

SANDY BARKER

Match Me If You Can



A fortune at
stake and the
clock is ticking...

MATCH ME IF YOU CAN

EVER AFTER AGENCY SERIES - BOOK ONE

SANDY BARKER

B

Boldwød

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For Lina, agent extraordinaire, champion, friend...

I couldn't (and wouldn't) do this without you.

TRIGGER WARNING

Content warning: A supporting character has fertility issues and has unsuccessfully attempted IVF.

1

POPPY

Not once in my four years with the agency have I been late for a morning staff meeting, but even I'm never *this* early. Typically, I'd be making myself a pot-for-one of perfectly brewed tea – precisely four minutes of steeping – then checking emails and planning my day. But not this morning. I'm too nervous. That's a first for me as well – this job can be demanding, even hairy at times, but it has never induced a bout of crippling nerves before. I take out my phone and open up our work chat thread. I still can't believe the article Mia posted, even though I'm staring right at it.

Secretive matchmaking agency used by London's crème de la crème revealed!

The (proverbial) cat is out of its bag and now amongst the (proverbial) pigeons. The Ever After Agency, a (once) secretive matchmaking agency is about to be outed.

Next week, we're posting a sizzler that will blow your socks off. We'll expose how the agency operates down to the (not-so-pretty) nitty gritty and wait till you see who is amongst the clientele! Celebs, politicians, sports stars – even a minor royal! We'll also be asking, 'Who really is founder, Saskia Featherstone?' Noble matchmaker? Or heartless money-grubber who feeds off the misfortune of others?

Don't miss it – subscribe now!

An overuse of idioms and word play notwithstanding, it certainly is an eye-catching announcement. At least Mia, our resident tech genius and social media savant, caught onto it straight away. There *may* be time for damage control. Though, if I'm honest with myself, I doubt it. How do you stop a tsunami with kitchen towel?

‘Good morning, Poppy.’

‘Oh,’ I say, startled, ‘good morning, Saskia.’

She strides into the conference room as though it's any other day (and she hasn't just been accused of heartless money-grubbing), taking her seat at the head of the oval table and flicking through her old-school planner. She slides a slimline pen from its holder and makes a note in the margin as she sips from a takeaway coffee cup.

I scrutinise her for signs that this morning's news has upset her. Not surprisingly, there are none. As always, she's the perfectly coiffed epitome of poise. This is why the rest of us secretly call her The Swan – if she ever does get flustered or worried or annoyed, we never see it. She wears the dual mantles of founder and leader with aplomb, and there's something about her calming demeanour that, well, calms me – usually, but not this morning. I breathe in deeply through my nose (in-two-three-four) and exhale slowly out through my mouth (out-two-three-four) like I used to coach my patients to do in my previous life, before I joined the agency.

‘Morning, all!’ Nasrin makes her typically loud entrance and sighs extravagantly as she plonks herself onto a chair. ‘The bloody Tube this morning...’ she adds, after which I tune out. The Tube is a nightmare every morning, teeming with rudeness, pickpockets, and people with questionable hygiene, so why whine about it?

The others arrive in turn and soon the conference room is abuzz with chatter. But it's just normal small talk – this both baffles and worries me. Why isn't anyone else freaking out? Or maybe they're hiding it like I am.

‘I mean,’ says Nasrin, her voice now at maximum volume, ‘how hard is it to rub on some deodorant? Or here's a thought,

maybe *don't* hold the overhead rail, you smelly git!'

At precisely 9.30 a.m., Saskia clears her throat. It is a subtle sound that nonetheless cuts through the hubbub – even Nasrin's rant – and we all still, our eyes collectively fixing on her. 'Let's begin, shall we?'

The relief at hearing the solution, the plan that will get us out of this mess, is palpable. Since the moment I woke up and read that message, I've been imagining the fallout. Dozens of permutations have flown through my head, all leading to one outcome – that the Ever After Agency, an agency *built* on confidentiality, will shut down forever more (no pun intended) and we'll all be out on the street, unemployed.

I'm not sure how I feel about practicing psychology again – and that would be the *best*-case scenario. Worst case, I end up back in Tasmania, living with Mum and Dad, destitute – a crappy outcome for anyone who's made a home across the world, let alone a thirty-five-year-old.

I cast my eyes around the table. With stillness and silence comes clarity and it's obvious now that others are just as concerned as I am. Fellow agent Freya – normally bubbling with energy – is wide-eyed and subdued. George, another agent – who we jokingly call our 'token male' – is chewing on his lower lip, his scowl marring his handsome features. At the other end of the table, poor Mia is paler than usual, her eyes fixed on Saskia and her chest rising and falling with her rapid breaths. Nasrin seems ticked off, but she may still be on the Tube thing.

And senior agent Ursula... well, she *may* be worried but as she's had a considerable amount of work done on her face, it's difficult to tell. She's supposedly close to seventy but doesn't look a day over fifty and even when she's laughing, barely anything on her face moves. I've had to scold myself for staring at her more times than I'd like to admit; it's a compelling face, simultaneously beautiful and horrifying.

Oddly, Paloma, our head of client relations, seems totally unperturbed, which baffles me. Surely, the source is a former client, meaning that ultimately, the buck stops with her.

‘Right, so I’m guessing you’ve all seen what Mia posted on our chat thread this morning.’ Seven heads bob in unison and Saskia (as expected) remains utterly composed. ‘First, I know this must come as a surprise, this... er...’

There it is, a minor chink in her armour. Witnessing our leader in a moment of fallibility, my stomach clenches.

‘Disaster?’ offers Ursula.

‘Perhaps a little overwrought, Ursula, but regardless, we will address it.’

How? I think of the tsunami again. Confidentiality and discretion form the bedrock of this agency. If we don’t have either...

‘Second,’ says Saskia, cutting through my runaway thoughts, ‘I trust everyone in this room implicitly – absolutely without question.’ Oh god. It hadn’t occurred to me that there could be a question of trust amongst *us*, that the source could be someone in this very room. My stomach sours even more. Saskia continues undaunted, her voice steady as she looks each of us in the eye. ‘You are all exceptional at what you do. You are all valued. And you are all like family to me.’

I glance around the conference table. We are an eclectic bunch, our origins spanning several continents just as our ages span multiple decades. Some of us went to university while some, like Mia, are self-taught, and our expertise is diverse, covering fields such as event management, marketing and PR, law, and my former profession, psychology.

Only one of us had a career in matchmaking before joining the agency – Ursula. Of course, we are much more than matchmakers. While many clients are seeking ‘the one’, others are happy with ‘the one for now’, and there are some clients who just want to silence their harshest critics – sadly and more often than not, their parents – by marrying only for appearances.

A dedicated team, our work is as vast and varied as our bios, often taking us out of the country or embarking on bizarre endeavours. In what other job are you going to be

tasked with taking trapeze lessons? Though that was Nasrin, not me.

Around half our cases allow us to keep more regular office hours, which means the work is not all-consuming – we have *lives*. But it's the sort of job I could never have dreamt up before I started with the agency. Every day brings something different, a new adventure, a new conundrum to solve. I'm never bored and always challenged – one of the things I love most about working here.

And while many people have a work spouse, I have a work family.

These thoughts are somewhat reassuring, though it's a false kind of reassurance – like standing with your back to the raging sea. Bugger, I'm back on the tsunami thing again.

'Lovely sentiment, Sask.' Only Paloma calls her that but it's rumoured that they've been best friends since high school. 'Right. So, let's talk about what we do know... Mia?'

Mia lifts her chin, then licks her lips before addressing the rest of us. 'So,' she says, her Dublin accent softening the edges of the 'o' sound, 'the account that posted the announcement belongs to an anonymous blogger, bu—' Several groans bisect her voice. '*But* I've traced the IP address, which could help us narrow down who's been blabbing.'

'And?' asks Nasrin.

'Let her finish,' chides Paloma.

Nasrin's mouth flattens into a line.

'The blog is based in London.'

More groans. Understandable, really, as more than half our clients live in Greater London.

'How does that help us, then?' asks Nasrin. Wow, she really got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning.

'Because,' interjects Saskia, 'it likely rules out our international clients—'

‘And anyone who lives outside the M25,’ finishes Paloma.

‘What if the blogger isn’t the leak – just the person they’ve told their story to?’ asks George.

‘Good point,’ I say, mostly because I’ve yet to contribute to the conversation and I feel like I need to say *something*.

‘That’s a possibility, of course,’ affirms Saskia and my stomach clenches again. God, with all the churning it’s done this morning, I could make ice cream in there. I lay a hand over it and pat gently.

‘Can you narrow it down any further?’ Freya asks Mia, her pale blue eyes hopeful.

‘I’m working on it.’

‘And I’m scouring our roster of former clients – those in Greater London,’ adds Paloma. Maybe that’s why she seems even more composed than Saskia. There’s a plan and she’s confident that she and Mia can find out who’s behind this.

‘Let’s say we do figure out who it is, then what?’ asks Ursula.

Oh, great question, Ursula. I’d say this aloud but I’m already embarrassed that I’ve added nothing meaningful to this discussion.

‘Then I’ll speak with them,’ says Saskia. She smiles and, believe me, the Mona Lisa has *nothing* on the ambiguity of this smile. If I didn’t know Saskia better, I’d say it was sinister. Yikes.

‘And say what?’ asks Ursula.

Hooray! I cheer internally – another great question.

‘Please remember that all our clients – and those on our potentials register – sign a non-disclosure agreement. And also remember that before I founded this agency, I was a solicitor, specialising in contracts law. Those agreements are failsafe.’

Ursula nods sagely. If her eyebrows were able to, no doubt they’d knit together.

Freya pokes me under the table and points to her lap, where she's scribbled 'disgruntled employee?' on a small notepad. I shake my head, confused. As far as I know, no one has ever left the employ of the agency. But maybe she's right.

'Any chance it's *not* a former client?' asks George.

Freya's eyes flick to mine, clearly spooked like I am by the uncanny timing. If it isn't someone who engaged the agency to meet their 'happily ever after' needs and it's not someone in this room, then that leaves only two options – our small but mighty support team (god forbid!) or one of the 'potentials' we put forward as possible love interests.

'Whoever is at the root of this,' says Saskia, hushing the rising murmurs with her stoic tone, 'I have every confidence that Paloma and Mia will find them and that it will all be sorted – and soon.'

'Besides,' says Paloma and all heads swivel in her direction. I really wish they'd sit next to each other, rather than at opposite ends of the table. This isn't the first time we've spectated their interplay like we're at Wimbledon. 'If this does get out...' She shrugs. 'It could be good publicity.'

At that, there's an explosion of outrage. We *never* publicise the agency – there are no advertisements on the back pages of *Tatler*, no appearances on talk shows, no guerrilla marketing, no party-plans, or radio ads, or even *matchbooks* with the agency's name on them. We're like *Fight Club* but without the fighting.

Our only method of procuring clients is referrals from previous clients or nominations – or both, as a former client can nominate someone (even without them knowing). But we never publicise the agency.

Ever.

'All right, all right,' says Saskia, now out of her seat and elegantly waving her hands as though we're a choir and she's directing us to sing more softly. Those of us who are standing – me included – plant ourselves heavily in our seats. Saskia leans on the conference table and smiles again – serenely this

time. ‘Obviously, that’s not our preferred route, so Paloma and Mia are dropping everything else to prioritise this. But the rest of us still have work to do, so let’s begin our daily briefing. Poppy, you have a new client for us,’ she says, giving me the floor.

I nod, swallowing hard and *really* wishing I’d made that tea. My throat is as dry as a dead dingo’s donger, as my dad would say. Freya, bless her, slides a glass of water over and I take a sip, telegraphing ‘thank you’ with my eyes.

‘Our client’s name is Tristan Fellows,’ I say a moment later. ‘He’s a referral from one of Saskia’s former clients, Ravi Sharma, and this will be a fee-for-service arrangement.’

This distinction is important, as half our clients pay a substantial fee and half are taken on pro bono. As well as expanding our referrals across the echelons of society, this practice is because Saskia believes everyone is entitled to their happily ever after –

or HEA, as we say in the biz – no matter their level of income. She’s an equal-opportunity romantic.

‘The case name,’ I add, ‘is “Marriage: Impossible”.’

‘Why “impossible”?’ asks Ursula, her chin lifted inquisitively, doing the work of her immobile eyebrows.

‘It’s like the movies,’ I reply. ‘You know, *Mission: Impossible*... they always succeed no matter how challenging the mission...?’

‘Oh!’ says George. ‘I love that – like, it’s *tricky* but doable.’

‘Exactly,’ I say, wishing we hadn’t got waylaid by my chosen case name.

‘So, he’s not... er...?’ I can tell Ursula is trying to find an appropriate way to ask if my client is unattractive – as if there is one.

‘Actually,’ I say, simultaneously pressing a button on my tablet, ‘Tristan is exceptionally handsome.’ An image of our new client appears on the screen above Saskia’s head, eliciting

a chorus of ‘ooh’s from around the table – except George who emits something like a growl. Even Saskia, who’s swivelled her chair around to see, seems genuinely surprised at how handsome Tristan is – thick, dark hair cut stylishly short, high cheekbones, whisky-coloured eyes framed by thick lashes and full brows, and a chiselled chin. He’s the love child of Henry Cavill and Theo James.

In the photo, Tristan is scowling as if he’s a brooding love interest on the cover of a steamy romance novel. And I’ve seen my fair share of romance novels – my bestie, Shaz, is obsessed with them. Ravi did provide a second photo, a candid shot from his wedding in which Tristan is laughing with Ravi’s new wife, but I get the sense that *this* Tristan is the one who needs our help – the scowler.

‘Apparently,’ – some pairs of eyes return to me but most stay riveted to the screen – ‘the issue is his personality. Ravi describes Tristan as—’

‘Impossible?’ George interjects, evoking polite chuckles from the others. George is a darling, just not as funny as he thinks he is.

‘Well, yes. And we have exactly forty days to find this impossible man a wife.’

‘Why forty days?’ asks George.

‘Because that is when our client turns thirty-five. And he’s either married by midnight on his thirty-fifth birthday and becomes the beneficiary of a sizeable fortune, or that fortune is bequeathed to the Avian Wildlife Trust of the Hebrides.’

‘And how much is “sizeable”?’ asks Nasrin.

‘Thirty million pounds,’ I reply, matter-of-factly.

Her eyes widen as George blurts, ‘Blimey!’

‘Oh, what fun this will be,’ trills Ursula, rubbing her hands together. I’ve already asked her to be my second on this one. Her vast experience in marriages of convenience is just what we need, and her enthusiasm... well, that’s always welcomed.

As I take my colleagues through the ins and outs of the case, including the specifics of our objective, I realise that Saskia was right to shift our focus back to work. I feel better already. By the time I've wrapped up and Freya commences an update on her own case, I am positively buoyant. Our client may be 'impossible', but I've never shied away from a challenge. If anything, challenging clients are the number one reason I love what I do.

2

TRISTAN

‘This is ridiculous.’

‘I told y—’

‘We’re well into the twenty-first century and this is so *old-fashioned*,’ I spit. No, not just old-fashioned – archaic. What was Grandad *thinking*?

‘Yes, but – Tristan, will you *please* slow down.’

I expel a huffy sigh, slowing my pace so my closest friend and solicitor, Ravi, can catch up. It’s the situation I’m frustrated with, not him.

‘Thank you. Now, as I’ve been saying, it’s not un-doable.’

I stop abruptly, incredulity permeating my entire body.

Ravi doubles back. ‘It’s not,’ he says, pinning me with one of his ‘just do as I say’ looks. Though to be fair, those looks have saved me a lot of time and money over the years – often both at the same time. And in this case, we may be adding my sanity into the mix.

‘Well then, what’s your plan?’ I ask. ‘Contest it? Argue that when the will was written, it was a different time and—’

‘No. I’ve told, you, Tris. I’ve looked into it – *thoroughly*. There’s no way to contest it.’

‘There must be!’ I head off again and he rushes after me. ‘You’re one of the best solicitors in London,’ I add when he’s beside me again. It may be stretching the truth a little – Ravi is an excellent solicitor but London’s teeming with those.

‘Stop trying to butter me up and listen.’ As usual, he’s onto me, so I tune in. ‘I’ve made you an appointment at an agency.’

‘What sort of agency?’ He doesn’t reply right away – his tell – and now *I’m* onto *him*. ‘Ravi? What sort of agency is it?’

He pulls me into a shopfront portico out of the foot traffic. ‘Just hear me out.’ But he doesn’t say anything else – he’s hedging and if he’s going down the route I think he is... oh no.

‘Ravi?’ I demand.

‘It’s sort of a matchmak—’

‘I’m out.’ I stride off again, excusing myself as I bump into several people while re-joining the flow of pedestrians. Unsurprisingly, Ravi rushes after me, also uttering apologies in his wake.

‘Tristan! For god’s sake.’

