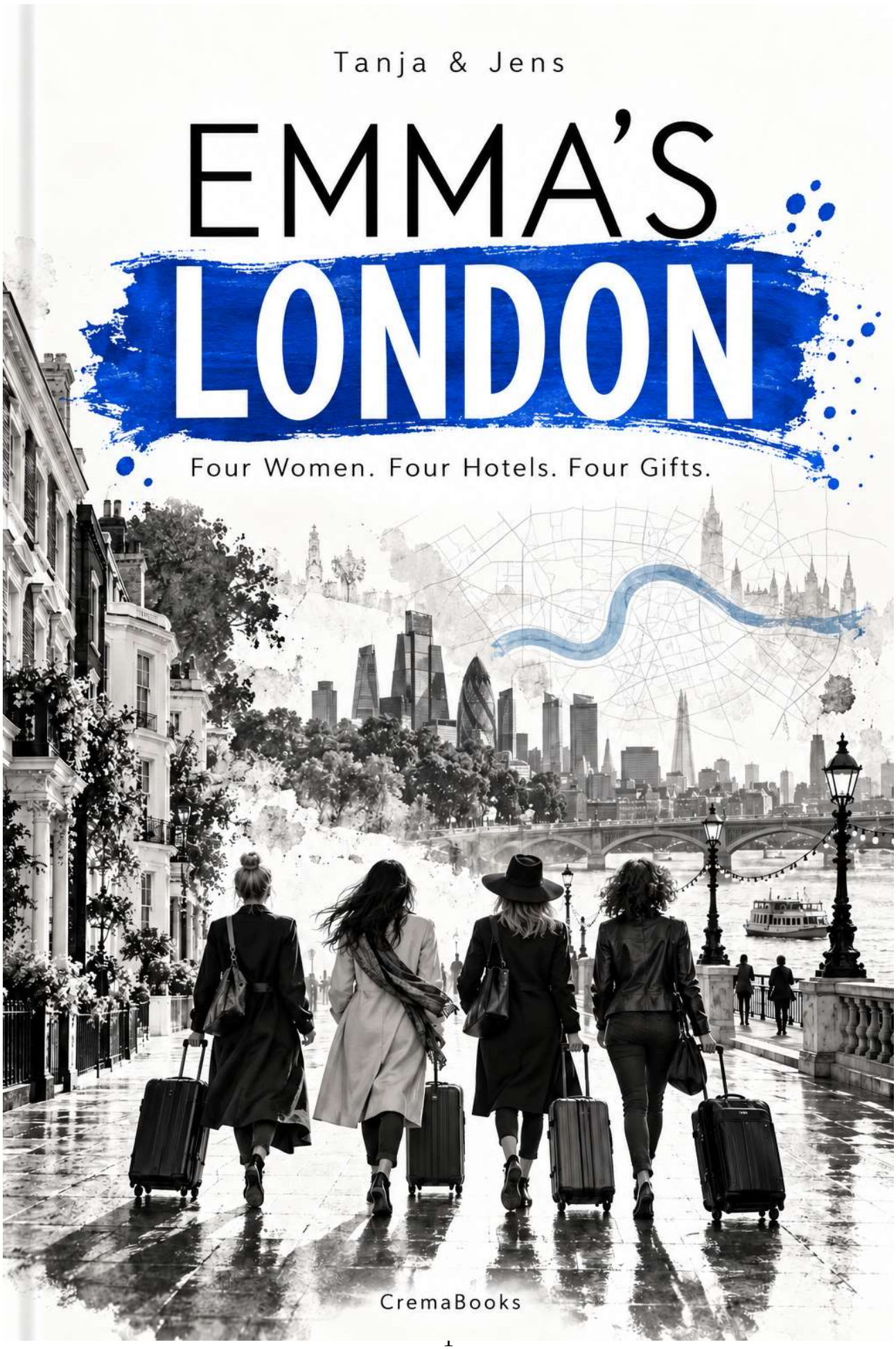
Tanja & Jens

EMMA'S LONDON

Four Women. Four Hotels. Four Gifts.



CremaBooks

IMPRINT

Title:

Emmas LONDON – **FOUR WOMEN. FOUR HOTELS. FOUR GIFTS.**

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FOUR WOMEN.
FOURTEEN DAYS.
FOUR HOTELS.

They wanted to see London.
In the end, they found four Londons.

—

And six weeks later?

FOUR WOMEN.
FOUR DAYS.
FOUR GIFTS.

Because sometimes the best gift isn’t a thing.
It’s a day together.
In London.

There we were again.
London.

Not quite yet.

But the plan was already on the table.

Four women. Fourteen days. Four hotels.

Giulia stared at Lara.

“Four hotels?”

“Yes.”

“With our suitcases?”

Lara didn’t even look up from her phone.

“No, Giulia. We’ll leave those at the airport.”

Inês choked on her coffee.

Emma grinned.

Four pins were scattered across the map of London on Emma’s phone.

Wood Wharf.
Central London.
Hampstead.
Kew and Richmond.

She zoomed out.

The dots moved closer together.

London got smaller.

The distances didn’t.

Giulia leant over the table.

“Why are we doing this again?”

Lara finally looked up.

Emma studied the four points.

Glass and water in the east.

Crowds in the centre.

Hills and houses in the north.

Greenery and the Thames in the west.

Then she said,

“Maybe we’re not doing fourteen days in London at all.”

Giulia raised an eyebrow.

“Then what?”

Emma turned the phone towards the others.

“Four different ones.”

For a moment, nobody said anything.

Then Lara smiled.

Just a little.

Giulia leant back.

“So we wake up in a different city every morning.”

Emma looked at the map again.

