

The Party

ALSO BY NATASHA PRESTON

The Twin

The Lake

The Fear

The Island

The Haunting

The Dare

The Party

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NATASHA
PRESTON

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This is for everyone who takes an emergency
book with them when forced to socialize.

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‘Have you seen the size of this castle?’ I ask my best friend, Kashvi, angling my phone screen toward her.

She rolls over on her bed in our dorm room, the warm light above her head reflecting in her dark eyes. She has tan skin, black hair that reaches her bum, and the brightest smile I have ever seen in my life. Kash has been my best friend since we met on our first day at St Mary’s Grammar School when we were four.

We share the same love for Taylor Swift, rom-com movies, and sneaking out to parties. We’ve roomed together for the past seven years, both of us absolutely refusing to share with anyone else. I’ve heard that a lot of the girls snore, and I would definitely end up committing murder if I was stuck in a room with one of them.

‘Allegra said her dad renovated the outside and that’s why it doesn’t look derelict,’ Kash says. ‘Don’t get too excited, because the inside is a different story. We’re camping in a cold, empty castle.’

‘Fun. That makes me feel so much better about lying to the head and my parents so we can stay there over the Easter holidays,’ I say dryly.

Kash smiles. ‘You’re *not* bailing on this trip, Bessie. Do you know how difficult it was to get my parents to let me go to “Allegra’s house” instead of New Delhi? They really wanted me to visit relatives I’ve only met about two or three times in my life.’ She does air quotes with her fingers because we’ve all told a little lie to our parents. An abandoned castle isn’t somewhere my parents would want me spending a long weekend.

‘I vividly remember the crying and begging, Kash.’

She sits up on her yellow tie-dye bedding, pointing a pink-tipped finger at me. ‘I did *not* beg.’

‘Whatever. Look at this! It has a *moat*. Think the water is safe to swim in?’ I ask her. ‘It looks okay. And didn’t Fergus say there’s a generator, so we’ll have heating and electricity? I’m sure he told me that.’

‘I asked Allegra the same thing about the moat. She said, and I quote, “If you want to catch ten different plagues, go ahead,” so I’m thinking no. But yes to the generator.’

‘Well, what does she know? The weather is uncharacteristically hot for springtime. I’m packing my bikini just in case,’ I tell her.

She shrugs, looking at me like she thinks I’m the one who doesn’t know what she’s talking about. ‘You know there’s a big storm the first two days, right?’

‘I can swim on Sunday,’ I say rather pathetically, since I can already tell it’s a bust.

The weather looks awful for this afternoon and Saturday, but

after that I see only sunshine on my app. Party for two days, swim for two days. There's a *chance*.

'It's your funeral,' she replies.

'Someone will come in with me.'

'I can't believe we've managed to keep this a secret. One massive, weekend-long party in a remote castle in the country and no one has said a word. It's a miracle when you think about it. Jia and Odette are both enormous gossips.'

Odette, not in our year, has been invited because she's friends with Hugo – a total heartthrob who would never look twice at any of us because we're younger than him. Allegra tried getting with him and then went for Shen, the hottie who moved from China to the UK to board at the same time as Jia.

Hugo is also our friend Raif's brother, but Raif doesn't want anything to do with us anymore.

'We haven't managed to leave the school grounds yet. Let's not get ahead of ourselves,' I tell her.

Sure, we've sneaked off school grounds before, but it was always for just a few hours. We'd be tucked back in bed when Mrs Evans, our dorm's houseparent, did her morning rounds.

This time we're leaving for the Easter holidays alone, not with an adult, as mandated by school policy.

She waves my worry away in true Kash style. When it comes to planning, she is the queen. She knows every single aspect of what we're about to do. She's been through it in her head hundreds of times, from the destination to the accommodations, and I'm not sure that's much of an exaggeration.

The planning part of our weekend adventure is the easy part.

Zeke is driving, and he's supposed to be taking me to my parents', since our families live twenty minutes apart. I emailed the school from my mum's account, giving me permission to leave school grounds without being collected by a parent. I've had access to her email for years, since she never changes her password.

Kash, Shen, and Jia are getting a taxi to the station. They're meant to be taking a train to the airport, where Kash will in theory board a plane to New Delhi and Shen and Jia will fly to Beijing.

However, Zeke and I will pick Kash up. Allegra will get the others.

Allegra and her twin brother, Fergus, both drive too, so they're taking their cars.

'We'll be fine. This isn't the first time we've lied to every adult we know,' Kash says, studying a printout of the castle's plans. Before we go away anywhere, Kash has to do her research. She doesn't like being surprised. The red folder containing property and location information from Allegra has curled at the edges, she's opened it so many times.

'No, it's just the first time we've lied in order to head to an abandoned castle.'