I take a sharp left towards the nearest pub, nearly bowling over a well-dressed pensioner. ‘Well, I never—’

‘So sorry, madam,’ I say, reaching out to stop her from toppling over. She glowers at me and bustles away. Well, I tried. Entering the pub, my eyes take a moment to adjust, a hazard of the late-summer sunshine, and I pause just inside the doorway.

‘Good idea,’ says Ravi, stepping up behind me. He skirts around me and beelines for the bar. ‘Sit there,’ he adds, pointing to a nearby table.

I pull out a wooden chair that’s probably seen thousands of arses over the years and sit down wearily. How in the hell have I ended up in this predicament? At least we found out before my birthday, as blind luck would have it.

‘Here,’ says Ravi, placing two glasses of whisky on the heavily patinated table. ‘And I’m expensing these, by the way.’

This elicits a small smile of concession. He sits opposite me, tipping his glass in my direction before gulping down half of it.

‘What time is it, anyway?’ I ask, flicking my wrist to see that it’s barely gone twelve.

‘Time for some Dutch courage. Drink up.’ I take a sip and note that he’s ordered eighteen-year-old Tomatin, my favourite. If he does expense it, it will cost me a mint, but I doubt he will. ‘Right,’ he says, his empty glass landing on the table with a thud, ‘I’ve consulted with every colleague and contact I have in inheritance law, *and* I’ve scoured every legal precedent there is but, I’m sorry to say, the only way out of this is for you to get married. And by the end of next month.’

I attempt to object but he silences me with a raised hand. ‘I don’t want to hear it. It’s either that or you forgo a thirty million pound fortune and we both know you’re not going to do that.’

He’s right. I groan, slumping in my chair. I take a sip of whisky, my consolation prize. ‘So, this agency then?’

‘Yes, well, I have a bit of a confession...’ He trails off, scowling at his empty glass.

‘Do you want another?’ I ask.

‘No... no,’ he says, lifting his gaze and taking a deep breath.

I can’t imagine what he’s about to confess but it’s clearly paining him. ‘Just say it, Ravi.’

‘This agency... it’s how I met Jacinda.’

‘What?’ I ask, perplexed. ‘I thought yours was an arranged marriage.’

‘First off, that assumption is racist.’ I blink at him – he knows I didn’t mean it like that. ‘Sorry, Tris...’

‘It’s fine. And second?’

‘Well, you are sort of on the money. I was trying to *avoid* an arranged marriage – that’s why I went to the agency.’

‘Hold on, you and Jass... and your parents...?’ I shake my head. ‘I’m not getting it, Rav. You need to spell it out.’ He

reaches for his empty glass, then retracts his hand. ‘So it *is* a two-whisky revelation, then?’

He shakes his head and stares at the tabletop for a moment. ‘When I was coming up on twenty-eight, my parents... well, no, it was *Mum*, actually – you know how she can get...’ He looks to me for confirmation – or is it commiseration? – and I nod. We’re both only children of difficult mothers and distant fathers, something we bonded over at boarding school. And I’ve spent enough time with Ravi’s mother over the years to know that if Lakshmi Sharma fixates on something, such as her son being twenty-eight and unmarried – the horror – then watch out.

‘Anyway, Mum was impatience personified and one night, she really kicked off. *Why* wasn’t I married yet? Apparently, *all* her friends’ sons were married and most of them had children, or their wives were expecting. And then there’s *me*’ – he makes a face – ‘successful solicitor, model son, except for one thing.’

‘You were single.’

‘Exactly. So, for months in the lead up to my birthday, every family dinner turned into one of my mother’s matchmaking endeavours. And they were all lovely women – attractive, educated, pleasant enough, just not... you know...’ He shrugs, seemingly lost in thought.

‘You never said.’

‘It’s not the sort of thing we talk about, is it?’ It smarts a little, the reminder that, even though Ravi is my closest friend, we don’t really share personal stuff. At least, not since those early days at boarding school when we’d talk into the night, mostly about wishing we had different parents – less-hard-to-please mothers and more-involved fathers.

‘So how did you find the agency?’ I ask, changing tack – enough navel gazing for today.

‘Oh, right. So, I know the founder.’

‘Really?’

He laughs. ‘You sound surprised. She’s not some little old lady tucked away in a chintzy bedsit with an old-school Rolodex, Tristan. She was once a solicitor – my mentor, actually, when I first joined Lewis & Patel.’

‘Oh.’ Ravi’s right. As soon as he mentioned the agency, I made several assumptions – none of them complimentary. And while I may not have imagined an old woman in a chintzy bedsit, I certainly hadn’t considered that someone who’d had a prosperous career in law would start a *matchmaking* agency.

‘Yes, and there are only a handful of us from her former life who know. She’s not even going by her married name any more.’

This is sounding more intriguing by the second – still, there’s no way in hell I’m engaging them to solve my dilemma.

‘Anyway, back to me and Jass,’ says Ravi. ‘I signed on with the agency – the process was initially quite stringent, so be prepared for that,’ – I don’t mention that I won’t need to be prepared for anything, as I’m not doing it – ‘but it was worth it. Jass was the first woman I met and... well, you know the rest.’

‘You really didn’t meet *anybody* else?’ I ask, my eyes narrowing.

‘Nope. They got it right first go. I’m telling you, they’re the best in the business.’

‘*If* you are looking for a wife.’

‘You *are* looking for a wife,’ he says pointedly.

I meet his gaze, still unwilling to admit that there may be no other way out of this.

‘What if I reached out to one of my exes?’

Ravi throws back his head and bellows out a laugh.

‘Why is that funny?’

He claps a hand over his mouth, his laughter ceasing abruptly. ‘Oh, you were serious.’

‘Yes, as a matter of fact.’

He sniggers. ‘That makes it even funnier.’

‘You’re being unkind.’

‘Am I?’ he teases. ‘Tris,’ he says, resting his elbows on the table and steepling his fingers, ‘it’s possible that you are the worst boyfriend in the history of the world.’

‘Harsh.’

‘*And* I’d wager that there isn’t one of your ex-girlfriends who’d agree to marry you, even if you paid them.’

‘God, Rav, what do you *really* think?’

‘I’m just being truthful.’

He is but it doesn’t hurt any less. Just then, a face pops into my mind. ‘Hold on. What about Rebecca? We ended things rather amicably.’

‘You broke up with her on holiday and she flew back to London early – by herself.’

‘But she understood we weren’t right for each other.’

‘Well, in that case, she’d be the perfect wife for you. I’m sure she’d leap at the opportunity.’

‘Are you enjoying yourself?’ I ask, even though he plainly is.

‘Absolutely. And for the record, Rebecca has been happily married for three years.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘Jass and I went to the wedding.’

‘Well, bollocks.’ Rebecca was my only flicker of hope to avoid engaging a (stupid bloody) matchmaking agency.

Ravi checks his watch. ‘Come on. I’ve taken the liberty of making you an appointment and we’re due in Richmond at one.’ He raises his eyebrows at me, a challenge to ignore his imperative. I suppose there’s no harm in hearing what they have to say. ‘And there’s no harm in meeting them,’ he says, as if reading my mind.

‘Fine.’ I down the last of my whisky and take out my phone out to call a car.

‘Don’t bother with a car. We’d never get there in time. We’ll take the Tube.’

This just gets better and better, I think, following Ravi out into the sunshine.

* * *

‘Just through here,’ says the receptionist, leading the way into a meeting room that looks out over the Thames. ‘Can I get you anything to drink?’ Ravi takes a seat and I wander over to the window. *At least the view is nice*, I think. ‘Tea, coffee, water?’ the receptionist continues.

‘Don’t suppose you’ve got anything alcoholic?’ I joke, turning my back on the river.

‘Of course, sir. We have a full bar available. What did you have in mind?’

I blink at her in surprise. ‘Uh, just water is fine,’ I reply.

‘Water for me too, thanks,’ adds Ravi. She nods, proffers a fleeting smile, then leaves.

‘How much is all this going to cost me?’ I ask, glancing about at the plush, yet tasteful furnishings.

‘A lot less than thirty million pounds,’ Ravi counters.

‘Good morning, gentlemen.’ Two women enter, one about my age who’s wearing a black sleeveless dress, her reddish-brown hair pulled into a low ponytail, and one... well, I’d be hard-pressed to say how old she is, but she looks a lot like my mother and her friends. She’s well put together but has clearly had multiple cosmetic procedures. Undoubtedly, my mother, who hardly likes anyone, would warm to her immediately.

‘My name is Poppy and this is Ursula,’ says the younger woman and I pick up on a refined Australian accent. They sit across from each other, so I take the seat opposite Ravi and

diagonal to Poppy. She pulls in her chair then fixes me with a broad smile. ‘So, Tristan, it’s good to meet you.’

‘Oh, um... thank you. And you.’

She consults a tablet as the receptionist quietly distributes glasses of water from a tray.

‘Thank you, Anita,’ says Poppy. After the receptionist leaves, she addresses me again. ‘I hear you’re in need of a wife – and in a hurry.’

I hadn’t expected her to be so forthright. My eyes flick towards Ravi, who nods at me encouragingly. ‘Er, yes, so I’ve been told.’

‘And you turn thirty-five on September twenty-eighth, is that correct?’

‘Yes.’ Surely, she has all this information – Ravi will have given it to her. Can’t we just get on with it?

‘A Libran,’ says Ursula, her eyes appraising me as though she’s at a livestock auction.

‘I don’t give much credence to all that – horoscopes.’

Ursula nods knowingly. ‘That’s a very Libran thing to say.’ She points a finger at me. ‘You’re a highly critical sign – you question everything, weighing up all your options.’

‘Oh, for god’s sa—’ I begin but Ravi cuts me off.

‘My wife, Jacinda, says the same about Leos.’ I glare at him for indulging this nonsense.

‘I think we may be getting a bit off track,’ Poppy says. ‘Tristan, why don’t you tell us about yourself.’

I appreciate the deft way she’s redirected the conversation but, again, won’t Ravi have given her all the information she needs? I already wish I hadn’t come.

‘Like what?’ I ask curtly. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Ravi shake his head but Poppy just gazes at me, a quizzical, almost tranquil expression on her face.

‘Let’s start with what you want in a bride,’ says Ursula.

I look between them, the word 'bride' irking me more than the horoscope thing – if that's possible.

'Well, you see,' I say pointedly, 'I don't want a bride. A "bride" is someone who's in love, someone who's involved in a romance, who cares about dresses and flowers and... whatnot. I require a *wife*. Someone who will help me fulfil the terms of my grandad's will and nothing more. So, what do I want in a wife? Simply, a woman who will marry me and stay married to me for two years. That's it. Now can we please move on?'

To her credit, Poppy doesn't even flinch. In fact, somehow, my rant elicits a smile. 'Of course,' she says. 'So let me tell you how this will work.'

'One moment,' says Ursula. 'I just want to clarify... why two years?'

'A specific term of the will,' replies Ravi. 'If married in time, Tristan inherits twenty-five per cent of his grandfather's estate immediately, another twenty-five per cent in a year, and the remainder after two years.'

'I see,' says Ursula.

'Oh good. Now can we please move this along?' I ask.

Oh, this is wickedly fun.

Objectively, Tristan may be the most handsome man I've ever seen in real life, but he is also everything Ravi promised. What a grouch! I have no doubt that if it weren't for having to forgo an eye-wateringly large inheritance, he'd happily remain a bachelor until his dying day.

But I am confident we can find him a wife – not a *bride*, as he so eloquently explained. There are plenty of women on our register who have ticked that special box on their application, the one that essentially says, 'marriage is a business arrangement'. I asked Saskia about it once – not why we have that question, but why she thinks so many of our potentials (twelve per cent at last count) are open to this type of marriage. She'd replied that many women are practical and no-nonsense and have no time for – or want of – what they consider a 'fairy tale' romance. Ironic considering the name of our agency.

'So, how do you find these women anyway?' asks Tristan after I've explained the process. It's a good question – he's clearly a fan of due diligence, but then, so are we.

'All our potential wives are carefully vetted,' replies Ursula, her hackles visibly rising. It's her connections at a well-known online dating service that helps keep our pool of potentials topped up. She'll also be the lead on selecting the potentials for this case.

‘That may be, but where do they *come* from? Are there really dozens of suitable women roaming around London willing to marry under these circumstances?’

‘The short answer is yes,’ I say and those dark amber eyes flick towards mine. ‘*Adding*,’ I continue, ‘that we’re prepared to extend our search beyond Greater London if needed and it’s unlikely you will need to meet *dozens* of women. Once you’ve completed your questionnaire, we’ll be able to narrow down a shortlist as a starting point.’

‘I’ve told you my sole requirement. I couldn’t care less if she likes reading by the fire,’ he says, his voice laced with sarcasm. Ravi grimaces at me apologetically but, regardless of his friend’s behaviour, I remain undeterred.

‘Do *you*?’

‘Do I what?’

‘Like reading by the fire?’

‘Well, I suppose so,’ he admits with obvious reluctance. ‘Doesn’t everyone?’

‘Not everyone, no,’ I retort, clearly taking him by surprise – maybe he isn’t used to being told no. ‘So, do you read anything in particular or just books in general?’

His eyes narrow. ‘Do you have all you need to get started or not?’

I pretend to make a note on my tablet. ‘Reading by the fire,’ I say slowly, drawing out the vowel sounds. Then I meet his eye. ‘Let me be clear, Tristan. This is an extremely prestigious agency with a wait list longer than the Thames. Two things bumped you to the top of that list – the time sensitive nature of your situation and your friend here,’ I say, nodding in Ravi’s direction. ‘He may have told you his connection to Saskia Featherstone, the founder of the agency?’

Ravi seems pleased with himself, but Tristan has a face like thunder. ‘Yes,’ he replies curtly.

‘So, it’s your choice but if we are going to find you a *wife* in the coming weeks, then we will need at least a modicum of

your cooperation. Have I made myself clear?’

All those years watching Mum’s collection of old black-and-white movies are *really* paying off. That felt very Katharine Hepburn à la *Adam’s Rib*. I did all but drawl in that distinct New England accent of hers.

Tristan’s head swivels sharply towards Ravi. If he’s seeking solidarity, he’s out of luck. ‘Thirty million pounds, Tris,’ Ravi says with a tilt of his head.

Tristan’s jaw tenses and he expels a frustrated breath from his nose – like a thoroughbred who’s tired of the bridle. An apt analogy, really. ‘Fine.’ He snaps his fingers at twice at me. ‘Give me the damned questionnaire.’

Ursula and I share a look, her eyes widening as much as they can, and she shakes her head ever so slightly. Is she telling me to reconsider taking this case? Even if she is, I’m already invested. It’s not often I get to spar with someone so arrogant. It might be fun to take him down a notch or two. I press a button on the console in front of me.

‘Anita, could you please bring us an NDA and a client questionnaire?’ I smile politely at Tristan while we wait and he looks away, scowling even more intently. ‘Thank you,’ I say when Anita hands me the documents. I slide the NDA across the table. ‘You may want to have your solicitor look this over.’

Tristan roughly pushes it towards Ravi. ‘He’s my solicitor.’

‘Excellent, that should speed things up. And this is the questionnaire.’ I hand over a stack of paper about half-a-centimetre thick.

‘Good god.’

‘I warned you,’ says Ravi, ‘but the proof’s in the pudding, mate. Jacinda was worth it.’

‘We can send you a digital copy if you prefer,’ I offer, ‘but we find that we get more candid responses from a hard copy.’

‘This is fine,’ says Ravi with a smile. He stacks the questionnaire on top of the NDA. ‘Oh, just one more thing. What happens if it turns out to be a love match?’

‘A *what?!*’

Clearly, Tristan doesn’t believe a love match is a possibility and having now met him, I’d agree. I smother a smirk and fix my eyes on Ravi.

‘Ignore him,’ says Ravi. Tristan starts to object, but Ravi silences him with, ‘It’s a pertinent question, Tris.’ Pertinent or not, Tristan’s scowl intensifies. ‘*If* it turns out to be a love match, do you still pay the woman the fee, what does the marriage contract look like...?’

Ravi turns back to me. ‘I’m not completely mad to ask about this, am I?’

‘No, not at all,’ replies Ursula. I’m happy to let her field this question, as we’re firmly in her wheelhouse now. ‘If Tristan and his future wife *do* fall in love...’ Tristan emits a groan, but Ursula continues undeterred. ‘Then we’ll all sit down together and determine how best to proceed.’

‘So, essentially, your response is, “we’ll see”?’ Tristan asks snidely.

‘Exactly. Every case is different, so it’s tricky to predict.’ This appears to satisfy Ravi but Tristan... not so much.

‘Right,’ I say, standing. I lean across the table, my hand extended. ‘Good to meet you, Ravi.’ He shakes my hand and we exchange smiles. ‘And I’ll be waiting to hear from you, Tristan.’ He shakes my hand – reluctantly, but he’s probably one of those people for whom manners trump discord. ‘Shall I ask Anita to see you out?’ I offer.

‘No need.’ Tristan races out of the room and Ravi flashes us a grateful smile as he exits.