“Without ever leaving London.”

Inês raised her coffee.

“That sounds either brilliant or exhausting.”

Lara reached for her phone.

“Both.”

“Well, then.”

Emma slipped her phone away.

Four Londons were waiting.

…..

WOOD WHARF

The Elizabeth line picked them up at Heathrow and carried them right across London.

No changes.

Emma sat by the window.

Outside, the city slid past.

Houses first.

Brick.

Gardens appearing for a moment between walls.

Tracks.

Rooftops.

Streets.

Then London grew denser.

Taller.

Faster.

Again and again, everything vanished into a tunnel.

Reappeared.

Vanished again.

Giulia had her head resting on Inês's shoulder.

"How much longer?"

Lara checked her phone.

"Not long now."

"You say that very convincingly."

Emma grinned.

Then the tunnel swallowed the city for good.

When the doors opened at Canary Wharf, cool October air hit them.

Emma stepped out.

Three paces.

Then Giulia stopped.

Glass above them.

Glass in front of them.

Towers gathering up the grey sky.

People with coffee in their hands.

Trainers under suit trousers.

Headphones.

Wide walkways.

Water between the buildings.

Everything sleek.

Everything tall.

Giulia slowly turned in a circle.

"This isn't London."

Lara stopped beside her.

"It is."

“No.”

Giulia pointed upwards.

“This is New York.”

Inês narrowed her eyes.

“A little bit.”

Emma laughed.

And then Lara said,

“You’re not actually that far off.”

Giulia looked at her.

“Please don’t tell me we’ve got on the wrong plane.”

“Canary Wharf is used as a film location all the time.”

Lara gestured between the buildings.

“Including for scenes that are supposed to be in New York.”

Giulia looked up again.

At the glass façades.

The broad streets.

The people who all looked as if they had somewhere important to be.

“Knew it.”

Emma pulled her scarf tighter.

The wind funnelled between the buildings and slipped down the back of her neck.

Not a wonky brick in sight.

Not a pub that looked as though Dickens still had an unpaid tab there.

Their first London genuinely didn’t feel like London at all.

…..

They carried on towards the hotel.

Then Emma stopped.

An old dock crane.

Giulia looked at it.

“That doesn’t belong here at all.”

“It does,” Lara said. “These used to be the docks. Warehouses. Cranes. Ships.”

Emma took out her phone.

A little star appeared on the map.

“What are you saving?”

“Old London.”

Emma put her phone away.

“One of them.”

Then they carried on to the hotel.

…..

That evening, Wood Wharf lay below them.

Emma stood at the window.

Behind her, Lara rustled around.

“What are you doing?”

“Setting the alarm.”

Giulia lifted her head.

“For when?”

“Five.”

Silence.

“Why?”

Emma turned round.

“Billingsgate Market.”

Giulia stared at her.

“Fish?”

“Fish.”

Giulia dropped back onto her pillow.

“I hate us.”

…..

The phone vibrated.

Emma opened one eye.

05:00.

Closed it again.

“No.”

Giulia’s voice came from the other bed.

“That’s what I said.”

“Up,” Lara said from the darkness.

Alarmingly awake.

“How can you already sound like that at five in the morning?”

“Like what?”

“Like Lara.”

Fifteen minutes later, they were outside.

Cold air.

Wood Wharf was quiet.

Completely quiet.

No voices.

No footsteps.

Only their own.

Giulia pulled her coat tighter.

“This is creepy.”

Emma looked at her.

“Why are you whispering?”

Giulia glanced around.

“No idea.”

Emma laughed.

Quietly.

They didn’t see the first cars until they reached the main road.

A taxi.

A van.

Then another.

The closer they got to Billingsgate, the more the silence disappeared.

Lights.

Engines.

Trolleys.

Men in jackets.

Billingsgate Market.

Just after half past five.

Inside, the place was already in full swing.

Crates.

Ice.

Water on the floor.

Voices.

Metal.

Emma breathed in.

Fish.

But not the way she'd expected.

Not heavy.

Not stale.

Fresh.

Cold.

Almost clean.

And coffee somewhere further back.

Emma looked at Giulia.

"I thought it would smell worse."

Giulia looked at the crates.

"Maybe because the fish is actually fresh."

Emma nodded.

Trolleys rolled past beside them.

Hands reached for boxes.

Ice cracked.

A man shouted something across the hall.

Emma simply watched.

…..

A little later, they were sitting in the tiny café inside Billingsgate Market.

Men in work clothes at the neighbouring tables.

Voices.

Cutlery.

The door kept opening, letting in bursts of cold air from the market hall.

Emma wrapped both hands around her coffee.

Warm.

Familiar.

At least that was.

Then Giulia pushed a white bread roll towards her.

Bacon.

Scallops.

Emma looked at it.

“What is that?”

“Breakfast.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“I have sweet things for breakfast.”

“Not today.”

Emma looked at Lara.

Smoked haddock.

Poached egg.

“It’s not even six yet.”

Lara looked down at her plate.

“I know.”

Giulia nudged the roll closer.

“London.”

Emma took a bite.

Warm bread.

Salty bacon.

Soft scallop.

A little sweetness.

Giulia waited.

“Well?”

Emma took a second bite.

“Shut up.”

Giulia grinned.

At the next table, a man kept eating without looking up once.

Another checked his phone.

Nobody was remotely interested in the four of them.

“I like this,” Inês said.

Emma nodded.

“We’re not watching London put on a show for us.”

She took a sip of coffee.

“We’re just part of it for a minute.”

Outside, crates kept rolling through the hall.

Someone shouted.

The door opened.

Cold air.

Emma looked at her half-eaten roll.

Nearly six in the morning.

