrase—*he was smoking*. His short brown hair resembled the mixed shades of toasted malts of an Indian Pale Ale through to the Imperial Stout. It matched the stony stare of his chartreuse eyes, a liquor the French monks perfected, now worn by the man of her sinful thoughts.

Her heart pounded. Her tongue was too big for her mouth, and she cupped her jaw to stop drooling, all while staring up at the god of her gutter party. 'Who are you?' *Adonis?*

'Officer Ryan Lewis. There's a law against drinking in public without a permit.'

Emma knew all about those permits and carried heaps of them in her van. Now stolen. 'Fine, give me a ticket. It'll totally top my day off.' *At least the view had improved.*

‘Care to confirm the make and model of your stolen van? And I’d like to see your driver’s licence.’

‘It’s a white van that has two front seats and a steering wheel, along with an exceptionally high-quality stereo inside. Sorry, I know nothing about cars, except to drive—when it’s here to drive.’ Emma grabbed her purse, then paused to stare at the asphalt where her van once stood. *I have no van!* She had clients to meet tomorrow, a function in the morning to set-up, and party equipment she’d hired out to collect this afternoon. How was she going to do all this now without her trusty van?

‘Anything else that makes it uniquely yours?’ Ryan asked.

‘There’s my logo with a large champagne bottle and the words *Parte*’ written in pink bubbles on the sides. Here’s my licence and business card with the same design.’ Grateful her hand remained steady while her tummy twirled its own glitter parade as she stared up at the guy. Aware how close their fingers were when passing him her cards, if he touched her, she’d faint.

Ryan read her driver’s licence. ‘I see it’s your birthday.’

‘Please don’t say happy birthday. I was meant to just eat lunch, but courtesy of the waitress, she spilled this lovely fly-attracting prawn-ponging perfume all over me. And no, I don’t normally sit in the gutter and drink straight from a wine bottle. My mother taught me manners, that I seem to have forgotten since my van’s vanishing act. And because I can’t drive

anymore, I'll drink instead. So, if you want to give me a ticket, by all means, make my day.' Yes, let's kill all forms of profit margins she'd been counting on from this month, because she'd have to hire a taxi now. *Was there a nearby hire company open on a Sunday afternoon?*

'How are you getting home?' Ryan asked.

'Um ...' She glanced down at her ruined appearance. 'I don't think a taxi will accept me in this condition.' Pulling a prawn head out from behind her ear she burst out laughing. *Could it get any worse?*

Ryan's smile was dynamite. Thank god she was already seated or she would've buckled to the pavement.

'Sorry, I'm not normally like this.' A heated prickly irritation spread across her skin.

'Understandable,' he replied in deep silky tones that sent goose bumps shimmying down her spine. 'I hope your day improves.'

'Can't get any lower than this, can I, Officer?' She gave him a slight shrug from her position in the gutter.

'Maybe I should give you that ticket to top your day off?' He said straight-faced, flicking the cover shut on his notebook as her smile dropped. 'But I won't. Happy birthday, Emma.' He had the smile of a movie star, and she had the opening night tickets to sit front and centre.



‘Thank you,’ Emma squeaked. Dry in the throat she swigged more wine and watched his swagger.

Victoria whispered, ‘nice arse.’

‘Ah-huh.’ Their heads leaned sideways, admiring his walk from their gutter view until the police car pulled away.

‘I think he was flirting with you, babe.’

‘Doubt it.’ Men who looked like Ryan never bothered with girls like her.

‘Come on, I’ll take you home, if you don’t mind playing sardines.’ Irene put the top down on her nifty sports car. Benjamin climbed into the back seat with Victoria beside him. Knees to their chests, they shared the wine bottle between them.

With the other bottle of wine in hand, in the front passenger seat, Emma stared at the vacant car park where her van should’ve been. What sort of adventures was her van having on its day out with the thief? Was it better than her day?

Happy birthday—*not*

[Get the rest of the story HERE](#)