When they’re out of earshot, Ursula sighs loudly. ‘Impossible is right,’ she says. ‘Are you sure you’re up for this?’

‘Oh, absolutely.’

‘You seem quite delighted by this case,’ she says.

‘Oh, for sure! One last hurrah if the agency *is* going down.’

‘Bite your tongue. Saskia and Paloma will sort this out. You know they will.’

‘You don’t sound convinced.’

‘I have to be right about this. I don’t know what I’d do if...’

‘I know. I feel the same way,’ I say, reaching across the table to pat her hand.

‘Poppy, Ursula, come quick,’ says Freya, poking her head in. ‘There’s news.’

We glance at each other, then follow Freya into the conference room.

* * *

Tristan

‘This has turned out to be one shitty day,’ I grumble as the lift descends.

‘This has turned out to be one *fortuitous* day,’ Ravi replies, holding up the sheaf of paper. ‘Even though you nearly blew it in there, we have a solution. Here, take this,’ he says, shoving the questionnaire into my hands. I roll it up tightly, resisting the urge to pummel Ravi with it for this hare-brained idea. ‘Now, go home, and get to work.’

‘I need to get back to the office to do *actual* work. I’ll do this thing tonight. Tomorrow at the latest.’

‘Uh-uh. I’ve already texted Adam and told him to clear your afternoon.’

‘When did you do that?’

‘On the Tube, while you were sulking.’

‘Rav... gah!’

‘I know. It’s utterly shite, but it’s what we’ve got. Come on, call a car. I’ll come back to yours with you if you like but

either way, we're finishing this by the end of the day.'

When the lift gets to the ground floor, Ravi rushes out, crosses the lobby, and is standing by the road before I've got one foot out of the lift. Something tells me he's enjoying this.

* * *

'Oh, come on. Favourite cuisine?'

Ravi stops tapping on his laptop and looks at me. 'Not everyone lives on protein shakes and steamed chicken breasts, you know.'

'That's not *all* I eat.'

'Well, let's exclude the times you invite yourself to dinner, then.'

'I don't – never mind. I just don't see how my favourite cuisine is supposed to help me find a wife.'

'It's not. It's to help the agency find you a wife.' He resumes typing and mumbles, 'Left to you, you'll be middle-aged and penniless before we know it.'

'I heard that.'

'You were meant to.'

'And I won't be *penniless*, just...' I catch the shift in his countenance as he grimaces at the screen. 'What?' He sits back, staring at the screen. 'Rav?'

He lifts his gaze. 'Don't you have a cousin?'

'I have two. Evie and Olivia. My father's sister's children.'

'Right,' he says.

'What are you getting at?' The ill-ease I've been feeling intermittently since we discovered my dilemma comes flooding back, engulfing me.

'All right, look—'

'Oh god.'

‘It could be nothing.’

‘Come on, out with it.’

‘My colleague has just alerted me to a case from a few years ago – very similar situation to yours, the grandfather outlived the father and it was his will that took precedent – marriage clause, deadline, the lot. A cousin contested the will a year after the beneficiary got married, saying that the marriage was a sham and didn’t meet the requirements of the will.’

My stomach clenches. ‘And?’

‘And the cousin won.’

‘Jesus, Rav. So now what?’

‘Depends – how well do you get along with your cousins?’

‘Honestly, I’ve barely seen them over the years. They weren’t even at Grandad’s service, though not many of us were. And they’re a lot younger than I am – early-twenties, I think, maybe mid-twenties by now. We didn’t really grow up together.’

‘I see.’

‘But I certainly hadn’t planned on leaving them out in the cold, especially now I know the extent of Grandad’s fortune. They’ll be well looked after – I was thinking about a few million. Is that enough? What do you think?’

‘I’d say so – three or four mil each...’

It hits hard – and suddenly – how much money we’re talking about. ‘god, Rav, I could be mind-blowingly wealthy in just over a month.’

He laughs, then stops. ‘Oh, you’re serious.’

‘Yes! Aren’t I always? Isn’t that what you and Jass say is my “problem”?’ He shrugs, conceding. ‘I suppose I’ve been so blinded by the terms of the will, I haven’t had much time to think about it.’

‘So, how should we proceed?’ asks Ravi.

‘What do you mean? It’s your plan, ridiculous as it i—’

‘I meant with your cousins,’ he replies, cutting me off.

‘Oh, I see. I don’t know, some sort of trust, something they could draw on once they turn thirty – something like that.’

‘Do you want me to draft something? You should probably talk to your aunt as well.’

Thoughts whirl through my mind and I don’t have the wherewithal to grab hold of a single one. I walk away from the table and flop onto the sofa, holding my head in my hands. It feels heavy. ‘Why did he have to burden me with this?’ I say to myself.

‘The money or the condition?’

‘Both.’

Ravi comes to sit opposite me in a barely used armchair. ‘Look, we’ve covered the condition. You’re absolutely right – it was another time when he made that will *and* it was supposed to apply to your father. If the addendum to make you heir had superseded that clause... well, you’d be free and clear.’

‘I feel ill every time I think about it and, believe me, it’s all I’ve been thinking about since the reading of the will.’

‘That’s understandable.’

‘And now this cousin thing – and that’s on top of discovering the extent of his fortune. Who knew Grandad was so wily with investments? He certainly kept that to himself.’

‘It’s a lot to walk away from,’ says Ravi gently.

‘No, I know. I wouldn’t want to do that. I mean, wildlife is a good cause but... why would he leave so much to that avian trust?’ I sigh, sitting back against the sofa.

‘Baffling. Of course, you *could* donate a percentage to them – offset some of the inheritance tax.’

‘Oh god, that’s right. So, we’re not really talking about thirty million, are we?’

‘That’s after tax, Tristan.’ Of *course*, he’s already calculated that but it’s no consolation and my head still feels heavy.

‘So!’ he says brightly. ‘Your favourite cuisine is...?’

‘You bugger.’ He grins at me and it’s impossible not to smile. I restrain myself with a smirk. ‘Why don’t I just marry that Poppy woman?’ I joke. ‘She seems sensible enough for a marriage of convenience.’

‘She was more than sensible – she didn’t put up with any of your shite – but you’re assuming she’d have you.’

‘Why wouldn’t she?’

‘Because she had your number the moment she met you.’

‘Well, perhaps, but I could charm her.’

‘Hah.’

‘What? I can be charming.’

‘No, you can’t. Other than the moderately endearing characteristic of *thinking* you can be charming, you are utterly without charm.’

‘You’re in danger of hurting my feelings.’

‘Also untrue.’

‘Fine. But still...’

‘No, Tris, she’d be sacked on the spot.’ He stands and retrieves the questionnaire from the dining table, tossing it at me. It’s like trying to catch a chicken that’s attempting to fly.

‘Oi.’

‘Don’t “oi” me,’ he scolds. ‘Just finish that so we can get it back to the agency before six. Oh, and you’ll need to sign this,’ he adds, pointing to the NDA.

‘It’s sound?’

‘It’s sound.’

‘All right.’ I wrangle the pages in my lap and flick to the second-to-last page. *Italian*, I write in the box.

True to his word – well, Ravi’s word – Tristan couriered over the signed NDA and completed questionnaire by close of business. After a long day like today – first the news that Mia found the person who owns that blog, moving us onto phase two of ‘Operation Shutdown’, then Ursula and I spending hours compiling a preliminary list of potentials for Tristan – the best thing would be to lock his responses away in my desk drawer and review them in the morning when my brain is fresh. But my curiosity is piqued.

I scan the first page – mostly information I already have – and giggle quietly to myself as I imagine him deciding what to put down for ‘favourite colour’. Most men settle on a primary colour, possibly a secondary but almost never a tertiary. We did have a non-binary client last year, a lovely artist seeking their ‘muse’, who wrote down ‘coquelicot’, which the entire team had to Google. When I discovered it’s the colour of poppies, I adopted it as my own favourite.

I flick to page ten of the questionnaire and laugh out loud at ‘black’.

‘What’s funny?’ asks Freya.

I hold up the questionnaire. ‘My new client’s favourite colour is black.’

‘Perhaps he’s secretly a goth,’ she quips.

‘Perhaps he’s not-so-secretly playing games with me.’

‘Or that. Much on this evening?’

‘Not really,’ I reply, as I have no plans other than starting the latest season of *Bridgerton*. I’ve been wanting to start it for weeks but have been waylaid by the case I wrapped up yesterday. ‘You?’

‘We’re seeing a show in the West End.’

I’ve worked with Freya for years now – we started around the same time – and this is the first time she’s mentioned that she’s part of a ‘we’. Her eyes widen when she realises what’s she’s said.

‘So, how long has this been going on?’ I ask, curious. She bites her lip, clearly worried. ‘Rather new, then?’

‘Yes and...’ She glances about but there’s no one else in the open-plan office, only Saskia and Paloma sequestered away in Saskia’s office out of earshot.

‘You’d rather keep it under wraps for now?’ She nods vigorously. ‘Don’t worry,’ I say, hushed. I mime locking my mouth with an imaginary key, then toss it over my shoulder.

‘Well, I’m off.’ She stands and starts to gather her belongings. ‘Oh,’ she says as if she’s just remembered something. ‘Any more word on...?’ She nods towards Saskia’s office, but the blinds are still closed. The only indication of the status of our crisis is the silhouette of Paloma pacing.

‘No. And they’ve been in there all afternoon.’

‘Do you think that we’ll be able to...?’ she asks, worry etching her face. Freya often speaks in riddles, never quite finishing her thoughts.

‘I seriously hope so. I love this job.’

‘Me too,’ she replies glumly.

‘And we may not know who the source is – yet,’ I add, hoping to assuage my concerns as much as hers, ‘but finding the person behind the blog is encouraging, don’t you think?’

‘I suppose so.’ Her eyes flick towards the enormous clock that sits over reception. ‘Oh, bollocks,’ she says, ‘I’m late. Bye, Poppy!’

I should head out too. I eye the questionnaire, toying with the idea of bringing it home with me. It's not often that I take work home – well, it's more often than Saskia would like. She's drummed it into our heads that we need to maintain a proper work–life balance and more than once, she's subtly shaken her head at me as I've been packing up for the evening and she's caught sight of work documents in my hand, or if I'm still at my desk when she's on the way out. Though, I suppose an emergency like the potential collapse of the agency trumps 'balance'.

Please let it be okay, I send out to the universe. The only response is the loud tick of the clock.

'Okay, Poppy, time to get out of here,' I say, standing.

Bring it with me or lock it away? Bridgerton is the decider and I slide the questionnaire into my desk drawer, lock it, and slip the key into my handbag.

Sometimes, I'll walk home – it's only a mile and a half from here – but tonight I'm feeling the fatigue of a densely packed day, as rewarding as it's been. I'll take the Tube one stop to Kew Gardens, then walk from there.

'Bye, Saskia, bye Paloma,' I call as I sling my handbag onto my shoulder. Not that I expect them to answer but good manners cost nothing (so my mum taught me). As I wait for the lift – just the thought of stairs exhausts me – I chuckle to myself. Whose favourite colour is *black*?

* * *

As I open the front door, my tablet loudly announces that Mum is calling and I rush to answer before she hangs up. 'Hi, Mum,' I say, a little breathless.

'Hello, Poppy, darling.'

I glance at the clock on the stove and do the quick calculation in my head. 'You're up early.'

'That bloody rooster!' she says, making me smile. 'I swear, he wakes up earlier every week. He'll be on the table

for Sunday roast if he doesn't watch it.'

I mentally add (very) early mornings to the mental tally of what I don't miss about growing up in farm country.

'Where's Dad?' I ask.

She leans in close to the screen and says, 'Asleep, the bugger. I swear that man could sleep through a cyclone. The house could be flattened around him, I could be swept off and dumped miles away, and he'd wake up and wonder what happened. He'd probably only miss me when he realised he had to make his own breakfast.'

'Mum, don't say that. Dad adores you, you know that.'

'He adores my cooking more like.'

'Mum!'

She waves a hand. 'Aw, he's all right, especially when he's sleeping.'

At that, we burst out laughing. This is a familiar routine of ours – her 'complaining' about Dad and me cajoling her until she concedes that they absolutely adore each other, even if they do drive each other up the wall sometimes. My laughter subsides and I sigh. It's moments like these when I'm flooded with homesickness. Not that I want to move back to Tassie – I don't think I will ever move back permanently – it's just... I wish Australia and the UK were closer so I could pop home more often.

I'd prop myself up at the breakfast bar, drinking hot Milo while Mum whipped up a batch of her famous pumpkin scones. She'd talk a mile a minute, gossiping about people I don't know, telling me all the connections between them as well as their darkest 'secrets'. 'You know Paul,' she'd say, even though I'd never met him in my entire life. 'He used to be married to Beryl's hairdresser, Carole, but he left her for the Whites' oldest daughter, that Sally girl. Barely even twenty-one she is...'

Dad would come in from his morning chores, his boots dirty but his smile wide. Mum would scold him while he planted a soft kiss on my hair and said, 'Morning, Pop,' before

waving off Mum's rebukes. He'd sit at the kitchen table to eat his breakfast – the same every day: three hard-boiled eggs with toast and a cup of builder's tea – and read the local paper, sharing snippets from time to time.

In the evenings, Dad would head to bed early (a farmer's lot in life) and Mum and I would 'stay up late' until at least nine(!) and watch a movie from her giant tower of DVDs, mostly classics from the 1930s and 40s. The screwball comedies, like *Adam's Rib*, *His Girl Friday*, and *It Happened One Night*, are my favourite – all those plucky women and witty repartee.

This is how I grew up. And this is how most visits have gone ever since I left home aged eighteen.

'I miss you, Mum,' I say, my voice catching.

'Aw, love, we miss you too.' The 'we' lands hard and I suck in a sharp breath. Mum cocks her head as though she is listening out. 'That sounds like your dad getting up. I'd better get the kettle on.'

'All right, Mum.'

'Oh! Sorry, Pop. I didn't even ask about your day.'

'That's okay. It was good. I started a new case today.'

'That's wonderful,' she replies, even though she thinks I'm still a psychologist – all part and parcel of working for a clandestine organisation. Only one person from my 'previous life', as I often think of it, knows what I really do – my best friend, Shaz. When she decided to move to London seven years ago, she invited me to come with her and it was the best decision of my life. With Shaz's help, I started afresh – new city, new life, new *job*. I would never have attended a professional women's symposium on my own, but I'd been Shaz's plus one and that was the night I met Saskia. The rest, as they say, is history.

'Tell me all about it next time?' Mum adds, pulling me back to the conversation.

'Always.' Not knowing I'm with the agency, Mum also doesn't know that I make up the tales about my 'patients'. If I

were still a psychologist, it would be completely unethical to share even a single detail, but she hasn't seemed to twig to that.

'Bye, love.'

'Bye, Mum.'

We end the call and I collapse against the armchair, taking a few deep breaths to quell the emotional impact of living so far from home. I peer deep below the surge of homesickness, looking for the assuredness that I made the right decision to leave all those years ago – first to Hobart for uni, then to Melbourne for my first proper job, then after my one and only heartbreak, following Shaz to London.

If I have one prevailing truth, it's that I never wanted to end up like my mum. The reminder comes with a hefty dose of guilt at wanting something better than what my mum considers 'the perfect life'. But I'm happy here, especially working at the agency and living in my lovely flat. This life is about as far from being a farmer's wife as possible.

'Right,' I say aloud. '*Bridgerton!*' That should help me shake off this introspective funk and I turn on the telly and angle it towards the kitchen so I can watch while I cook dinner.

* * *

'Good morning, Poppy,' says Ursula, who's leaning against my desk. It's a good thing I don't mind Chanel N°5, because my desk will smell of it all day.

'Good morning. You're in super early today.' Ursula typically keeps more 'flexible hours', rarely arriving before nine.

'I had a brilliant idea about your impossible client last night and I wanted to share it with you in person.'

'Oh, great – I'll just go brew myself some tea and then we can get started,' I say, dropping my handbag onto my desk.

‘Can the tea wait?’ she asks.

‘Er...’ This is the most animated I’ve seen her in... well, I don’t know how long – but... well... *tea!*

‘Oh, sorry,’ she says, ‘forgot who I was talking to. Come on, I’ll keep you company.’ We head towards the staff kitchen.

I’ve barely filled the kettle when Ursula begins. ‘Do you remember that case of mine from a couple of years ago, “The *Principessa* and the Pea”?’ Ursula always names her cases after fairy tales.

I cast my mind back, landing on an Italian contessa, who, like Tristan, was forced to wed. Only in her case, it wasn’t to inherit, but so her billionaire father wouldn’t cut her off. ‘The contessa – the one from Umbria.’

‘That’s the one. So, you know how I like to keep in contact with my clients, particularly the success stories?’ It’s a modest question – I can’t think of a single time since I joined the agency when Ursula *wasn’t* successful.

‘I do, yes.’ The kettle has boiled and I pour water into my teapot, then check the clock so I can time the steeping.

‘She’s single again.’