Scallops for breakfast.

Somehow, that felt exactly right for London.

…..

Later, the sky was only slightly lighter.

Billingsgate behind them.

Canary Wharf ahead.

Men in suits walked towards them.

Giulia stopped.

“Fish back there.”

She pointed ahead.

“Banks here.”

Lara nodded.

“London.”

Back at the hotel, Giulia collapsed onto the bed.

“I’m sleeping.”

“But we were going to—” Lara began.

“No.”

Emma checked the time.

Just after seven.

The day hadn’t even properly started.

She dropped onto the bed too.

“Just twenty minutes.”

Giulia raised one finger.

“Liar.”

…..

When Emma woke again, the room was bright.

“What time is it?”

Lara was sitting fully dressed by the window.

“Nine.”

“Damn.”

“We’re on holiday.”

Emma blinked.

Then she grinned.

“True.”

That afternoon, they walked to Greenwich.

On foot.

Giulia stopped at the entrance to the foot tunnel.

“We’re walking under the Thames now?”

“Yes.”

“Under the water?”

“Technically, under the riverbed,” Lara said.

Giulia looked at Emma.

“Why is she like this?”

“She was like that when we met her.”

The air in the tunnel was cooler.

Their footsteps echoed.

White tiles.

Strip lights.

Someone ahead of them grew smaller in the distance.

Voices approached from behind.

Emma brushed her fingertips over the wall.

Cold.

“There’s water above us now,” Inês said.

Giulia stopped.

“Don’t say things like that.”

“You wanted to know—”

“I didn’t want to know anything.”

Then the wall changed.

The white tiles stopped.

A section of the tunnel was lined with metal.

Giulia slowed down.

“What is that?”

Lara looked over.

“That section was repaired after a bomb strike during the Second World War.”

Giulia looked up.

“Under the Thames.”

“Yes.”

“And you’re telling me this NOW?”

Emma laughed.

“Keep moving.”

Giulia did.

Much faster than before.

On the other side, they turned around.

Canary Wharf stood opposite them.

Glass.

Towers.

The London where they’d eaten scallops for breakfast that very morning.

Giulia slowly shook her head.

“This is seriously all the same city.”

Emma looked back across the Thames.

“Apparently.”

Then they carried on.

…..

After a few days in Wood Wharf, they could almost find their way back to the hotel without the map.

Canary Wharf.

Greenwich.

Docks.

Then the suitcases were back in the corridor.

Giulia looked at them.

“Moving on?”

Lara zipped up her case.

“Yes. Hotel number two.”

“How many more?”

“Three.”

Giulia briefly closed her eyes.

“I didn’t actually want to know.”

A little later, they were back on the train.

This time towards central London.

At the second hotel, Giulia still commented on the suitcase.

By the third, she probably wouldn’t bother.

Central London hit Emma the moment she came out of the station.

People.

Buses.

Sirens.

The smell of frying oil.

Someone bumped into her and apologised without slowing down.

Emma grinned.

Giulia looked at her.

“What?”

“Now London feels like London again.”

Lara rolled her eyes.

“That makes absolutely no sense.”

“It does.”

Then Big Ben appeared between the buildings.

Emma stopped.

“There.”

Inês looked up.

“It was there last time too.”

“I know.”

Emma lifted her phone.

Red bus.

Big Ben.

Click.

Too late.

Half the bus out of frame.

Big Ben crooked.

Giulia looked at the screen.

“Perfect.”

“The bus is cut off.”

“Exactly.”

…..

“We booked.”

Lara held up her phone.

Emma looked at the screen.

Then at the queue.

“Does the queue know that?”

Giulia grinned.

Emma shifted her weight onto the other foot.

Bad idea.

“I’d like to hand in my feet.”

Giulia looked down.

“Both of them?”

“As a set.”

Not long after, they were inside.

At the top, nobody said anything at first.

Emma stepped up to the glass.

London lay below her.

Rooftops.

Glass.

Water.

The Thames threading through it all.

Giulia came to stand beside her.

“Okay.”

Emma looked at her.

“Okay what?”

“Worth it.”

Lara stood behind them.

That little smile.

Emma knew it.

“Don’t say it.”

Lara raised both hands.

“I haven’t said anything.”

“Your face has.”

Then light suddenly broke through the clouds.

St Paul’s brightened.

Emma lifted her phone.

Then lowered it again.

“No photo?” Inês asked.

“In a minute.”

Look first.

…..

By evening, their feet were done.

Giulia stopped.

“No.”

“No what?” Lara asked.

“Everything.”

Inês pointed at a bar.

“Cocktail?”

Emma straightened up.

“I can walk again.”

Soon they were sitting at a table with their legs stretched out.

Ice.

Lime.

Mint.

Too strong.

Perfect.

“We’ll do less tomorrow,” Lara said.

Three women looked at her.

Then all four of them laughed.

…..

The next afternoon, they lost Giulia in Covent Garden.

One moment she was there.

The next, she wasn’t.

Emma looked around.

People.

Bags.

Music.

Somewhere, a violin was playing.

“Of course,” Lara said.

They found Giulia by the third violinist.

Holding coffees.

“I brought you coffee.”

Lara took one.

“I take back everything I said.”

Giulia grinned.

The violinist kept playing.

A child danced.

People paused for a moment.

Emma took a sip.

The coffee was mediocre.

The moment wasn’t.

“This would be even better in the evening,” Inês said.

Lara was about to reply.

Giulia looked at her.

“Don’t plan it.”

Lara stayed quiet.

And, surprisingly, it remained unplanned.

…..

A few days later, the suitcases were ready again.

Hotel three.

Hampstead.

Giulia looked at the hill in front of them.