No adults, no one other than us, knowing where we are. It's exciting, the most anticipated party of the year.

'Cool, isn't it?' she says, wiggling her dark brows.

I drop my phone on the bed and smile. 'I can't wait.'

The castle is gorgeous, and it's in a pretty countryside village, miles from anything or anyone else, in the middle of a huge forest.

'You commit the layout to memory yet?' I ask, only half joking, because she probably has. Maybe she's being extra diligent this time because there will be no adults.

Unless you count Hugo, who's eighteen, but after watching him snort ice cream through his nose I certainly do not.

She holds up the paper. 'I think I have it.'

Of course you do.

The castle has been in Allegra and Fergus Beaufort's family for generations, and their parents are now trying to develop the area since they own about a hundred acres of land surrounding it. Apparently it's the last chance we have for a weekend there, and we're not passing it up.

The seven of us, a friend group forged during Getting to Know You Week at the start of sixth form – though I knew most of them already – will go tomorrow morning to set up. Allegra has a boot full of party supplies to decorate the ballroom, where we'll spend most of our time.

Allegra is *big* on aesthetics, her life one big Pinterest board. That's the only reason we're going early. We couldn't possibly allow everyone to arrive at anything less than a perfect venue.

The rest come in the evening, and the party will last until we leave on Monday.

'Allegra has given us a very specific route to the castle,' Kash says, holding up her phone next to show me a map. 'It's been

bothering me for a while. Okay, look here – there’s a more direct journey, but that goes through the village. Do you think she just doesn’t want to be seen?’

‘But why would she worry about people in town seeing us? No one there knows who we are.’

‘I guess she wants to make sure word about the party doesn’t get back to our parents and the school.’

We’d be in *so* much trouble if we were caught, but could the school really expel nearly the entire year group? It wouldn’t look good on the tours when there are no students left in Year Twelve.

Allegra’s route is the one I will be taking. We’ll be okay if no one knows we’re not where we’re supposed to be this weekend. We can be discreet when the stakes are this high.

‘Should we go over the plan again at breakfast?’ I ask, checking the time on my phone. Fifteen minutes to go. I’m starving, my snacks depleted after last night’s movie. Kash and I hid under my covers with an iPad, her holding the bowl of our remaining sweets, the volume low in case Mrs Evans came by to do *another* one of her lights-out checks. She takes her job way too seriously.

‘We can, but you know how Allegra is. She’s already been through it, and we don’t want her to think we don’t trust her. She’s thought of *everything*, apparently. All we need to do is pack a bag and prepare for little to no sleep for the next three nights.’

Kash isn’t wrong: Allegra can’t be questioned. Not ever. But to be fair to her, she does usually think of everything.

‘Okay. I mean, if anything changed or if something was wrong, Allegra and Fergus would tell us, right?’

There's an air of secrecy shrouding the weekend that I don't like, and I'm not talking about the fact that we have to keep the party to ourselves. Details have been few and far between, nothing close to the usual bombardment of texts and constant reminders.

Kash laughs, throwing her head back. 'No, she wouldn't tell us at all, but you're going in Zeke's car and picking me up at the station. We're the ones in control of that.'

'We've got this.'

'We'll have a much better time if we sneak into that castle without the constant worrying. No more stressing, Bessie.'

I hold my palms up. 'No more stressing . . . if you promise to pack your bikini too.'

She rolls her eyes. 'Nicely played. I'll pack it, but I'm not promising anything. I don't want to spend the whole weekend vomiting.'

'Have you heard how much beer Shen wants to bring? You'll definitely vomit.'

She laughs and then bites her lip, her playful expression dropping. 'Bessie, can I ask you a question?'

'You just did.'

She waves my comment away. 'Do you feel like we're all drifting? Not you and me. But the others?'

I've been ignoring that feeling since the summer holidays. The seven of us are like a family. We're growing apart but all desperately holding on. I hate it, because I genuinely love my friends.

'That was random.'

'Well, I figured while we're overthinking things . . .'

I hold up my hand. 'I'm done with the sneaking-away drama.'

But I get how you feel about our group. Things are different after . . .’ I say, then snap my lips together because we agreed not to talk about it. It’s done and dusted. ‘But we’re all still here, and Allegra has put a lot of effort into this weekend. Let’s have the best Easter ever.’

‘Starting with the castle.’

‘Exactly. Starting with the potentially life-ruining castle.’

She laughs. ‘The danger aspect makes it more fun. Come on, I’m starving.’

I swing my legs off the bed, trying to push any negative thoughts out of my mind. How often do you get to take over a castle for one massive party? It’s what teen dreams are made of.

A chance to let off steam and be wild with no adults there to ruin our fun. With no one knowing where we are. It’ll be like we’re the only people on the planet.

We can get away with anything.