‘What?’

Ursula nods. ‘Mmm-hmm. Or as good as, anyway. She reached out to me last week. It’s not working, the marriage, and she wants out.’

‘But didn’t she need to stay married for five years or something like that?’ Ursula’s about to answer but I interrupt. ‘Sorry – I just... What defines “not working” in a marriage of convenience?’

‘He’s gay.’

‘Right, *and...*?’

‘And even a woman in a marriage of convenience has needs, Poppy.’

‘Sure, but can’t she just take a lover like a normal person?’ I ask, perplexed.

The Poppy of five years ago would never have suggested such a thing, especially considering my disastrous I-didn't-know-he-was-married affair (a story for another time), but in the business of romance, love, and sex, I've discovered that the 'rules' are a little more fluid than I'd once believed.

'She says she can't, that it wouldn't feel right cheating on her husband.'

My mouth quirks in amusement. 'Really? The woman who married a stranger so she'd inherit her father's fortune doesn't want to step out on her gay husband?'

Ursula shrugs. 'People are strange.'

I laugh. 'Uh, yeah, that's true. Still... if she's expecting to have marital relations with her fake husband, I think that may rule out Tristan. He seemed pretty set on it just being a marriage on paper.'

She shrugs again. 'What harm can come from introducing them? She's beautiful, age-appropriate, *wealthy* – he'd know that she wasn't just in it for the fee.'

'Look,' I say, 'even if they meet and Tristan's agreeable – and so is she – how does this solve her problem? The legalities, I mean. She still has to be married for five years.'

'I've given that a lot of thought – actually, I was up half the night thinking about that niggling little detail.' It's hardly 'little' but I let her proceed. 'So, how about this? She gets divorced and married on the same day! *Voilà!*' she adds with one of her hand flourishes.

I can't help myself from laughing but she seems puzzled by my reaction. Oh god, she wasn't kidding. 'Sorry, Ursula,' I say, swallowing my laughter.

It's only been three and a half minutes since the tea started steeping, but I turn and pour anyway. I need to get out of this kitchen – and this conversation.

'Well, just think about it,' Ursula says, an edge of frustration in her voice.

Technically, Ursula is senior to me – both in tenure and in job title – but we have an agreement in the agency that whoever is lead on a case gets the final say. Still, I adore Ursula as much as I respect her, and I don't want to upset her.

'Of course, I will – it's a novel idea,' I say, but when I turn around, she's already left.

5

TRISTAN

‘You didn’t tell me I’d have to meet with them so many times,’ I grumble.

‘Including today, it’s twice. Stop being such a wanker about it.’

‘Isn’t it “on brand” for a wanker banker?’ I retort.

‘Hey.’ Ravi stops short, tugging at my sleeve and I reluctantly turn to face him.

‘What?’

‘*That* – that’s what. Your attitude to this whole thing... it’s shite, Tristan. Like Poppy said, they didn’t *have* to take you on. Just because I nominated you, it wasn’t a given that you’d be accepted. I called in a favour, so when I say, “stop being a wanker”, I mean, stop being a bloody wanker. Got it?’

I can’t remember Ravi ever telling me off like this – part of me is impressed. ‘Understood,’ I say.

‘Good, now come on. I don’t want to be late.’

I jog to catch up to him, mindful that he’s doing everything he can to get me out of this mess. It’s not his fault that my best option is a bloody matchmaking agency. Well, my *only* option. Five minutes later, we are waiting in reception, having been offered – and having declined – refreshments.

‘Tristan, Ravi, apologies for keeping you waiting.’ According to the giant clock on the wall, it has *just* gone ten, the second hand only marginally past the two.

‘Hello, Poppy,’ says Ravi, holding out his hand. She shakes it, smiling politely, then turns towards me. It may be my imagination, but her expression seems to shift when she claps eyes on me, that smile becoming a smirk.

‘Tristan.’

‘Poppy.’

We don’t shake hands – a decision that seems mutual – and in my periphery, I catch Ravi glowering at me. ‘This way,’ she says brightly.

She leads us towards the rear of the office and into one of those screening rooms wealthy people have in their houses. It has two rows of red velvet seats, facing a large screen that fills the far wall. It’s not lost on me that if a fortune does come my way next month, I could buy a home large enough to accommodate one of these. If I were a film lover, which I am not.

Ursula is already sitting in the front row, and we follow Poppy down the short aisle. Ravi sits beside Ursula, I sit beside Ravi, and Poppy sits on my left. She reaches for a complicated-looking remote and in moments, the lights dim and a close-up photograph of a striking redhead fills the screen.

‘This is potential wife number one,’ Poppy says. ‘Nerida.’

Over the next fifteen seconds or so, a series of photographs of the same woman dissolve in and out – the woman grinning from a mountain top, what I think is Machu Picchu in the background, another with her arms around a Red Setter’s neck, her snorkelling with her hair floating around her like rays of the sun, her singing in a choir – a *choir*?

‘I’m sorry,’ I say to Poppy’s profile, ‘what exactly are we doing?’

‘We’re showing you the shortlisted potentials.’

‘Right but this feels a bit... voyeuristic, don’t you think?’

The lights come up and I blink at the unexpected brightness. Poppy is staring at me and it’s impossible to

decipher the look on her face. ‘Would you like to go about this another way?’ she asks.

‘Is there another way?’

‘Of course.’ She smiles but it doesn’t quite reach her eyes. ‘It’s just that Ravi here said you’d prefer this method.’

My head swivels in his direction. ‘What did you tell them?’

‘That the few times you have had a long-term girlfriend, they’ve all been incredibly beautiful.’ I go to speak, but no sound comes out. ‘And that you’d value physical appearance as much as suitability.’

‘That’s not tr...’ I don’t finish the word because, in actual fact, it is sort of true. Ravi raises his eyebrows at me, challenging me to dispute his claim. I don’t. Instead, I turn back to Poppy.

‘Can you tell me about Merin?’ I ask, glancing up at the redhead.

‘Nerida,’ she corrects but she moves on before I can apologise. ‘She was born and raised in Edinburgh and is the head of a non-profit organisation that supports children with learning difficulties.’

‘And what’s with the choir?’ I’m hoping she’s not overly religious. In my family, the closest we come to religion is donating a sizeable sum to the St Vincent de Paul Society every Christmastime.

‘She’s a member of Edinburgh City Voices.’ I have no idea what that is, but it doesn’t *sound* religious. ‘At university, she studied both Social Sciences and Music. She’s an alto,’ Poppy adds, as though an afterthought.

I look up, setting my eyes on the frozen image of Nerida singing, her mouth a perfect ‘O’. She is very pretty – and demonstrably clever, with an impressive, rather noble job. Could I imagine being married to her, however?

This is just an arrangement, I tell myself. Only, up on that screen is a living, breathing person – a person who,

presumably, has hopes and fears – and, potentially, emotional baggage. Why else would she agree to be part of this?

I feel three sets of eyes on me and turn back to Poppy. ‘This is fine, but perhaps you could tell me more about each of them as they show up on screen.’

‘Of course,’ she says, her professional smile making another appearance. She could sell high-end real estate with that smile – no doubt she’d make a killing.

The lights dim again and the next woman to appear on screen is a raven-haired, heavily made-up beauty who’s laughing with her head thrown back.

‘This,’ says Poppy, ‘is Vittoria. She’s actually a contessa.’

* * *

‘Hello, Mother.’

‘Finally. I’ve called three times today. Have you been ignoring me?’ I haven’t but would it be any wonder if I had?

‘No, of course not. I—’

‘Never mind. So, has your friend sorted this mess yet?’ I sigh involuntarily, regretting it immediately.

‘Don’t you sigh at me, Tristan Antony. This is an extremely stressful time for me’ – I keep silent, despite her infuriating tendency to make *everything* about her – ‘and I would appreciate being kept abreast of the latest developments.’

There is no way in hell I am telling her about the agency, but she’ll want some sort of update.

‘It seems that there is no way to circumvent the terms of the will,’ I say, pausing to allow the sharp intake of breath I know will come. It does. ‘But we are considering all angles and, as you know, Ravi is a legal mastermind, so I am in good hands.’

‘This isn’t just about *you*, Tristan,’ she says, clearly clueless as to how ironic she’s being. ‘This is the family fortune at stake.’ She says this as though I’m unaware of this – *and* as though my father didn’t ensure she would be well looked after upon his death several years ago. On that inheritance alone she could live to a hundred and one and still retain the lifestyle to which she is very much accustomed.

‘Yes, Mother,’ I say, hoping to placate her.

‘Now, have you heard anything from Lucinda?’ Lucinda is my father’s only sibling and the mother of my cousins.

‘Er, no, not yet, but Ravi suggests that I meet with her soon.’

‘Why?’ she asks crossly. ‘She’s a conniving trollop and she’s not entitled to one penny of that estate. I suggest you have nothing to do with her. If your father were here, he’d say the same thing.’

I’m not sure that’s entirely true – my father and Lucinda got along reasonably well – and I mute the phone so I can voice my exasperation in private. A few seconds later, I unmute. ‘Mother, I understand—’

‘Do not attempt to placate me. Your father did that – *constantly*. And she may have pulled the wool over his eyes, but believe me, Lucinda will want a slice of the pie and she’ll get her hands on it too if you let her anywhere near this.’

Two things occur to me at once. First, we only buried my grandad a fortnight ago and there is not an inkling of grief in her tone – although, there was not a lot of love lost between the two. And second, now is clearly not the time to explain that if I do find a wife in the next thirty-seven days, I’ll ensure that Evie and Olivia are well looked after.

‘Right,’ I reply benignly.

‘Anyway, I must dash. I’m expected at LLC in forty minutes,’ she says, referring to the London Ladies’ Club, an organisation so exclusive I have no idea where their premises are even though she’s been a member since before I was born.

My mother has taken the role of ‘snobbish upper-class wife’ to an entirely new level.

‘All right, Mother. I’ll speak to you soon.’

‘Ensure that you do.’

She ends the call and almost immediately, I sense the tension in my shoulders falling away. Why do I let her get under my skin? Perhaps because I don’t know any other way.

My phone rings again – she must have forgotten to tell me off for something else.

‘Hello.’

‘Hello, Tristan.’ It’s not my mother, it’s Poppy. ‘Quick question – is your passport up to date?’

‘Er, yes. Why?’

‘Good,’ she says, ignoring my question. ‘How soon can you pack for Greece?’

6

POPPY

‘Hi, Shaz.’

‘Hey! Can you hang on a sec? I need the loo.’ Of course, she does. I’ve never known anyone who needs to pee as often as my best friend.

She puts down her phone, giving me a sideways view of the lounge room in her shared flat. When I landed the job at the agency, I had a huge jump in pay and was able to move out of the place we shared in Islington and into my (lovely) flat in Kew. Shaz, on the other hand, still needs a flatmate, despite working as a psychologist for a prestigious practice on Harley Street. She and her colleague, Alfie, live not far from me in Teddington.

‘Sorry, ’bout that,’ she says, righting the phone. ‘How’s your week gone?’

‘That’s why I’m calling. I’m really sorry, but I need to neg on your work do tomorrow night.’

‘What? No, you promised.’

‘I know. It’s just that I have to go to Greece. I’m leaving first thing.’

‘Greece? As in the country?’

‘No, *Grease* as in the West End musical.’

She frowns dramatically – Shaz experiences every emotion to the nth degree, the poor thing. ‘I don’t want to go by myself,’ she whines.

‘You’ll be fine. Alfie will be there. He’s a good buffer.’

‘Not as good as you. He always lets me drink too much.’

‘Sharon,’ I say, using her full name for effect, ‘you are a grown-arse woman. You can certainly refrain from drinking too much and making a fool of yourself.’

‘Not if you’re not there.’

‘I would be if I could, you know that.’ She pouts and nibbles on her thumbnail. ‘Look, he may not even be there.’

She heaves out a sigh. ‘He RSVPed yesterday.’

‘Oh.’ We’re both quiet a moment – me mentally sticking pins into a Michael-shaped voodoo doll and Shaz... well, she’s probably doing the same. ‘Do *you* have to be there?’ I ask, my last-ditch attempt to save my bestie from a run-in with her horrible ex-boss/ex-boyfriend.

‘I keep telling myself to make an excuse, but I can’t. Not if I want to appear professional and... and like I’m over him.’

I hate Michael for what he did to Shaz – and I hate it even more that she’s not over him. He controlled and manipulated her for the better part of a year and is in the ‘Bucket of Bad Men’ along with my ex, married-but-pretended-not-to-be Malcolm. The only saving grace is that Shaz doesn’t have to see Michael very often, not since he was relocated to Paris to start up the practice’s French office.

And I wish I could ‘cure’ her of the constant longing and sadness but she’s my best friend, not my patient. All I can do is listen and commiserate and bombard her with bestie love.

‘I’m really sorry, lovely.’

‘I know.’ She sniffs and shakes her thick blonde hair – a ‘hair shimmy’ she calls it, her go-to tactic for shaking off a funk. I wish it worked for me but I’m not really a shimmy kind of girl – hair or otherwise. ‘Right,’ she says, her voice now chipper, ‘now tell me why you’re abandoning me in my hour of need to go to Greece.’

I laugh. ‘I’m not abandoning... Never mind. It’s a work trip.’

‘Well, obvs,’ she interjects. Shaz wasn’t in the UK a week before she started adopting British vernacular. ‘So, a scrummy Greek love interest then?’

‘Not quite. Ironically, I’m swapping minding you for minding one of my clients.’

‘Man? Woman? Non-binary?’

‘Man.’

‘Age?’

‘Thirty-four.’

‘Job?’

‘Investment banker.’

‘Ooh, a wanker banker.’ I laugh. She’s not far off the mark there. ‘So, hot or not?’

We often play this game with her patients and my clients. Shaz posits that it’s because we were both farm kids growing up – her in rural Victoria – and we didn’t have a typical adolescence. Not much time for girlish gossip when you’re mucking out the stables and collecting eggs every day after school.

‘Depends. You think Cavill is hot, right?’

‘He looks like Henry Cavill?!’

‘Ish – just as handsome. Maybe more.’

‘Ooh, Pop.’ She wags her brows at me suggestively even though we both know clients are strictly ‘no-go’.

‘He’s not my type.’

‘You mean he isn’t battery-operated.’

‘Ugh, I’m going now.’

‘Wait. At least tell me his name.’

‘It’s Tristan. And I really do have to go. I need to pack.’

‘Send lots of pics.’

‘You know I will,’ I reply – my usual lie. Sharing photos of agency clients is another strict no-no. It’s taboo enough that I tell her about them. ‘And Shaz, you’ll be okay – tomorrow night, I mean.’

She nods, clearly not trusting herself to speak. God, I wish I could be there.

‘Get your hair done after work and wear your green dress. You look amazing in that – it matches your eyes.’

‘Yeah, okay,’ she says wanly.

‘He’ll be so dazzled by how beautiful you are, he’ll be speechless and unable to say anything at all, let alone something mean.’ She rolls her eyes – she doesn’t believe me either. ‘I love you, Shaz. You’ve got this, all right?’

She nods again. ‘Love you too.’

She ends the call and I just know she’s sitting on her sofa blubbering. I fire off a quick text:

I’ll have my phone with me. Text if you need me. Pop x

I can’t say I was happy when Tristan played the ‘you got me into this’ card and insisted I go with him to Greece. I don’t usually accompany my clients on dates. At least I’ve never had to before. Freya once had a client who was so shy Freya was (literally) by her side through every date, coaching her with pats on the arm and whispers. Thank goodness her client was matched on date number three. Imagine being a third wheel for months on end.

But when Tristan and I spoke earlier, he said he was out of his depth – probably so I would take pity on him.

To be fair, Vittoria *is* the type of woman who eats handsome young men for breakfast then snacks on billionaire Baby Boomers for lunch – *if* she were allowing herself a trip to the buffet. She’s what we call in the biz a ‘man-eater’ – not exactly original even if it is accurate. I’m impressed that Tristan’s instincts picked up on that from a few photographs and a brief bio.

And I'm convinced this won't be a match, but my respect for Ursula won out over sense. So, I guess it's fair that I accompany Tristan as I'm only putting him through this as a favour to Ursula. At least I'll get to spend a few nights on a super yacht as compensation, a first for me.

* * *

Tristan

'How did you get her to agree to that?' Ravi asks.

'More importantly,' says Jass, interrupting, 'how did she get *you* to agree to going to Greece. I mean, really, a contessa?' She says the word as though it smells bad.

'She *could* be suitable. Apparently, she's in a similar boat.'

'So to speak,' Jass quips.

'Yes, so to speak,' I reply before taking a sip of wine. I'm seated at the breakfast bar watching my closest friends cook me a bon voyage dinner while drinking their wine. I really don't deserve them.

'And is this super yacht hers or is she just borrowing it?' asks Ravi.

'I believe it belongs to Vittoria, yes.'

'Hear that, Jass? Tristan marries the contessa, *we* get to holiday on a super yacht in the Mediterranean.'