“Why did nobody tell me London has mountains?”

“That’s not a mountain,” Lara said.

“My legs say it’s a mountain.”

Small houses.

Old windows.

Pubs.

A cat sat on a wall and looked at them as if they were the problem.

Emma stopped.

“She belongs here.”

Inês pulled her coat tighter.

“She probably pays more to live here than we do.”

Then Hampstead Heath opened up in front of them.

Suddenly, space.

Wind.

Grass.

And London beyond it.

Grey.

Glass.

The Shard.

St Paul’s somewhere in between.

Lara stopped.

Just like that.

Emma followed her gaze.

“Strange.”

Giulia stepped beside her.

“What?”

“A second ago London had disappeared.”

Emma looked towards the skyline.

“Now it’s back.”

For a moment, nobody said anything.

Later, they sat on a bench.

Red cheeks.

Cold hands.

Giulia looked around.

“Yesterday we were right in the middle of London.”

Emma tucked her hands further into her sleeves.

“Somehow, we still are.”

The city lay below them.

Up here, only wind.

A light came on in a house at the edge of the Heath.

Then another.

Emma watched.

“Let’s stay here for a bit.”

…..

Half an hour later, they were standing in front of a gate.

Closed.

Lara looked at her phone.

Then at the gate.

Giulia stepped beside her.

“Don’t say anything.”

“I’m not saying anything.”

“Your face is saying plenty.”

Lara sighed.

“We have to go back.”

Emma looked at the path behind them.

Uphill.

Of course.

“How far?”

“Seventeen minutes.”

Giulia lifted both hands.

“I quit.”

“What?”

“London. Legs. Everything.”

They walked back.

Past old brick houses.

Narrow streets.

Tiny front gardens behind walls.

A pub that looked as though it had been there since before anyone thought of counting Hampstead as part of London.

Emma looked around.

“This doesn’t feel like a big city at all.”

Inês nodded.

“Not until you look across the Heath.”

Then it started to rain.

Big drops.

Giulia looked up.

“Of course.”

The pub sign they’d passed a moment earlier suddenly looked like a revelation.

Inside, it smelled of wet coats, wood, beer and something fried.

Giulia dropped onto a bench.

“I take back everything I said about wrong turns.”

Lara hung her jacket over a chair.

“You said quite a lot.”

“All of it. Taken back.”

Emma warmed her hands around her glass.

Outside, rainwater ran down the windows.

Inês looked out.

“If that gate had been open, we wouldn’t be here.”

Emma nodded.

“Then it wasn’t a wrong turn.”

Lara looked at her.

“It was.”

“Lara.”

“Objectively.”

Giulia groaned.

“Please.”

Then Lara laughed.

Properly.

Not that small, controlled smile.

Emma looked at her.

Maybe that was exactly what Hampstead was.

London – just far enough away from London to let you see it again.

…..

By the fourth hotel, they were professionals.

Almost.

“Charging cable?”

“Here.”

“Adapter?”

“Here.”

“Giulia?”

No answer.

She was in the bathroom.

Toothbrush in her mouth.

“What?”

Lara closed her eyes.

“Nothing.”

The next morning, Emma heard birds.

No siren.

No Tube.

No delivery vans.

Birds.

She stayed in bed.

“This is wrong.”

Giulia moved under the duvet.

“What?”

“London’s tweeting.”

“Tell London to tweet more quietly.”

Emma went to the window.

Trees.

Brick.

A bicycle against a fence.

Wet red and yellow leaves on the pavement.

She opened the window.

Cold air.

Damp earth.

Wet leaves.

Green.

At breakfast, Lara was already at the table.

“Kew Gardens first.”

Giulia arrived with wet hair.

“Coffee first.”

Inês wordlessly pushed a cup towards her.

Giulia wrapped both hands around it.

“I love you.”

“I know.”

Emma looked out of the window.

“I like it here.”

Lara looked up.

“We’ve been here since last night.”

“Still.”

…..

October was cool in **Kew Gardens.**

Wet leaves on the paths.

Red.

Orange.

Yellow.

Then Emma opened the greenhouse door.

Warm, humid air hit her.

Palms.

Enormous leaves.

Heavy air.

A strand of hair immediately stuck to the back of her neck.

Giulia looked up.

“If something eats me in here, tell my mother I died happy.”

Lara looked at her.

“It’s a plant.”

“That doesn’t reassure me at all.”

Emma laughed.

Later, they stepped outside again.

Cold air.

Wet paths.

Autumn.

Kew suddenly felt a very long way from London.

…..

The next morning, Emma lay awake.

Nearly two weeks in London.

And still so much left.

Streets they’d only brushed past.

Places for later.

London hadn’t become smaller.

If anything, it had grown.

“I have a plan,” she said.

Lara looked up.

“You?”

“Richmond to Teddington.”

Giulia pulled the duvet higher.

“How far?”

Emma grinned.

“Until London stops.”

…..

Richmond.

Still London.

Buses.

Shops.

People.

Then they went down to the Thames.

Under Richmond Bridge, it smelled of coffee.

Naturally, Giulia had spotted the little café first.

A short while later, four warm cups were lined up on the wall.

Traffic above them.

Water in front of them.

Emma held her coffee in both hands.

“I could stay here.”

Lara looked along the path.

“We’ve walked about two hundred metres.”

“It was nice.”

They carried on along the river.

Boats.

Dogs.

Damp wood.

Cold air.

Then, all at once, everything turned green.

Petersham Meadows.

Grass all the way to the Thames.

Cows.

No skyline.

Inês stopped.

“Are we even still in London?”

Lara was about to answer.

Giulia held up a hand.

“Don’t check.”

A little further on, they sat among plants and pots at Petersham Nurseries.

Emma shared her gingerbread cake with Giulia.

Dark.

Sticky.

Candied ginger.

Lara silently pushed the cream towards her.

After nearly two weeks, each of them knew what the others needed.

Without asking.

After that, the path took them on to Ham House.

Dark brick.

Yellow leaves.

Autumn light.

Giulia had a leaf stuck to her shoe.

Emma photographed it.

Not the house.

The leaf.

“You really can’t do tourist attractions properly,” Giulia said.

“I photograph feelings.”

Lara looked towards the entrance.

“If we go in, we won’t make Teddington.”

Emma looked back once more.

“Then not today.”

Beyond Ham House, everything went quiet.

Ham Lands.

Grass.

Bushes.

A narrow path.

Wind through the stems.

No bus.

No Tube.

At some point, Giulia linked her arm through Emma’s.

And they kept walking like that.

They heard **Teddington Lock** before they saw it.

Water.

Metal.

Railings.

Then Emma spotted the pub by the river.

“My feet have just said yes.”

A little later, fish and chips sat in front of her.

Hot haddock.

Golden batter.

Thick chips.

Lemon.

The cold Thames beside them.

A warm plate in front of her.

Emma looked at the river.

“How far out of London have we actually walked?”

Three heads turned towards Lara.

Lara grinned.

“Not at all.”

Emma shook her head.

“This is getting slightly unsettling.”

Giulia raised her glass.

“To London.”

Inês looked at her.

“Which one?”

Giulia thought for a moment.

“All of them.”

Their glasses clinked.

Then Inês said quietly,

“We fly home tomorrow.”

For a moment, nobody spoke.

Giulia looked at the Thames.

“We didn’t do the boat.”

Emma grinned.

“Next time.”

…..

Four suitcases stood in the room.
Closed.
Giulia was sitting on one of them.

“I’d just like it noted that I still think four hotels is ridiculous.”

“You liked every single one,” Lara said.

“That’s not the point.”

“What is the point?”

“Packing four times.”

“Seven minutes the last time.”

“Seven traumatic minutes.”

Inês laughed.

Emma stood at the window.

Trees outside.
A bicycle against the fence.
One last bird somewhere.

Their final evening.

Emma wasn’t thinking about sights.

She was thinking about cold air at five in the morning.
Scallops instead of jam.
Glass and docks.
Wind on the Heath.
A wrong turn that ended in a warm pub.
Cows.
Ginger.
Salt on her fingers.

About Giulia linking arms with her.
About Lara eventually forgetting to check the time.
About Inês, who so often knew what was missing before anyone said a word.

Nearly two weeks.
And suddenly it felt far too short.

“I’d do it again,” Emma said.

Giulia looked at her.

“Four hotels?”

“Yes.”

“There’s something wrong with you.”

Emma laughed.

“Maybe.”

Lara looked across at her.

“Why?”

“Because every day we woke up in a different London.”

Giulia pulled a face.

“You sound like a quote on a calendar.”

Emma grinned.

“I know.”

Then Giulia went quiet.

“But it was lovely.”

Lara smiled.

“Very.”

Inês looked at the suitcases.

“And tomorrow we leave.”

Nobody answered straight away.

Emma put her hand against the glass.

Cool.

“We’ll come back.”

Giulia grinned.

“Fine. But next time, three hotels maximum.”

Emma grinned back.

“Deal.”

She knew that wasn’t true.

So did the others.

…..

Later, Emma lay in bed.

The others seemed to be asleep.

She opened the photos.

Cows.

Wind.

A crooked Big Ben.

An old crane against glass.

Giulia by the violinist.

Billingsgate early in the morning.

Blurred.

A little dark.

Perfect.

Her phone vibrated.

Giulia.

Two metres away.

Giulia: Forgot something.

Emma looked towards her bed.

No movement.

Emma: What?

Three dots.

Giulia: The boat.

Then Inês:

Inês: Hampstead at night.

Lara:

Lara: Notting Hill.

Giulia:

Giulia: Camden.

Lara:

Lara: Those were two things.

Giulia:

Giulia: I’m complicated.

Emma muffled her laugh in the pillow.

Emma: Next time.

A heart from Inês immediately.

A thumbs-up from Lara.

Then Giulia:

Giulia: Three weeks.

Emma:

Emma: Four.

From the other bed came a quiet voice.

“Now you’re being unreasonable.”

And they all laughed.

…..

The key stuck on the second turn.

As usual.

Before the door was fully open, Emma heard paws.

Then he was there.

Far too much dog all at once.

Emma crouched down.

“Yes. I missed you too.”

He pressed his head against her chest.

Warm.

Familiar.

Very much like home.

Her bag landed in the hallway.

Beside the chest of drawers stood a cardboard box.

SALINGO.

Emma laughed.

“Of course.”

The dog was already sitting in front of it.

“You can’t read.”

His tail thumped against the cupboard.

“Apparently you can.”

A little later, he was eating.

Emma sat on the floor with her back against the wall.

Her suitcase was still unpacked in the hallway.

Her phone vibrated.

The group chat.

Giulia: I forgot something else.

Emma: What now?

Three dots.

Giulia: London.

Lara: That’s not a specific location.

Inês: Leave her. I know what she means.

Emma looked at the suitcase.

Then at the dog.

Emma: Three weeks?

The answer came at once.

Giulia: Four.

Emma put her phone down beside her.

The dog nudged his nose under her hand.

London was over.

Apparently only for this time.

…..

EPILOGUE · SIX WEEKS LATER

Four mugs stood on the table.

Three mulled wines.
One coffee.

Lara’s, obviously.