'I think you'll find that it's the Aegean,' I tease.

'You know geography's never been Ravi's strong suit.'

'Useless at pub trivia,' I say playing along.

Ravi stops chopping and points a knife end at us in turn. 'That's quite enough from you two – Ms "Puerto Rico is the fifty-first state of America" and Mr "No, no, I'd stake my life on it, the Eiffel Tower was built in 1889!"'

'I don't sound like that,' I retort.

‘What, like a posh Londoner?’ Jass jibes. ‘Sorry, Tris, but that impression was bang-on.’ As she tips her head in condolence, Ravi bats his eyes at me, his teeth hidden behind a smug smile.

‘I like how you ducked the jibe about Puerto Rico, Jass. Nicely done,’ I say with a golf clap.

‘I still think I’m technically correct,’ she replies with a lift of her chin.

‘You aren’t.’

Ignoring me, she turns to Ravi. ‘You okay to finish on your own, darling? I want to grill Tristan.’

‘Oh no,’ I groan.

‘Come on,’ she beckons me, ‘and bring the bottle.’

Jacinda Sharma may be the only woman I take orders from – well, willingly. She’s the sister I never had but always longed for.

We head to their sofa, a sparse Scandinavian thing with firm seat cushions and a low back. It’s supposed to promote good posture but it’s about as comfortable as a seat in an A&E waiting room. Appropriate really, as I’m about to be examined.

‘So...?’ Jacinda says, scrutinising me from the other end of the sofa and tucking her bare feet beneath her – not a good sign; she’s settling in for the long haul.

‘How long till dinner?’ I call out to Ravi.

‘Around half an hour,’ he replies, his words punctuated by the sizzle of chicken hitting the pan.

‘How much do you already know?’ I ask Jacinda.

‘Everything,’ she says, her tone adding the ‘of course, you idiot’.

I laugh. ‘Well, then what do you need me for?’

‘I want to hear it from you – how you’re *feeling* about it all. You and your grandad were close once, before... well...’ I

swallow the unexpected surge of grief. ‘And not only have you suffered a loss, now you’ve got to put your life on pause to find a *wife*. That’s a lot for anyone to bear.’ The kindness in her eyes is one of the many reasons I adore her.

‘Well, yes, it did all come as a shock. I’m fairly certain I traversed the five stages of grief in a matter of days.’

‘After getting a little hung up on stages one and two,’ Ravi shouts from the kitchen.

‘Thank you for the reminder,’ I shout back.

‘And where are you now?’ Jacinda asks.

‘Grudging acceptance. I could be married within a month,’ I add, mostly to myself. The more I hear the words, the stranger they sound, like when you have to type a simple word like ‘markets’ so often in an end-of-financial-year report, it begins to look like alien hieroglyphics.

‘Ravi says he told you about us – how we met.’

‘Yes.’ I lean closer. ‘And I’m curious, how did it work on your end?’

‘My end?’

‘Yes, as the...’ I struggle for the right word.

‘Woman?’ she teases.

‘No, well, yes... you are a woman, obviously, but... well, Ravi was the client and you were...?’

‘Also the client,’ she finishes, confounding me.

‘But the women I’m being matched with... so they’re clients as well? Poppy called them “potentials”.’

‘As far as I understand,’ says Jacinda, ‘some people do sign on to be put forward as potential matches, but not me. I was a client too. So, while the agency was assembling potential matches for Rav, they were doing the same for me and for similar reasons.’

I cock my head, not fully understanding.

‘I was an unmarried professional Asian woman in my mid-twenties and my parents were in fits,’ she explains. ‘They may have been liberal enough to give me an Anglicised name, but if I hit *thirty* and wasn’t married, it would reflect poorly on them. Never mind that it was four years away.’

‘Oh, I see.’

‘Yes. So suddenly, age twenty-six, I was knee-deep in surprise dinner guests.’

‘Ravi said his parents did the same thing.’

‘Mmm-hmm. And each suitor I turned down made matters worse. My parents, the aunties... all of them constantly in my ear... Didn’t I realise the *urgency*?’ She smiles wryly.

‘I hadn’t known till Ravi said,’ I say. ‘About the pressure to marry, I mean.’

‘Well, unless you’re living it, it’s hard to comprehend. Which is why Ravi referred you to the agency. Because you *are* living it now. You’re on the clock.’

‘It’s not exactly the same, though, is it?’ I ask. ‘For you and Rav, it was cultural, whereas for me, it’s... different.’ I shrug.

‘Yes, that type of pressure from your culture, your own *family*, it can be a lot, but don’t downplay your experience, Tris. It’s not the same as what Ravi and I have been through, but it *is* a lot to handle, especially as it’s all come on at once.’

‘I suppose,’ I acknowledge. ‘Since the reading of Grandad’s will, I’ve certainly felt overwhelmed.’ She leans over to pat my arm, comforting me, and something comes to mind. ‘So, who referred you? To the agency?’

‘My cousin, Aashvi. I don’t think you’ve met her.’ I shake my head. I’ve met a couple of Jacinda’s brothers, but no one else from her family. ‘We’re both the only daughters in our families, so we’ve always been close – like sisters, really. And because she’s a few years older, she’d already run the tick-tock-time-to-get-married gauntlet. I hadn’t realised, though, because when it started happening to me, she’d already been married for several years. Anyway, one night at a family event,

after I'd been cornered by the aunties yet again, Aashvi pulled me aside and told me her secret.' Jacinda smiles, wagging her eyebrows.

'The matchmaking agency.'

'Exactly. Look, give it a chance. For me, that agency was a lifesaver – *and* a life-changer.' Her expression softens as she looks in Ravi's direction. 'They helped me find him.'

She watches Ravi for a long moment, her face radiating love. I doubt I will ever feel that way about someone. I've never even come close and if I am about to embark on a marriage of convenience, any hopes of falling in love will be completely off the table – for at least another two years.

But that's only if I *wanted* to fall in love, which I do not.

‘First time in one of these?’ I ask Tristan, hoping to distract him. He’s had white knuckles since we boarded the plane at Heathrow but his fear of flying – something he failed to disclose on his questionnaire under the ‘fears and phobias’ section – has ratcheted up to eleven since we climbed on board the helicopter.

‘Mmm-hmm,’ he replies tersely. He’s been in a staring competition with the back of the pilot’s head for the past five minutes; at this rate, he’ll win.

‘Not long to go now,’ I say, as cheery as Mary Poppins wanting the medicine to go down. ‘The flight time to Poros is only about forty minutes all up.’

‘I still don’t understand why we couldn’t have taken a boat,’ he says, the most I’ve got out of him in five hours. Waiting in the airport lounge, I tried to make conversation but after the fiftieth monosyllabic reply I gave up, instead absorbing myself in book eight of my favourite crime thriller series.

‘We’ll be on the ground before you know it,’ I say to Tristan, who’s now looking a little pale. I’m channelling my inner psych now – soothing tones and reassurances for the person standing on the precipice of full-blown terror. ‘Isn’t the colour of the water beautiful?’

The pilot glances over his shoulder with a smile – we’re all connected via our headsets. I look across at Tristan but his

increasingly paling face is still set in a perma-frown – resting dick face? – so I try another tack.

‘How’s your stomach? Are you feeling unwell?’ I’d pressed a motion sickness tablet into his hand before we left London, but it may have worn off by now.

He shakes his head.

‘Water?’ I ask, holding out an unopened bottle.

He snatches it from me. ‘Thanks,’ he says gruffly.

It hadn’t occurred to me that this might be the reason he asked me to accompany him to Greece. I’d figured he was anxious about meeting Vittoria but maybe I’ve missed the mark. I had to run his request past Saskia, hoping she’d decline, but she not only approved me coming to Greece, she encouraged it. Maybe Ursula got in her ear – two birds, one stone. Or in this case, two clients, one marriage.

I glance at Tristan’s hands, which are fisted in his lap. Hmm – I was definitely wrong attributing his gruff manner and monosyllabism to first-date jitters. Now that I know he’s just a nervous flier, I decide to leave him and Vittoria to it. I’ll make myself scarce the moment we board the boat – sorry, *super yacht*.

I look out the window again. I haven’t been to Greece in ages, and that was a frugal long weekend with Shaz not long after we arrived in London. EasyJet flights, backpacks and buses, and a hostel on Mykonos that was loud, crowded, and incredible fun. Travelling as a twenty-something ex-pat with my bestie was liberating. I even indulged in a flirtation with Lars, a Swedish farmer. Big hands. I wonder what he’s doing now. That was nearly seven years ago; he’s probably married to some gorgeous blonde Amazon with a handful of kids. And with the size of his hands, that would be a lot of kids.

‘Talk to me.’ Tristan’s command pulls me away from my less-than-wholesome wander down memory lane. It’s also surprising, because from what I’ve gleaned so far, Tristan enjoys conversation about as much as the average person enjoys a toothache.

I meet his eye. ‘What would you like to talk about?’

‘Anything, just... I need a distraction.’

‘Okay. How about a lesson in obscure TV shows from Australia? Where we lived, we only got reception for the ABC – that’s the government’s TV station – but there was something comforting, if not compelling, about *Gardening Australia*. I mean, where else could you learn about transplanting Australian natives?’

‘Er...’

‘So, not interested in Aussie TV?’

‘I was thinking more along the lines of you telling me about yourself.’

‘Oh.’ Another surprise. ‘I don’t usually get asked that in my line of work.’

‘I suppose not.’

‘Well, I’m Australian,’ I say with a smile.

His mouth twitches – not quite a smile, more of a smirk. ‘I gathered,’ he says dryly. ‘Your accent reminds me of Cate Blanchett’s, you know.’

‘I’ll take that as a compliment, because I grew up in rural Tasmania where we have a tendency to speak rather slowly and go up at the end of our sentences, like we’re asking a question, even when we’re not.’ I execute the line with the exact cadence and intonation I’m speaking about and the smirk turns into a smile – albeit a teeny one.

‘So, why London?’ he asks.

Ouch – cutting straight to the quick. *Because a bad man named Malcolm lied about being married, dated me for two years, then ripped my heart out, taking with it any ability I had to romantically love another human being, possibly for the rest of my life.*

‘Because my best friend, Sharon, was moving to London to further her career and I thought “what the hell?” and came with her.’

He watches me, the wheels turning behind those whisky-coloured eyes. ‘That seems like quite a decision to make on a whim.’

‘You’ve caught me. It was more considered than that. Career-wise, it made sense for me as well. Sharon and I were both at the same practice—’

‘Practice?’ he asks, interrupting.

‘We’re psychologists. Or, rather, she still is and now I work at the agency.’

‘Right. That explains a lot.’

‘You say that like I’ve been analysing you.’

‘Haven’t you?’ he asks, making me laugh.

‘I wouldn’t be a very good psych if you’ve already cottoned on to me, now would I?’

He gives me a side-eye and it’s difficult to know whether he’s amused or suspicious. I hope I’ve deflected effectively. I definitely don’t want to give away my secret sauce to a client. Because the truth is, I am a very good agent and a lot of that has to do with my ability to understand people. Not necessarily analyse, though I suppose there are elements of that, but to empathise. Like me being sure that behind Tristan’s dickish personality is a man who’s scared and confused and just wants to do the right thing. *Way* behind – close to the horizon – but there.

‘And what about you?’

‘You know all about me,’ he retorts. ‘I filled in a thousand-page questionnaire. What more could you possibly need to know?’

‘Not *need*, per se. And I’ve already discovered something new about you, just now.’

‘Which is?’

‘An inclination towards the hyperbole.’

‘Ahh, I see. So, it won’t come as a surprise when I tell you that I’ve never been more terrified of anything in my life.’

‘Of riding in a helicopter?’ I ask.

‘Of getting married,’ he replies.

‘Oh, I see.’ It’s all I can think to say. Is he hyperbolising now? Or is this the truth? Here I am deciding that his fears are flying related – not without good reason, mind you – but I may be way off the mark. Perhaps I *won’t* be making myself scarce when we meet the contessa. This may be the most ‘hand-holdy’ case I’ve ever had.

* * *

Tristan

Why did I have to say that? It’s the truth, but now she’s gone all quiet, her expression indecipherable and for the fiftieth time today, I’m on the verge of calling it quits. No contessa, no Scottish choirgirl, no London museum curator... no bloody marriage!

But thirty million pounds...

I know I’m wealthy by most people’s standards. When I meet someone new, they’ll assume everything from my political affiliation to the size of wardrobe. More often than not, they’ll be wrong but I’ll just smile politely – or sometimes not – and get on with my life.

Yes, I like to dress smart and I enjoy ‘the finer things’ as they’re often called but I don’t drive a flashy car, I don’t ‘summer’ at Lake Como, although I *have* been there once and it was rather beautiful (despite the fact that I had to get on a plane). I have a nice flat in a nice part of London and, yes, I pay someone a hundred quid a week to clean it – I do some washing and ironing but that’s only because I don’t have the time to do anything more. I work sixty, seventy, sometimes eighty hours a week, and my social life mostly consists of inviting myself to Ravi and Jacinda’s for home-cooked meals. The few times I have seen someone for more than a casual date here or there, it has ended (as Ravi likes to remind me)

poorly. Some might say disastrously – ‘some’ being the likes of my ex, Rebecca.

I manage money for a living and I already have enough to live on comfortably for the rest of my life if I wanted to retire early, which I do not – I enjoy my work. But *thirty million pounds*? It’s an implausible figure for one person, even if that person is me. What will I *do* with it? Even with generous trusts for my cousins and a sizeable donation to the Avian Wildlife Trust of the Hebrides (and any other organisations that come to mind), in my hands, that sum will grow. I will be – and stay – *very* wealthy.

But at what cost? I’ve never wanted to marry, let alone a *stranger*. I glance at Poppy, whose nose is pressed to the helicopter window. She’s attractive in an unassuming way – straight reddish-brown hair that falls past her shoulders, an appealing face. She dresses well – a little conservative for someone her age, perhaps. Well, *our* age, as I assume we’re of a similar vintage. She’s... well, attractive, just not in an obvious flaunty way.

My phone vibrates in my pocket and I lean back to retrieve it, grateful for the distraction. It seems that any time I allow myself to think of late, I end up in odd mental cul-de-sacs where my shortcomings stand out like road signs. ‘YOU’RE TERRIBLE AT ALL THINGS TO DO WITH WOMEN’ screams this latest one – a bit long for a road sign, but still.

I’ve missed a call – not sure how that happened. Oh, it was Aunt Lucinda. I tap the button to play the voicemail she’s left, pushing aside one half of my headset and pressing the phone to my ear. It’s difficult to hear over the roar of the helicopter blades, but I make out ‘impossible situation’, ‘completely unfair’, and ‘call me immediately’.

‘Everything okay?’ Poppy asks, her voice clear in my left ear.

I drop the phone into my lap and right the headset. ‘Er, yes,’ I reply, glancing at her.

‘You seem a little upset.’

While I may hyperbolise on occasion, ‘upset’ is a gross understatement. Due to the unexpected trip to Greece, I’ve yet to speak to my aunt about any of this. I intend to do the right thing by Evie and Olivia, of course, but Aunt Lucinda doesn’t know that.

‘Just a call from my aunt.’

‘Anything I can do?’

‘Er, no. But I should probably speak with her as soon as we land. And thank you,’ I add, sending a taut smile across the cabin.

‘Arriving in five minutes,’ says our pilot in a strong Greek accent.

For the first time, I properly look out the window. Poppy was right, the colour of the water is quite extraordinary – though it’s not really one colour. Some parts are a deep inky blue and closer to the shore, it’s almost turquoise. The island of Poros appears to be largely unpopulated, with low rugged hills covered by dusty green foliage. We arc around a small ‘pimple’ connected to the rest of the island by a thin strip of land and covered by terracotta-roofed buildings. The waterfront all around this part of the island is populated by densely packed boats of all sizes. We swoop closer and my stomach does a dive as though I’m falling. I grip the edge of the seat.

The clearly skilled pilot eases back on the joystick and for a moment we hover just above a row of enormous yachts. Only a handful have a helipad and I wonder which one is Vittoria’s. We move off to the right and smoothly lower onto the largest of the yachts, a sleek black boat with a dozen satellite dishes atop the helm. We set down without so much as a bump and our pilot flashes us a grin. If I were that skilled at flying a helicopter, I’d be flashing a grin too.

‘Welcome to Poros,’ he says, his teeth glaringly white against his olive complexion.

‘Ready?’ asks Poppy, removing her headset, her smile hopeful. I gulp, then return her question with a sharp nod.

I am very much *not* ready but here we go.

‘This way, please,’ says the guy in the crisp white uniform – seriously, epaulettes, knee socks, the lot. I smirk at Tristan hoping to share a ‘can you believe this?’ moment, but he’s frowning intensely. Of course, he is.

‘You right?’ I ask quietly as we approach the edge of the helipad.

‘In what sense?’ he replies tersely.