Outside, Christmas lights hung between the houses.

Giulia flicked through the photos on her phone.

Cows.
Big Ben.
The old crane against glass.
A rather dark photo of Billingsgate Market.

Then she stopped at one picture.

Emma and Inês by the river.
Both laughing.
Emma couldn’t remember why.

“I know what I’m getting Emma for her birthday.”

Emma looked up.

“You do realise I’m sitting right here?”

“Yes.”

Giulia put her phone on the table.

“London.”

Emma grinned.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Then I’ll give you London too.”

Giulia sat up straighter.

“Hang on.”

“What?”

“My birthday isn’t until much later.”

Emma thought about it.

“True.”

“That’s unfair.”

Lara took a sip of coffee.

“That’s generally how birthdays work.”

“Lara.”

Inês laughed.

Giulia pulled her mulled wine closer.

“I don’t want to wait that long.”

Emma looked outside.

Christmas lights.

A bus went past.

Then she looked back at the others.

“Then we’ll give each other London for Christmas instead.”

Silence.

Only for a moment.

Inês was the first to smile.

“All of us?”

Emma nodded.

“All of us.”

Lara put down her mug.

“Budget?”

Three women, at once:

“Lara.”

Giulia reached for a pen.

“Wait.”

She pulled a piece of paper towards her.

Drew four boxes.

“We’re not just giving each other London.”

Emma leant forward.

“Then what?”

Giulia wrote.

Friday

Saturday

Sunday

Monday

Then she looked around the table.

“Each of us gives the other three one day.”

Everyone sat a little straighter.

Inês got it first.

“So one person plans.”

“And the other three know nothing,” Emma said.

Giulia grinned.

“Exactly.”

Lara was already pulling her phone closer.

“Then we need rules.”

“Of course we need rules,” Giulia said.

Emma took the pen from her.

“Not many.”

She wrote:

One special highlight.

Inês added:

Something to eat or drink that fits the day.

Giulia:

At least one thing nobody expects.

Lara looked at the paper.

“And a realistic schedule.”

Giulia crossed it out.

“Hey.”

“Gift,” Emma said. “Not business trip.”

Inês laughed.

Emma kept writing.

The only things revealed in advance:

Start time.
Shoes.
Clothes.
Hungry – yes or no.

Underneath, Giulia added:

NOTHING ELSE.

Lara exhaled.

“And the logistics?”

Emma grinned.

“Whoever gives the day sorts them.”

Lara looked as if someone had taken something away from her.

“Transfers too?”

“Transfers too.”

“Reservations?”

“Yes.”

“Opening times?”

Giulia put a hand on her arm.

“You can do this.”

“That’s not my problem.”

“Not yet.”

“Four days.”

Giulia folded the slips of paper.

“Draw.”

“Why draw?” Lara asked.

“Because otherwise you’ll take Friday.”

“Friday is logistically—”

“Draw.”

Inês took the first one.

Looked at it.

Smiled.

“What?” Emma asked.

“Nothing.”

“You’re smiling.”

“I’m allowed.”

Giulia drew next.

Then Lara.

Emma got the last one.

She unfolded it.

Monday.

Of course it was Monday.

Giulia looked over her shoulder.

“Monday’s good.”

“Why?”

“No idea.”

“Very reassuring.”

Emma laid the slip in front of her.

Four women.

Four days.

Four gifts.

No scarf.

No perfume.

No stuff that would eventually disappear into a drawer.

One person planned.

Three knew nothing.

And somewhere between Friday and Monday, each of them would get London once.

Not the whole city.

Just one day.

Hers.

Giulia raised her mulled wine.

“So.”

Inês raised her mug.

Lara her coffee.

Emma hers.

“To Christmas?” Lara asked.

Giulia shook her head.

“To London.”

The mugs clinked together.

Emma looked at the little folded slip in front of her.

Monday.

She didn’t yet know what she was going to give the others.

But London was already starting up again in her head.

Four times: I’m giving you London.

…..

Christmas was over.

The four slips of paper weren’t.

Each of them had her day.

Then Emma’s message appeared in the group chat:

LEAVE APPROVED.

Giulia, immediately:

MINE TOO.

Inês:

Thumbs-up.

Lara kept them waiting.

Then:

Approved.

The flight followed soon after.

The hotel.

London was booked.

Now came the part the others weren't allowed to know about.

Each of them had a day.

And each of them planned it alone.

One highlight.
Something to eat.
Something nobody expected.

The only things revealed beforehand were:

What time they were starting.
Which shoes.
What clothes.
Hungry – yes or no.

Everything else stayed secret.

Four women.

Four different plans.

And none of them knew what the other three had in store for London.

…..

Inês had drawn Friday.

She opened GetYourGuide.

Scrolled.

Tour.

View.

Another tour.

No.

Keep going.

Then her finger stopped.

Bake British scones.

Inês read the heading again.

Then the description.

Scones.

Jam.

Cream.

Tea.

She grinned.

Giulia with flour on her hands.

Emma would probably start tasting things immediately.

Lara would…

Inês paused.

Lara would probably ask first whether they were getting aprons.

She laughed.

On her own.

“Okay.”

She put her phone down.

Picked it up again.

Looked at the booking once more.

Four people.

Friday.

Her thumb hovered over the button.

Usually there was someone like Lara on the other side of the table.

Someone who knew where they were going.

Inês was usually the one who followed.

Not this time.

This time, three women would be following her.

She tapped Book.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then the confirmation appeared.

Inês stared at it.

Booked.

Actually booked.

She took a screenshot.

She nearly sent it to the group.

Her finger was already over the chat.

She stopped.

“Idiot.”

Back.