I don’t get a chance to answer as the steward, who’s standing at the top of a steep staircase, hurries us with, ‘Ms Dean, Mr Fellows, this way, please,’ in a clipped British accent. ‘Spiros will bring your luggage,’ he adds as I look behind me.

He leads us down to the next level of the yacht where we cross the broad deck and pauses outside a tinted sliding glass door. ‘Madam Vittoria is waiting for you inside.’

‘Thank you,’ I say, adding, ‘And what’s your name?’

He hesitates, then replies, ‘Stewart, madam.’

Stewart! The steward’s name is Stewart!

‘Thank you, Stewart.’ He dips his head in acknowledgement, then leaves us. ‘You ready?’ I ask Tristan.

‘As I’ll ever be,’ he says dryly.

I slide open the door and step inside, my feet sinking into the deep pile of the carpet. Tristan follows, sliding the door closed behind us. My eyes take a moment to adjust after the

bright sunlight out on the deck. Blinking, I scan the opulently decorated salon. Vittoria is there, seated at a bar – posing, really – one of her long legs exposed to her mid-thigh by the split in her slinky dress, its stark white splashed with teal and fuchsia. She’s slender, her hip and collar bones visible under the fabric of her dress and her limbs sharp and spindly. Both hands drip in fat gold rings and at least a dozen bangles adorn each wrist. It’s a miracle those teeny wrists can carry that much weight.

She looks past me, her eyes locking on Tristan, then slinks off the stool, traversing the cabin like a prowling cat.

‘*Ciao, Tristan! Come stai?*’ she purrs. Her black hair falls in a sleek sheet down to the middle of her back, and she’s so heavily made-up, she must be off to a gala after this.

‘Er, hello, Vittoria,’ Tristan replies, his voice strangled.

Her mouth puckers into a flirty pout as she clutches him by his upper arms, planting a smack of a kiss on each cheek and leaving sticky red lip prints. She leans back and runs her eyes salaciously from his face to his toes. Good grief, next thing, she’ll pry open his mouth and inspect his teeth.

I’ve read her bio, done desktop research on her, and Ursula has briefed me that she can be a little, uh, intense, but nothing could have prepared me for how much of a *presence* she is. Lady Gaga could be standing right here and I wouldn’t even notice her.

A waft of her heady perfume tickles my nose and scratches at the back of my throat. I cough discreetly before introducing myself. ‘Hello, I’m Poppy, from the agency – Ursula would have mentioned me.’ I step forward, holding out my hand.

Vittoria looks at it, her face contorting. ‘*Sì*, she did mention you.’ Ignoring my hand, she leans in for polite air kisses beside my ears. ‘*Benvenuta*,’ she adds, only it’s far from a welcoming welcome. I flick a look at Tristan, who’s busy wiping lipstick off his cheeks with the heels of his hands.

‘Thank you,’ I reply to Vittoria, smiling. ‘And your yacht is incredible,’ I add, looking around. Seriously, this salon

could be straight out of The Ritz.

‘Oh, *cara*, this is not my yacht. It belongs to a friend. I recently downsized so I no longer have a helipad.’ She shrugs. ‘I suppose, we all have to make concessions in such a crazy economic climate, *no?*’

‘Oh, absolutely,’ I reply deadpan, pro that I am. ‘I recently switched to an Aldi brand of skincare – almost as good as the name brand but a tenth of the price.’

Vittoria doesn’t seem to catch on that I’m teasing, and she’s obviously confused. Maybe she’s never heard of Aldi.

‘Shall we go to my yacht now?’ she asks rhetorically, tossing her head like a frolicking thoroughbred. She snaps her fingers at a steward (not Stewart), and he hands her a teeny fuchsia handbag from which she produces sunglasses so large they could double as ski goggles. She slips them on, then takes from him a pair of fuchsia sky-high heels (with that tell-tale red sole), letting them dangle elegantly from her fingers.

Standing there expectantly, she waits for the steward to step around her and slide open the door to the deck. I glance at Tristan to gauge his reaction. Is this him amused or horrified? Maybe both.

I take my own (normal sized) sunglasses from where I’ve hooked them over the neckline of my linen dress and follow Vittoria out into the sunshine. In contrast to the salon, the air out here is warm but not hot and it smells briny and fresh – herbaceous almost. It’s invigorating and, although I’ve had to abandon my closest friend in her hour of need, I’m glad to be here.

Vittoria sashays across the deck, expertly steps into her heels, then starts down the gangplank, her heels clacking and hips swaying wildly with each step. God, if I didn’t know better, I’d swear she learnt that from Gina Lollobrigida herself.

‘What have you got me into?’ Tristan asks, his voice low and intense. He’s following so closely, he’ll trip me up if he’s not careful.

‘Give it a chance,’ I whisper over my shoulder. ‘It’s only on paper, remember.’

‘Even so...’

Vittoria stops at the end of the gangplank ‘*Ciao, caro,*’ she calls to someone on up deck, her skinny arm raised as if she’s putting her hand up in class. ‘*Grazie mille.*’

Desperate to see who owns such a yacht, I look up, and a short man with a bulbous stomach and thick head of grey hair comes to the railing of one of the middle decks – seriously, this boat is *huge*. He takes the fat cigar from his mouth and waves it at us. He could be Aristotle Onassis if Aristotle Onassis weren’t deceased.

‘*Andiamo,*’ says Vittoria. We turn left and walk to the slightly smaller yacht next door, this one white. She pauses at the end of a gangplank, where Stewart the steward waits patiently, ready to do her bidding.

‘Welcome to my little home away from home, as you English like to say.’

Without waiting for a response, Vittoria prowls up the gangplank and, again, we follow. And I don’t bother correcting her about the ‘English’ thing; I doubt she cares I’m from Australia. With how she was eyeing up Tristan, it’s clear she hopes I’ll accidentally stumble, flip over the yacht’s railing, and tumble headfirst into the Aegean.

‘Oh, I’ve invited a few friends to dinner,’ she says, stopping again once we get to the deck.

You have to be on your toes when you’re following someone who stops every five seconds. Tristan isn’t, and bumps into me. ‘Sorry,’ he mutters.

Over the top of her sunglasses, Vittoria stares down at our feet distastefully – Tristan in leather sneakers and me in ballet flats – while simultaneously stepping out of her heels. ‘No street shoes on the deck.’ Tristan and I hurriedly follow the order and take off our shoes while Stewart bends down to collect Vittoria’s. Somewhere in the recesses of my mind, I knew this rule, but I’d forgotten. Oops.

‘Drinks on the upper deck at eight,’ Vittoria continues. ‘To see the sunset.’

She turns to Stewart and snaps her fingers at him as if he’s a Pomeranian at a dog show. Seemingly unfazed, he slides open the tinted glass door, she steps through it, and he slides it shut behind her. So, no chance of Vittoria winning the Miss Congeniality Award then. We’ve only just arrived and she’s already ditching us. I get that me being here may not be ideal, but there’s no need to be rude.

‘This way, please,’ Stewart says to us. I’m guessing if I need anything while we’re onboard, Stewart will be my guy. I need to endear myself to him.

‘Beautiful day,’ I say, tipping my head to the sun and inhaling deeply.

‘Indeed, Ms Dean,’ he replies. Excellent – a point for Poppy.

‘Excuse me, are you *enjoying* yourself?’ Tristan asks quietly.

‘What?’

He leans closer as we walk side by side. ‘The question is self-explanatory. You’re *working* yet you seem to be enjoying yourself.’

I stop and turn on him. ‘Hey, you know what? I didn’t want to come to Greece but you *insisted*. So, excuse me if I happen to get a kick out of all this.’ I gesture, my arms wide to encompass the yacht, the island, *Greece*. ‘I also happen to love what I do – even when my client is being...’ I flap my hand at him, using the gesture to convey words like ‘grumpy’, ‘difficult’ and ‘really bloody annoying’.

He harrumphs – the perfect retort if we *were* in a 30s screwball comedy – and steps around me to follow Stewart to our cabins. We enter through a side door, one that looks like it’s from the Starship Enterprise, and are led down a long hallway, the enormous, tinted windows on our right framed every two or three metres (I didn’t bring my tape measure) by stark white uprights. To our left – or rather, *portside* – the

walls are indented with lit recesses, each holding some sort of *objet d'art*. There's no way they stay put when the yacht's moving. Imagine having to pack them all away every time you set sail, then take them out again once you arrived!

At the top of a wide spiral staircase, I peek over the railing. Seriously, how big is this 'downsized' yacht? There are *three* decks below this one. At the centre of the staircase – also three decks high – is a wide steel and glass cylinder filled with wine bottles, each one in its own 'cubby' with its neck on a slight decline. A red display reads '9°C'. Geez, what a wine rack! Sure beats the wrought-iron nine-bottle rack that sits atop my fridge – another bargain from Aldi. Though, I realise now that I should move it. It's definitely more than 9°C up there.

We eventually arrive at our cabins – they're across the hall from each other – but we've been walking since the dawn of time and I have no idea where we are in relation to where we came in. I wonder if Google Maps will have a floorplan.

'Ms Dean, Mr Fellows,' says Stewart, 'your cabins.' He performs the minor miracle of opening both doors at the same time, then steps back. 'As Madam Vittoria said, drinks at eight. Please make your way up to the cockpit.'

The cockpit! I supposed if I'd had more warning, I'd have brushed up on my yacht lingo.

'And that is...?' inquires Tristan.

Stewart signals down the long hallway. 'Back to the centre staircase, up two flights, and head towards the stern.'

'Er, thank you,' Tristan replies. I flash him a smile in solidarity, but he frowns again – I'm *definitely* calling that his resting dick face – then goes into his cabin and closes the door. *Rude!*

Stewart smiles at me in the way that people who work in the service industry do when they want the exchange to be over, and retreats. I've some work to do there. But now it's just me, my ballet flats, and my cabin. I step inside and close the door behind me.

'Oh, wow,' I say.

I drop my shoes to the thick carpet and remove my sunglasses where they've been acting as a headband, but I may need to put them back on again. *Everything* in this room is either shiny or finished in a high gloss – the fixtures, the furniture, the *satın bedspread*. Light bounces around like it's on a trampoline.

My phone announces a personal text message and I retrieve it from my (also normal sized) handbag. It's Shaz.

Help! ☹️

‘Oh my god,’ I say aloud. I sit heavily on the edge of the bed and almost slide right off. ‘Gah!’

Who the hell has satin duvet covers? I right myself, casting my eyes about to take in one garish detail after another right down to the salmon-coloured carpeting. This place is a nightmare. I’m not prone to migraines but having to look at this for the next three days may induce one.

And Vittoria! Unless this is strictly a business arrangement and I *never* have to see her – and I mean *ever* – then this whole trip is a waste of time. Is she even a real person? If I didn’t know better, I’d swear she was an actress playing a role – and badly. *Cara* this and *caro* bloody that. She could be in a Bond film – as the villain.

Tristan Antony Fellows, what the hell have you got yourself into?

It’s a great question and I have no clue how to answer it. Should I go to Poppy right now and tell her this is an enormous mistake, that we’re wasting our time? Three days is a lot when you’re on the clock. Or rather, sitting on a ticking time bomb.

That would explain my dream last night, I think, flashes of it coming back to me. I was wandering around an unfamiliar house while a grandfather clock ticked ominously in the background. When it began to chime – loud ‘bongs’ that reverberated through the house – I sat upright in my bed, gasping and sweating.

Speaking of... I flop backwards and stare up at the also-garish ceiling. With its riblike protrusions, it looks like the inside of a gutted fish. Or that's what comes to mind. I hold up my wrist to check the time: 6.45 p.m.

'Oh, bollocks,' I murmur, sitting up again. I should return Aunt Lucinda's call. I take my phone from my pocket and dial Ravi instead.

'Need rescuing already?' he says, forgoing salutations.

'You have no idea.'

He laughs at me. 'Only you could be whisked away to paradise and find something to complain about.'

'I'll ignore that.'

'So, just called for a chat?'

'Actually, no. Aunt Lucinda called while I was on the helicopter.'

'Helicop—never mind. I shouldn't be surprised. You always were a jammy bastard.'

I don't have the energy to argue with him. 'So, my aunt?'

'Well, what did she want?'

I realise that I've yet to listen to her message properly. 'I'm not sure, but it didn't sound good.'

'Right. Did you phone her before you left London?'

'Er, no. I didn't really have time.'

'Do you want to phone her now? I could be on the call with you as your solicitor.'

I consider the offer. 'Mmm, I think that may come across as somewhat hostile, don't you think?'

'Could do.'

'But I have to speak to her, don't I?'

'Uh, yes, you do. So why don't you put your big boy pants on and get on with it. Look, I've got to step into a late meeting. Phone me later?'

‘All right.’ He ends the call without saying goodbye either and though it’s not the first time – he rarely says either hello or goodbye when he’s in ‘solicitor mode’ – it leaves me feeling somewhat... well, empty.

Staring out the large, tinted window at the yacht next door, my grandad comes to mind – not as he was recently, consumed by dementia, a heinous disease that robs one of almost everything that matters – but Grandad from my childhood, all the way through to a few years ago. He was larger-than-life, a tall, smiling man, who habitually jangled change in his pocket and whistled beautifully with a distinct vibrato as he went about his day.

I’d always been close to him, or as close as two people in my family could be, a family in which affection is seen as a weakness and having actual conversations – *meaningful* ones – is practically unheard of.

I think he may have felt sorry for me when I was a boy, especially as I was the only child in the family for some time. He’d grown up in a large family, but my grandmother, an unkind woman who passed away when I was a child, only conceded to having two children – my father and many years later, Aunt Lucinda. I’ve sometimes wondered if I was the son Grandad wishes he’d had, one who was interested in his collection of fossils and artefacts and tales from his travels. I will need to sort through that collection at some point, perhaps have a museum curator look at them – a concern for another time.

On rare occasions, my parents would leave me with Grandad for an extended period of time – like when it was school holidays and they wanted to go off travelling and couldn’t find anyone else to mind me. They’d drop me off at his house in Surrey, a wonderland for a child like me or, possibly, any child. It’s not surprising that those were some of the best and happiest times of my childhood.

Grandad took me to his gentleman’s club once – a respectable one with wingback chairs and leather-bound books lining the walls. I’d had a lemon squash and he’d shown me off to his friends, bragging about my school report and

sporting wins. I think I was around twelve then. It remains one of my most treasured memories.

I put a pause to reminiscing; it's not making me feel any less empty.

I miss him.

I may be bamboozled by the antiquated terms of his will, and I may wonder for the rest of my life if I ever really knew him, what with his (almost) divine ability to invest in precisely the right companies at exactly the right time, amassing a sizeable fortune and telling no one... But to me, he was *Grandad*, the only adult in my life who ever showed even an ounce of interest in *me* – who I really am, and not who they wanted me to be.

I sit with that notion, letting it wreak its havoc. Grief really does come in waves – and unexpectedly.

‘Right,’ I say, many moments later, ‘enough wallowing.’ Only because I can't bear it any longer.

I snatch up my phone from the bed and send a text message to Aunt Lucinda.

Apologies, Aunt Lucinda, but I am abroad at present. I will speak with you soon. Hoping all is well with you.
Your loving nephew, Tristan.

I regard the message, considering how it will be received, then hit the ‘backspace’ button, erasing the last line. I press ‘send’.

She'll hate it, I know she will. Lucinda hates any kind of shorthanded communication. While only in her early sixties, she is old-fashioned and just... well... *old*. Old in the way that some people are, regardless of their age.

But I just cannot deal with her right now. I'll wait until I'm feeling more myself. For now, I suppose I should unpack and find something suitable for a soiree on a yacht.

* * *

I've chosen casual trousers and a linen shirt, hoping that will be suitable for meeting friends of an over-the-top Italian contessa, one who I may end up marrying. The surreal notion sends shivers down my spine and I wish I could say they were the good kind.

I've also donned leather boat shoes, so I don't have to walk around barefoot. They were tucked away in a back corner of my wardrobe, as I've only worn them a few times before – most recently, sailing with Ravi and Jacinda on one of her father's friend's sailboats. Boating life isn't really my thing.

At five minutes to eight, I step out into the hallway, quietly close my cabin door, and knock on Poppy's. We didn't say anything about arriving at dinner together, but I'm hoping she hasn't gone without me. My nerves have doubled, perhaps tripled, since we boarded the yacht.

The door swings open. 'Hi,' she says brightly. 'I was just about to come get you. Should we go up together?'

'Er, yes.'

'Cool. You look nice,' she says.

'Thank you. So do you.' She's wearing a variation on the linen shift she had on earlier, this one green with ruffles on the shoulders and at the hem.

'Let me just grab...' She crosses her cabin, which is decorated identically to mine – that is, horribly – and collects a small silver handbag from the bed. 'Shall we?' She smiles reassuringly as she closes her cabin door then heads off along the hallway; the smile does its job and the tension in my jaw and shoulders lessens.

Poppy gets to the end of the hallway, pausing at the large circular staircase. 'I don't know why I'm in the lead, I have no idea where I'm going.' She turns to me. 'Do you remember what Stewart the steward said?'