New folder.

FRIDAY.

She put her phone on the table.

Two seconds.

Then picked it up again.

What if Giulia thought scones were boring?

No.

Giulia would be entertained by the baking tent alone…

Inês grinned again.

Emma?

She’d love it.

Probably.

Lara…

She opened the booking again.

No.

Not probably.

Good.

That was good.

Nobody would expect it.

She looked up the route.

Saved it.

Then another.

Back to the hotel.

Everything worked.

Almost suspiciously well.

Inês leant back.

Friday.

Arrive.

London.

Bake scones.

They wouldn’t need anything big after that.

She opened a new tab.

She already knew the place.

The Alchemist Canary Wharf.

Cocktails.

Lights.

Glasses that looked as though they belonged in a laboratory.

One of them caught Inês’s eye.

She pictured Lara’s face.

That was enough.

Reserve.

Click.

Confirmation.

Another screenshot.

FRIDAY.

Now there were two bookings in the folder.

A few train routes.

And suddenly, her entire day.

Inês looked at the folder.

Opened it.

Closed it again.

Opened the group chat.

Giulia had sent some GIF.

Emma had replied with a laughing emoji.

Lara was asking something about hand luggage.

Inês typed:

Are you actually excited?

Deleted it.

Typed instead:

I need a window seat on the plane.

Giulia replied immediately:

You’re planning already.

Inês froze.

Then:

😂

Nothing else.

Her phone vibrated again.

Giulia: I KNEW IT.

Inês placed it face down on the table.

And grinned.

Friday was hers.

…..

Giulia had Saturday.

Perfect.

Saturday could be anything.

This time, she knew pretty much exactly what she was looking for.

Original Jack the Ripper Tour – in German.

Giulia grinned.

Emma would be in immediately.

Inês probably too.

Lara would claim that serial killers were not an appropriate way to start a day on holiday.

That settled it.

She saved the tour.

Then she looked at the map.

Lots of walking.

Of course.

Going to London and not walking seemed fundamentally impossible.

Giulia thought about the last trip.

About feet.

About Emma’s offer to hand hers in “as a set”.

No.

Not this time.

She kept searching.

Westminster to Greenwich. Thames.

Giulia sat up straighter.

Boat.

Sitting down.

London came to them.

“Genius.”

She clicked.

Big Ben.

Tower Bridge.

The Shard.

Canary Wharf.

And all without taking a single step.

Booked.

Giulia looked at her two bookings.

Murder.

Boat.

Better.

Then came her next problem.

Food.

Four women got hungry sooner or later.

Especially Emma.

She opened a new tab.

Restaurant.

No.

Too normal.

Afternoon tea.

No.

Too much.

Then The Shard appeared.

Giulia stopped scrolling.

Entry.
View.
Champagne.

She smiled.

Obviously.

If they were doing Saturday, they were doing it properly.

A small snack beforehand would be enough.

Something on the way.

Nothing that meant sitting at a table for an hour.

She wanted to go up.

London below them.

Champagne in hand.

Very grown-up.

Very elegant.

Giulia clicked Book.

And at that exact moment, she remembered what came next.

She'd always wanted to do it.

Read the heading.

Again.

Then she started laughing.

London Loo Tour.

She pictured the other three.

Champagne in The Shard one minute.

Then:

“Come on. We’re going to look at toilets now.”

Giulia had to put her phone down because she was grinning too much.

That was it.

Exactly it.

Nobody would expect it.

Not Emma.

Not Inês.

And definitely not Lara.

She kept reading.

History.

Public loos.

London.

And at the end, a former public toilet.

Now a bar.

Giulia stared at the screen.

“No.”

Then she read it again.

Yes.

A bar.

She booked it.

Now she had four stops.

Jack the Ripper.

The Thames.

The Shard.

Toilets.

Giulia studied the list.

Completely ridiculous, really.

She loved it.

Then she opened the map.

Connections.

Stations.

Routes.

Where did they have to change?

Where could they grab something quickly on the way?

How much time did they need between things?

She moved things around.

Searched.

Rejected them.

Tried again.

For the first time, she understood – just a tiny bit – why Lara liked lists.

A very tiny bit.

She took a screenshot.

Studied it.

Her Saturday.

In the morning, the others would still think they'd worked Giulia out.

By the champagne, they'd probably even think they'd landed themselves a rather sophisticated day.

Giulia grinned.

They had no idea.

And if nobody wanted to leave that former toilet by the end of the evening…

fine.

Saturday could simply end there.

…..

Lara had Sunday.

She opened the first tab.

London tour in a vintage Rolls-Royce.

She looked at the pictures.

Leather.

Wood.

London through the window.

Very nice.

Very comfortable.

Very…

Lara closed the tab.

No.

That was for people who wanted to look at London.

She wanted the others to understand something about it.

She opened her saved activities.

Private Brixton tour with a local – culture & stories.

Lara read more slowly.

History.

People.

Markets.

Music.

A part of the city they'd barely touched on their last trip.

Yes.

That was better.

Someone had to make sure this weekend wasn't just cocktails and food.

With Emma, she wasn't sure.

With Giulia, not at all.

And Inês…

Lara smiled briefly.

No.

Culture was staying with her.

She booked Brixton.

Then looked at her Sunday.

Sensible.

Interesting.

Very Lara.

Too Lara.

She opened GetYourGuide again.

Scrolled.

And stopped.

Street art and graffiti.

Lara pursed her lips slightly.

Then clicked anyway.

Brick Lane.

Shoreditch.

Banksy.

Stik.

Stories behind the art.

Techniques.

Hidden messages.

She kept reading.

Then read it again.

This was culture.

Just not the sort Giulia would expect from her.