I snigger softly. I don't often spend time with someone who is so open about being confused or lost or who shows any sort of weakness. It's refreshing. 'Er, yes,' I say, stepping

around her. ‘I’m fairly certain we go up two decks, then head towards the stern.’

‘And that’s the back of the boat?’

‘Yes, and the front of the boat is the bow,’ I reply, glancing over my shoulder. ‘Oh... you were joking.’

‘A little.’ She grins and I smile sheepishly, then we proceed up the staircase. But as we ascend, that tension starts to build inside me again. Again, what on *earth* have I got myself into? Thank god Poppy agreed to accompany me on this trip.

We emerge into a large salon with sliding doors that open onto the rear deck. Two long leather sofas form an ‘L’ and an opulent dining table is set for seven. So, only four strangers to make small talk with for the next couple of hours – well, five counting Vittoria. I can only hope the evening won’t go much past ten.

Vittoria calls to us from the deck. ‘*There* you are! Finally.’

What? She told us to arrive at eight. I check my watch: 7.58 p.m. I glance at Poppy, wanting to share my annoyance, but she slips out of her sandals, navigates around me, and calls, ‘*Kalispera*,’ to the assembled group.

‘*Kalispera*,’ replies a man whose shirt is open to the middle of his extremely hairy chest. He smiles at Poppy in a less-than-wholesome way, adding to my annoyance.

‘Introductions,’ says Vittoria. ‘My friends, this is Tristan, the man I told you about.’ I can only imagine what she’s said about me. ‘And *that* is Poppy,’ Vittoria adds, her mouth curled into a snarl. ‘She’s...’

Vittoria doesn’t seem to know how to explain Poppy’s presence, but Poppy appears unfazed.

‘Hello, I’m a friend of Tristan’s,’ she says to the group. Not quite truthful but considering who’s present, she *is* my only ally.

‘So, this is Anne and Peter,’ Vittoria says, gesturing towards the only couple. ‘They are new friends, and also

English,' she says to me in a way that suggests being English equates to being 'lesser'. It's an odd way to treat one's friends, even if they are newly acquired.

Poppy and I exchange hellos with Anne and Peter, and Vittoria moves on, interrupting our polite exchanges about where we're all from.

'This is my dear friend, Carlo,' she says, indicating the hairy man who's still leering at Poppy. 'He is also a guest on my yacht, so you will see lots of him.'

Wonderful.

Carlo stands, scoops up Poppy's hand, and lays a sloppy kiss on it. '*Piacere, tesoro,*' he says.

I can only guess that's Italian for 'you're young enough to be my daughter but I don't care'. He doesn't bother to greet me and I can't say that *I* care.

'And this is my... uh... *cousin,*' says Vittoria, 'Salvatore.'

The way she says 'cousin' seems off, but what can I do but take her at her word? I hardly know the woman. At least he seems friendly enough, rising to shake my hand, then kiss Poppy on each cheek. Although, for some reason, Poppy seems far less receptive to Salvatore's chaste cheek kisses than she is to Carlo's leering. I wonder what's going on.

With a nod from Vittoria, a steward appears at my side with a tray, on which are two glasses of champagne. I take them with thanks and hand one to Poppy.

'Thank you,' she says, her smile returning – and as before, it's a salve for my nerves.

'A toast,' says Vittoria, raising her half-empty glass, 'to old friends and new.' We all echo her words, and she takes a sip, locking eyes with me over the rim of the glass. After she swallows, she runs her tongue over her lower lip and tilts her head coquettishly.

It's difficult, not only to swallow the champagne, which I may just choke on, but also to tear my eyes from hers. This must have been how King Polydectes felt just before he was

turned to stone. Only Vittoria's tractor-beam stare seems far more menacing than a decapitated gorgon's.

POPPY

What the flying fig is Vittoria's husband doing here? And introducing him as her cousin? She *knows* he's not supposed to be part of this. It's way beyond inappropriate. I hope I've done a decent enough job of disguising my shock. If this is going to work, Tristan *cannot* find out who he is.

With a larger group, I'd sneak out and call Ursula for backup. It's the rare occasion that backup is needed but when it is, we're there for each other. I once had to fly to Glasgow, hire a locksmith, and (essentially) break into one of Nasrin's client's homes just to make sure she'd turned the iron off. It was either that, or the client abandoning her holiday with her soon-to-be fiancé to fly home and check herself.

Ursula will be livid about this. Maybe I can get Vittoria alone before dinner, see what she's up to, then slip away and call Ursula. She might be able to organise an 'urgent matter' that Salvatore needs to attend to back in Umbria.

'So, Anne, Peter, you're from Nottingham?' I ask. If I can't tend to the 'situation', I may as well make conversation. Besides, like me and Tristan, they've been left out of the rapid-fire Italian the others are exchanging. Also rude.

'I am,' says Peter. 'I even used to play in Sherwood Forest as a boy, but Anne is a Londoner – born and bred.'

'A Londoner who fell in love with a man from the Midlands,' she says, smiling at him adoringly.

'Too right you did, love,' he replies, locking eyes with her.

Oh, they are adorbs!

‘I was in London for work, you see,’ he says to me. ‘At a trade conference. And who was manning the dual-flush toilet booth?’

Toilets! They met over toilets! I school my expression so I don’t let on how sweet-slash-hilarious that is.

‘I’ll tell you who,’ Peter continues. ‘A beautiful woman with the most beautiful smile I’d ever seen.’

That renowned smile makes another appearance and I must say, Peter is bang on. Anne has a great smile – like Cameron Diaz in the meet-cute scene of a romcom. No wonder Peter fell in love with her at first sight.

‘And how do you know Vittoria?’ asks Tristan. I was getting to that, but I’m pleased he’s joined in. Talking to people may relax him a little. I swear, if his jawline were any tighter, he’d be a shoo-in to play the next Batman.

‘Well!’ says Anne enthusiastically. ‘We’re here on holiday – first time away since before the... well, you know...’ She’s avoiding saying ‘COVID’ as though it’s a swear word. ‘Anyway, we’re staying at a darling little hotel halfway up the hill.’ She motions generally towards the town. ‘And this morning, we were walking along the waterfront and we stopped to admire this beautiful boat—’

‘And before we know it, we’ve been invited onboard for a tour and now here we are for dinner!’ Peter says, finishing the sentence.

Ah, so Vittoria has recruited strangers as buffers. I smile at them kindly. It’s not their fault, they’re being (ab)used as human shields.

‘Er, excuse me, Poppy?’ Tristan says to me. I lift my brows to indicate I’m listening. ‘I’ve just remembered that I need to speak with you... about the—’

I cut him off. ‘Oh, right. Yes, I totally forgot! We should probably do that now.’ I turn to the others – well, Anne and Peter, as the Italians are still absorbed in their conversation.

‘Apologies, but would you mind excusing us just a moment? Just some business we need to tie up.’

‘Business?’ asks Peter.

Oops, I’ve forgotten my own lie about us being friends. I’d blame it on the bubbly, but I’ve barely touched it. ‘Well, sort of. It’s our mutual friend’s fortieth coming up and we’re supposed to—’

‘Order this special gift. It’s time sensitive, you see,’ Tristan says, proffering a decent addition to my lie. ‘And, you see, I – rather, *we* – completely forgot to order it. And it’s time sensitive and—’

Uh-oh, he’s over-explaining and repeating himself. When lying, you must be succinct. I grab him by the arm and pull him inside the salon.

‘We’ll be right back,’ I say, interrupting him. Out of the corner of my eye, Vittoria scowls at me. I’ll deal with *her* later.

Tugging on Tristan’s arm, I lead him through the salon, past the spiral staircase and towards the bow. Halfway down a plushly carpeted hallway, I stop.

‘What on earth is going on?’ he whispers.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Wait... how can you *not*?’

‘Well, I know that Vittoria has invited strangers onto the boat under the guise that they’re her friends.’

‘Yes, exactly. But why?’

‘That’s what I’m not sure about. But I’ll talk to her.’ I really don’t want to raise my bigger concern – Salvatore.

‘This is a mistake, Poppy.’

‘We don’t know that yet. We only just got here.’

‘I know but I have a bad feeling.’

‘She’s a lot, I’ll agree.’

‘That’s an understatement if I’ve ever heard one. Vittoria is —’

‘Is what?’ says a voice.

Our heads swivel in unison. That’s the thing about plush carpeting – it allows intense Italian women to sneak up on their unsuspecting guests.

‘I was about to say that you’re entirely out of my league.’

Well done, Tristan. Top-notch lying, even if it is a little farfetched.

Vittoria grins at him flirtatiously. ‘Oh, Tristan, you flatter me.’

Holy shit, she actually bought it. Tristan flashes me a pained look.

‘Now,’ says Vittoria, slinking closer. She wraps both hands around Tristan’s upper arm, her ruby red nails like talons after a kill. ‘Why don’t you return to the party? We both know you don’t have a gift-giving emergency.’

‘You’re onto us,’ I admit. ‘Tristan was just feeling a little...’

‘Anxious,’ he supplies.

She tuts at him. ‘There is nothing for you to be anxious about, *caro*. Now, come. *Andiamo*.’

As she leads Tristan away, he looks over his shoulder at me, telegraphing, ‘Help!’

I rush to catch up. ‘Vittoria?’

She stops abruptly, pinning me with that distinct glare of hers. ‘*Si?*’

‘I was hoping to have a word, before we head back to the others.’

She huffs impatiently. ‘*Che cos’è?*’

I have basic Italian (at best) but her meaning is clear.

‘In *private*,’ I insist.

Her two faces – disdain for me, unadulterated lust for Tristan – make appearances in quick succession.

‘*Scusami, caro,*’ she purrs at him. *Gag.*

Tristan looks at me helplessly.

‘It’ll just take a sec,’ I say.

He leaves reluctantly and as soon as he’s out of earshot, I turn on Vittoria. ‘Why is Salvatore here?’

She regards me for a moment, her thoughts playing out on her face. ‘He wanted to meet his successor,’ she says eventually.

‘What? He knows about your plan to divorce him?’

‘Of course.’

‘Don’t say “of course” as though it’s obvious. Ursula was clear – we need to be discreet about your current marital status, right up until the last minute. Him being here could risk the whole operation.’

Vittoria shrugs and my fingers twitch. I’d love nothing more than to flick her on the end of the nose to wipe that smug smile off her face.

‘You need to send him away,’ I say instead.

‘No,’ she says adamantly. ‘Salvatore is my husband and I want him here.’ Geez, Ursula must have got an enormous bonus for working with Vittoria. She’s a total pain in the arse. Come to think of it, I hope *I* get an enormous bonus, but right now, I need to draw some clear boundaries. Vittoria has already gone (way) off-piste and we’ve only just arrived.

‘If Salvatore stays, there’s absolutely *no* mention that you’re already married.’

If Tristan does agree to marry Vittoria, it’s my responsibility to fill him in on the machinations but, for the moment, there’s no need to cause him further stress. He already thinks this is a mistake – and so far, I’m of the same opinion – but he may come around.

‘*Capisci?*’ I ask, glaring back at her. It’s a useful Italian word to have under my belt, especially in times like this.

Her eyes narrow but I am very good at this and she will not win a staring – rather, a *glaring* – contest.

‘Okay, *bene*,’ she concedes. ‘You drive a hard bargain.’

‘This is not a *bargain*, Vittoria. This is a sensitive situation in which my client’s needs are my number one priority. If you attempt to derail this arrangement further, we will depart first thing in the morning. No matter what you may think of me, I still need to be convinced that you are a viable option for Tristan, and so far, I’m not. This isn’t a game. Do you understand?’

She frowns, then looks away. ‘*Sì*,’ she replies with the petulance of a pissed-off teenager.

‘Good. Now, I need to make a brief call.’ When she doesn’t move, I add, ‘I’ll see you there in a few minutes.’

My dismissal surprises her, I can tell, and she spins with a dramatic hair toss, then leaves, a haughty sniff marking her exit. I permit myself an eye roll. And I’d prepared for *Tristan* to be the challenging one! It’s a good thing I came.

I take out my phone to update Ursula and there’s a new message from Shaz:

Managed 15 min then came home ☹️ drowning sorrows in cheap plonk and Rolos

Oh, Shaz. I called her earlier – as soon as I read her last message – and I *thought* I’d talked her down (off the ledge) then up (to build her confidence). But it was obviously just bravado. And where was (bloody) Alfie in all this? He’s her friend too – couldn’t he have looked out for her?

I stare at the message a moment longer, torn. Do I call her again, risking a lengthy conversation, or just send a message? I really should get back to Tristan – who knows what Vittoria’s up to now. I tap out a quick reply.

Sorry lovely. Hang in there. Call you later. Px

I tap ‘send’, guilt and regret twisting into a helix then ripping through me. As an agent, I’ve facilitated dozens of

HEAs, but I can't seem to help my closest friend navigate the troubled waters of her tempestuous love life. I sigh.

I scroll to my message threads, find the one with Ursula, and send a message.

I need to speak to you. Vittoria playing games. Salvatore here. Match not looking likely. Please call me first thing.

There's not much more I can do tonight, other than rejoin the others and run interference for Tristan. I hope tzatziki is on the menu, or calamari, or lamb. I *love* Greek food and, so far, it appears to be the only thing to look forward to.

I head back down the hallway and, as I'm slipping my phone into my clutch, it beeps with a message. It's Ursula.

I'll phone at 9 a.m. London time.

Good. Reinforcements incoming.

TRISTAN

As an international investment banker, I've met all sorts of people, many of whom are difficult to deal with – narcissistic megalomaniacs with egos the size of Big Ben, spoilt children of the titled (and entitled), and once a Hollywood actor who I offloaded as soon as I realised how troublesome it would be to manage his portfolio.

Tonight was the first time I've been utterly out of my depth. I'm surprised I uttered a coherent sentence all evening. Actually, I'm not certain that I did.

I close my cabin door and slump against it, resisting the urge to bang my head repeatedly until any of this begins to make sense. How on earth have I ended up on a super yacht in the Aegean trawling for a wife?

'Oh, Grandad, you old bugger,' I mutter to myself.

There's a tap at the door, which startles me. Surely, Vittoria is not so brazen she'd just show up at my door? It's become apparent that she's interested in far more than a marriage on paper.

'Hello?' I call, rounding on the door and eyeing it cautiously.

'It's me.'

I expel a relieved sigh and open the door to Poppy.

'Hi,' she says.

'Hello.'

‘Just checking how you are.’

‘Oh, I see.’ I’m conflicted. Should I be inviting her in? What’s appropriate in this situation?

‘So, how are you?’

‘Er, did you want to come in?’ For a moment, she looks horrified. ‘Sorry, I... I’m not sure what the protocol is here.’

‘No worries,’ she replies. ‘But probably best if I don’t. Besides, I snagged this from the bar.’ From behind her back, she produces a bottle of Greek brandy – Metaxa Private Reserve. ‘*And*,’ she says, raising her eyebrows, ‘there’s no one on the flybridge.’

‘The flybridge?’

‘The top deck of the boat.’

‘Oh.’ She looks at me expectantly. ‘Oh! Sorry, you’re suggesting we go up together.’

‘I figured you might need to debrief.’

‘You have no idea,’ I reply.

‘I have some idea,’ she says, smirking slightly. I forgot she does this for a living. ‘Come on.’ She cocks her head. ‘I promise not to get us lost.’

I join her, closing my cabin door behind me, then follow her along the hallway, up the spiral staircase, down another hallway, out a side door, along an exterior walkway, and up a steep set of stairs. How she found the way is a mystery, especially considering how ‘geographically challenged’ she seemed earlier.

We emerge onto an enormous deck that looks out over the bustling marina and gives us direct views into the yachts either side. It’s just gone 11 p.m. and, of the two dozen yachts in sight, this appears to be the only one that isn’t hosting a raucous party. The dull thud of dance music permeates the air, several sets of drumbeats competing with each other. I cast my eyes about. The flybridge has several large, padded areas, which I assume are for sunning oneself, a long bar, several

built-in sofas, and a hot tub. Oh! Surely, Poppy is not suggesting...?

She laughs. ‘Don’t worry, I didn’t invite you up here for the hot tub.’

‘Oh, I... sorry, why do you say that?’

‘Because as soon as you clapped eyes on it, you went like this.’ Poppy makes a face that wouldn’t be out of place in a horror film. I chuckle to myself.

‘I can promise you, Tristan, yours and mine is strictly a professional relationship. Definitely no hot tubs on our horizon.’

While I take that in, moderately comforted, Poppy forages behind the bar, then holds up a pair of brandy snifters. ‘Success!’ she declares, grinning at me.

‘Well done you,’ I say, and her grin widens.

‘Grab a seat over there,’ she says nodding towards one of the sofas, ‘and I’ll bring the drinks over.’ When she joins me, she hands me a generous pour of the brandy.