Lara ticked it off.

Good.

She imagined Giulia.

“YOU booked this?”

That alone almost made it worth it.

Then Lara looked at the route.

Brixton.

Street art.

A great deal of walking.

She could almost feel her feet from the last London trip again.

No.

After that, they were sitting down.

She kept searching.

Regent’s Canal.
Boat trip.
Live music.

Lara paused.

A boat.

Sitting.

Music.

Nobody had to go anywhere.

Perfect.

She added it.

Then leant back.

Brixton.

Street art.

Canal.

Something was missing.

Lara looked at the list.

Of course.

Food.

“Oh, brilliant.”

This time it didn’t take long.

Big Easy Canary Wharf.

Ribs.

Barbecue.

Cocktails.

Live music.

Lara smiled.

Not fancy.

Not complicated.

One table.

Four chairs.

Ribs.

And after that, nobody had to go anywhere else.

She booked it.

Then she looked over her Sunday once more.

Culture.

Street art.

Boat.

Music.

Ribs.

Lara sat still for a moment.

It had become considerably less sensible than she'd intended.

She liked it.

Then she opened the group chat.

Giulia had written:

I hope none of you is planning some sort of educational holiday.

Lara looked at Brixton.

Then at the street-art tour.

Typed:

Of course not.

And put her phone down.

…..

Emma had Monday.

Departure day.

Of course.

She'd looked at the slip back at Christmas and thought:

Great.

Then she'd booked the flight.

In the evening.

Better.

And yesterday, the hotel had replied.

Yes.

They could leave the suitcases there after check-out.

Emma read the message again.

Then smiled.

Monday was hers.

She'd known what she wanted for ages, really.

Warner Bros. Studio Tour.
Harry Potter.
With transfer.

Emma clicked through the pictures.

Hogwarts.

Diagon Alley.

The Great Hall.

She wanted to go.

Badly.

She opened the times.

Looked at the flight home.

Back at the tour.

"Damn."

She pushed the laptop away a little.

Then did the sums again anyway.

No.

Even if everything ran perfectly.

No traffic.

No delays.

No three women who just quickly needed to…

Emma closed the tab.

"Next time."

That hurt a little.

She kept looking.

Then something caught her eye.

Unusual Richmond: Kings, Rebels and Rock Stars.

Emma read it.

Then read it again.

They knew Richmond.

Or thought they did.

The Thames.

Greenery.

Petersham.

Teddington.

But that was exactly what she liked about it.

A place they'd already been.

And a story they still didn't know.

Kings.

Rebels.

Rock stars.

Emma grinned.

That was better than ticking off yet another attraction.

Booked.

Morning sorted.

Now lunch.

Emma opened her saved places.

There they were.

The hand-pulled noodles.

Right opposite the Sky Garden.

She remembered the dough.

Hands stretching it.

Slapping it down.

Stretching it again.

Until it became long strands of noodles.

No booking needed.

At lunchtime, you could usually squeeze in somehow.

Perfect.

She didn't write it down.

She’d remember that.

Then came the afternoon.

And this time, Emma had to search for longer.

But then…

Afternoon Tea Walking Tour.
More than thirteen tastings.

She read the description.

Sweet.

Savoury.

Tea.

London on foot.

Several stops.

Emma lingered over the pictures.

That was her day.

Not sitting somewhere while afternoon tea arrived on a tiered stand.

Being out and about.

Trying things.

Moving on.

Trying something else.

She booked it.

Then she looked at Monday as a whole.

Richmond.

Noodles.

Afternoon tea.

Quite a lot of food, actually.

Emma pulled a face.

“Okay.”

Nothing big in the evening, then.

Just a cocktail.

Maybe.

One.

She laughed at herself.

Four women in London.

One cocktail.

Very optimistic.

But they had a flight.

That was probably the only force powerful enough.

Emma almost closed the laptop.

Opened it again.

Richmond.

Noodles.

Thirteen tastings.

Cocktail.

Suitcases at the hotel.

Then the airport.

She went through it all once more.

Not because she was Lara.

Definitely not.

Just…

Emma looked at the flight time.

Maybe a tiny bit Lara.

She closed the laptop.

Monday was set.

Not Harry Potter.

That still annoyed her.

But perhaps that was a good thing.

They weren’t trying to finish London, after all.

They wanted a reason to come back.

…..

Emma opened the group chat.

Typed.

My Monday is sorted.

The reply came immediately.

Giulia:
Mine too. Unless I change everything again.

Emma grinned.

Then Lara.

Lara:
😳

And straight underneath:

My Sunday is sorted. I’m only waiting for one confirmation.

Giulia:

Of course you’re waiting for a confirmation.

Lara:
That’s called planning.

Then it went quiet for a moment.

Emma looked at the chat.

Three days.

One missing.

She was just typing:

Inês?

When the three dots appeared.

Disappeared.

Came back.

Then:

Inês:
You won’t believe this.

Giulia:

Oh no.

Inês:

I’m planning too.

Another message.

All by myself.

Emma laughed.

Giulia:

WHO ARE YOU AND WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH INÊS?

Inês:

Very funny.

Nothing for a few seconds.

Then:

Emma:

I’m excited.

Giulia:

Me too.

Inês:

Very.

Lara:

Me too.

Emma looked at the screen.

Four women.

Four days.

Four plans.

None of them knew what the others had in store.

Not where they’d start in the morning.

Not what they’d eat.

Not what anyone had booked.

Not even whether they’d still be able to walk by the end of the day.

Emma put her phone down.

Last time, they’d discovered London together.

This time, they were going to give it to one another.

And suddenly she was dying to know what the other three thought that meant.




CremaBooks