‘Cheers, big ears,’ she says, leaning forward with her glass out. I touch mine to hers and she laughs again. *At* me, I’m positive. ‘It’s just a saying. Your ears are perfectly normal sized.’

‘I’m so glad I amuse you.’

‘I’m sorry. I shouldn’t laugh but you do realise you’re an open book, right?’

‘How so?’

‘Let’s just say, it’s obvious you don’t play much poker. Or if you do, you lose.’

‘I don’t play poker, no.’ She smiles knowingly and sips her brandy. I take a sip of mine and for the first time tonight, I actually *taste* something. It’s delicious. ‘So, how did you know about...’ I wave my hand to indicate the deserted deck.

‘I charmed Stewart – you know, the steward who showed us to our cabins?’

‘Oh, right.’ I attempt to conjure an image of his face but come up empty. ‘To be honest, everything has been a blur since we arrived. I barely remember what we ate for dinner.’

‘Well, that’s a shame. The food was incredible,’ she says with a smile. ‘Anyway, I asked Stewart to show me someplace quiet and he led me up here.’ She looks around approvingly. ‘Have you been on a yacht before?’

‘No. Have you?’ I ask, for want of something more interesting to say.

‘A couple of times.’

‘Oh, but I thought... You were a little lost before, when we were heading to dinner.’

She smiles. ‘Okay, you got me. I’ve been on *day cruisers* before – they’re *much* smaller. And, full confession,’ she says, her hand held aloft, ‘until today I had no idea what a cockpit or a flybridge even were.’

We exchange smiles, which sets me further at ease. Even confessing a white lie is testament to her lack of guile, and her openness gives me the confidence to broach my most immediate concern.

‘Poppy, you’re the professional here, how do *you* think this is going? I mean...’ I look about, ensuring we’re alone, then lower my voice, just in case. ‘Vittoria, she seems... you know...?’

God, why can’t I complete an entire sentence? I sound like a blithering idiot.

‘She fancies you,’ Poppy says matter-of-factly.

‘Well, yes,’ I reply, grateful (again) for her honesty.

She nods. ‘It’s an issue, I agree, but I’m on it. I spoke with her earlier *and* I’ll be conferring with Ursula in the morning. You remember my colleague?’ I nod. There is no forgetting someone I met less than a week ago, *especially* someone like Ursula.

‘Also, we’ve yet to sit down with Vittoria – properly, I mean – to discuss the arrangement.’

‘Right.’

‘Tristan?’ she says, swirling the brandy in her glass, seemingly transfixed by the dark liquid.

‘Yes?’

‘I’m very glad I came.’ She lifts her gaze to mine.

‘Me too,’ I say.

‘I had no idea Vittoria would be so challenging.’

Oh, I see, I think, somewhat deflated.

‘I mean, imagine how this would have gone if we’d sent you here on your own,’ she adds. ‘Pffft.’ She shakes her head and takes another sip. I do too, the brandy warming my insides. ‘So, when I talk to Ursula, I’ll ask her to call Vittoria and help me get things back on track. Salvatore needs to go for a start,’ she says as though to herself.

‘He’s a bit odd, don’t you think?’

‘That’s one way of putting it.’

‘And he appeared to be particularly interested in *me* – over dinner, I mean. Lots of questions.’

‘Yes, I can’t say I was fond of the seating arrangements,’ Poppy murmurs.

While I’d been up one end of the long table with Vittoria and Salvatore, Poppy had been stuck with Carlo down the other end. And poor Anne and Peter, in between, were the oft-neglected buffers. I attempted to draw them into conversation but kept getting roped into answering a never-ending stream of questions from Salvatore.

‘Poppy?’ I ask.

‘Yes.’

‘I’m curious. Vittoria,’ I whisper, ‘she’s been provided with my biography, yes?’

‘An abridged version – like what we gave to you about her. Why do you ask?’

‘The questions at dinner... it was a bit like an inquisition and although it was Salvatore asking most of them, Vittoria seemed particularly interested in my responses.’

‘More so than a woman who might become your wife?’

‘Mmm, an astute point.’ I reflect for a moment. ‘Perhaps I’m just overwhelmed. This is...’ I shake my head.

‘Hey, don’t be so hard on yourself. It’s a lot, which is another reason I’m glad I came. I think I misjudged you.’

‘How so?’ I ask, my gaze fixed to hers.

‘Well, at our first meeting, *and* our second – actually, even just today after we arrived in Poros – you were... hmm, let’s call it “self-assured”.’

I laugh. ‘That’s one way of putting it.’

‘Do you prefer “arrogant arse”?’

I cease laughing. ‘Oh.’

‘*Anyway*, what I meant is that seeing you on the helicopter today, how scared you were’ – I wince, embarrassed that she saw me like that, that *anyone* saw me like that – ‘and talking with you now, it’s a reminder that each client is a complex individual and some behaviours can be attributed to the stressfulness of the situation.’

‘Is that a compliment?’

‘Ah, no,’ she replies with a laugh. ‘I mean, you can take it as one if you truly *are* a narcissist. Do you *want* credit for my self-discovery?’

‘I didn’t mean...’ I heave out a breath, looking into my glass. ‘I wish I could close my eyes and wake up in a month’s time with all this sorted.’

‘Sorry,’ she says after a moment. ‘I was only teasing.’

‘So,’ I say, changing the subject. ‘How was dinner up the other end of the table? Carlo seems like a bit of a character.’

She rolls her eyes. ‘Carlo is a creep with roving eyes and hands.’

‘I did notice him leering at you.’

‘Mmm.’

‘You did well to fend him off without resorting to violence,’ I say.

‘Well,’ she says, holding up her left hand and wiggling her fingers. ‘The one time he was brazen enough to lay his hand on my leg, I dug my nails into it.’

‘Really?’

‘Mmm-hmm. I’m surprised you didn’t hear him yelp.’ I shake my head. ‘Anyway, he must have got the hint. That’s when he turned his attentions on poor Anne.’

‘I felt sorry for them.’

‘Anne and Peter?’ she asks. ‘Yeah, me too. But I suspect they’ll be dining out on their experience for years.’ She adopts a British accent. ‘Peter, what about the time we were invited aboard that enormous yacht? Do you remember that bizarre dinner with those odd people?’

We share a smile.

‘So, what’s to be done about him? Carlo, I mean.’

‘Maybe he’ll fall overboard,’ she replies with a smirk.

‘You don’t need me to... er... step in, do you? As a proxy?’

Her eyes widen in amusement. ‘A proxy? For *whom*?’

I instantly feel foolish. Poppy is obviously capable of taking care of herself, regardless of whether she has a significant other. Still, I forge ahead, shoving my foot further into my mouth. ‘Er, a boyfriend or—’

‘There’s no one to be a proxy for – and even if there were, I’m good, thanks,’ she replies, rightly taking me to task. I’m formulating an appropriate apology when she tips her head back and drinks the rest of her brandy. ‘Top up?’ She nods towards my glass.

‘Yes, all right, then.’ I down the rest of mine and hand her the glass, frustrated that the moment for an apology has passed.

As Poppy returns to the bar and tops us up, I direct my attention to the yacht we landed on earlier today. Surprisingly, the older gentleman who Vittoria thanked – the yacht’s owner, I presume – appears to be watching us from his flybridge. I wave, but he doesn’t acknowledge it.

‘It really is close quarters, huh?’ asks Poppy, handing me my glass.

‘You’d think they’d rather be moored offshore somewhere, have some privacy,’ I reply. ‘Not crammed in cheek by jowl.’

‘I think that’s the whole point. See and be seen.’

‘Mmm, you may be right. I can’t imagine anything worse myself,’ I say. ‘I don’t really care for people en masse.’

She laughs. ‘So you’re not going to rush out and buy a yacht then? Fill it with hangers-on and wannabes?’

‘Er, no. Besides, I imagine these go for a little more than what I’d be able to spend. If I were to buy a yacht, it would be considerably smaller.’

‘That would be nicer, though, don’t you think? A smallish boat, one you could sail around the islands in – sleeps four, maybe six. Would be a lovely holiday – close friends only.’

‘Mmm,’ I say, ‘it does sound rather nice. I’ve never considered owning a boat before but if all this works out, then perhaps... Ravi and Jacinda would like it, I think, sailing about.’

‘You and Ravi are close,’ she states.

‘Yes. We’ve been friends since school. We were both boarders, you see, and... well, I’ve never been particularly good at making friends, even then, but Ravi sort of decided we’d be friends and’ – I shrug – ‘I just went along with it. And after school, we both attended Oxford, which solidified our friendship. We’re like brothers, I suppose – though neither of

us has that frame of reference. He's also an only child. Anyway, we're quite different but it works.'

'You complement each other.'

'Well, yes. He's more outgoing than I am *and* more measured.' The heft of those words hits hard. 'When I discovered the terms of Grandad's will... it was a lot to take on all at once, particularly off the back of losing him.'

'I'm really sorry,' she says, 'about your grandad.'

My eyes prick with tears, but I blink them away. 'In truth, we lost him a while ago. Dementia,' I add by way of explanation.

'That's... that must have been very difficult.'

I nod, not trusting my voice, and finish my drink. 'I should head off to bed,' I say, standing. No point in wallowing. That's not going to get me anywhere. 'Thank you for the brandy – and the talk.'

'No worries.' I start towards the stairs. 'Tristan?' I look over my shoulder. 'I'll sort it out, okay?'

I nod at her. 'Thank you.'

'You okay to find your way back?' she asks.

I smile. 'I think so, yes.'

'Okay. Good night.'

'Good night, Poppy.'

I do find my way and am soon ensconced in my cabin. My phone is on the bed where I left it, indicating that a voicemail has been left since I went upstairs. Hoping it's Ravi, I play the message.

'Tristan, it's your Aunt Lucinda. My solicitor wants to meet you. He's sending information about a meeting. On video. Nine o'clock tomorrow morning. I will be present, and I expect you to be.' Aunt Lucinda's voice cuts out and I sit on the bed heavily. If only I *could* skip ahead to the day after my birthday and let the fates decide all this.

POPPY

‘On a scale of one to disaster, what’s the status?’ asks Ursula.

I’m on one of the sunning pads up on the bow of the boat, enjoying the morning sunshine along with a perfectly brewed cup of tea that Stewart made me. I’ve won him over, aided by a lengthy chat this morning about how he came to be chief steward on Vittoria’s yacht. It’s my experience that people like to talk about themselves.

‘Let’s see...’ I say, ‘Vittoria is all over Tristan like a rash, her *husband* is not only aboard, he’s grilling Tristan like he’s interviewing him to work at MI6, Vittoria engaged *strangers* to play the part of her friends, and her real friend, Carlo, is a leering lout who can’t keep his hands to himself. Tristan is close to pulling the pin and I’m close to agreeing with him. So... what’s that? An eight?’

‘Oh dear,’ Ursula replies, as succinct as ever. ‘Right. First, Salvatore must go.’

‘I agree.’

‘Leave that with me. I’ll also press the need for Carlo to make himself scarce.’

‘Permission to push him overboard, captain?’

She chuckles at that, one of the reasons I adore her. We may be skirting crisis mode, but Ursula has retained her good humour.

‘And what about these “friends” of hers?’

‘They were only here for dinner – a lovely couple. Poor things. They had no idea what they’d got themselves into.’

‘Mmm. A good story to dine out on, at least.’

‘Exactly what I said to Tristan.’

‘And how is he this morning?’

‘Actually, I haven’t seen him yet. I messaged him earlier and he said he had a family matter to attend to.’

‘I see. And otherwise?’

‘Like a fish out of water. Ironic, really, considering we’re surrounded by the stuff.’

‘So, he’s dropped the cantankerous façade?’

‘It seems so. He’s been rather pleasant – surprising considering everything that’s going on.’

‘There’s that, at least. How about I telephone Vittoria as soon as we wrap up here?’

‘Uhhh...’

‘Do you foresee a problem with that?’

‘Only that a steward told me she doesn’t typically rouse before two – as in two in the *afternoon*.’

Ursula sighs. ‘Oh right, of course, I forgot about that.’ Paper rustles in the background. ‘It’s somewhere in my notes...’

Ursula has never quite embraced the move to digital records. Me, I rarely touch paper at work – other than the paper questionnaires and legal documents, which are then digitised by our support team.

‘It’s okay. How about I message you as soon as she’s up?’ I suggest.

‘An ambush. Excellent idea. You have to keep on top of clients like Vittoria,’ she says. I take the comment for what it is – advice, rather than condescension. I’ve learnt a great deal from Ursula over the years. ‘Oh, Poppy, I should have asked. Did you want to sit in? On the call, I mean?’

It would be an excellent opportunity to learn more from one of the best in the biz, but considering the precariousness of the situation, I doubt Vittoria would appreciate a witness to her being told off. And I have no doubt that will be Ursula's strategy. If ever a client needed us more than we needed their clientele...

'Probably best that I sit this one out,' I reply.

'Mmm, perhaps you're right.'

'And how is everything else? What about the leak? Any news?' I ask.

The group chat has been worryingly devoid of posts – other than Nasrin telling us how she snagged some bargain swimmers in the summer sales – so I suspect our progress has stalled.

'Nothing I'm afraid. But not to worry,' she says benignly, which makes me worry. 'Anyway, I'll wait to hear from you. And Poppy?'

'Yes?'

'Well done so far.' From many other people, her remark could come off as patronising. But it doesn't.

'Thank you,' I reply brightly. She ends the call without saying goodbye, like she does every time.

* * *

Tristan

'Ready?' Ravi asks.

'I'm not sure I ever will be.'

'Just remember, let me do the talking – unless I specifically throw to you.'

'Right.'

'It's time. Let's join the call. I'll see you in a bit.'

He ends our call and I navigate to the email Aunt Lucinda's solicitor sent earlier and tap on the link to the video conference. I'm so uneasy it takes three goes, but seconds later I'm connected and staring at a split screen of Aunt Lucinda in a conference room with her solicitor and Ravi in his office. I adjust my posture, sitting up straighter.

'Good morning, Aunt Lucinda,' I say.

Ravi's lips disappear between his teeth. Bollocks, I've already ignored his advice.

'Tristan, this is my solicitor, Aurelius Gooch.'

I'm not sure why she's introducing him as though we don't all know who each other is. I refrain from responding, retroactively following Ravi's instructions and unsurprisingly, Mr Gooch commences without so much as a salutation.

'Mr Fellows, simply put, I am advising you that your aunt intends to contest the terms of the will, specifically that her daughters, the Misses Fellows-Wren, have been omitted from their grandfather's bequeathment.'

All this I know, of course, but I remain silent, allowing Ravi to counter.

'Mr Gooch, Mrs Fellows-Wren, *you* should be advised that you have no legal standing to contest this will.' They both go to speak but Ravi holds up a hand and proceeds undeterred. 'That said, Mr Fellows is prepared to set up a generous trust for each of the Misses Fellows-Wren, coming into effect on their respective thirtieth birthdays.'

I hold my breath, hoping the news will take the wind out of Aunt Lucinda's sails, obliterating all this legal puffery. Securing her daughters' futures without having to undergo legal proceedings? Any reasonable person would accept and move on.

Alas, reason and my aunt seem to be unacquainted. 'Generous trusts? Don't be absurd. They are rightful heirs to my father's fortune, *as am I*,' she adds, her voice venomous. 'At minimum, my daughters *and I* should receive three-quarters of the estate. *That* is our generous offer to you,

nephew. Should you fight us on this, I will ensure that you are cut entirely from the will. You won't see one penny.'

She's vehement, but grossly naïve. That's not how these things work and if she's not careful, the whole estate will be tied up in the courts for years, dwindling through lack of stewardship, with the proceedings devouring our respective coffers. Her solicitor will know this and I catch him placing a hand on her forearm, as if to shut her up. She glares at him, shaking him off.

'Mr Gooch,' says Ravi, smiling amicably, 'how about I send over the details and you can confer with your client?'

Aunt Lucinda's mouth gapes like a goldfish at feeding time.

'Yes, all right,' says Mr Gooch. 'By end of day.'

He ends the call and now I'm staring at a black screen. Ravi's photo appears and I accept the video call.

'What do you think?' I ask. My stomach gurgles, declaring that I've been too anxious to eat anything this morning.

'Was that your stomach?' he asks with a chuckle.

'Rav!'

'It went as well as it could have. She's got no legal standing and hopefully her solicitor will talk her around.' I sigh audibly. 'You weren't *really* worried about this aspect, were you, Tris? I've told you, I've got this part. You just get married in time.'

'All right.'

'And how's that going, by the way? Should Jass and I book our flights to Greece?'

'For what?'

'The wedding!'

'First off, Vittoria was an unlikely candidate to begin with but now...' I shake my head. 'And even if it does work out, I doubt we'll get married here in Greece. It'll be in London or wherever it is she lives – somewhere in Italy.'

‘You don’t know where she lives?’

‘I know her estate is in Umbria and that the closest village is called Paciano but beyond that, no. I did just meet the woman.’

‘All right, sorry. No need to get your knickers in a twist. Look, leave all this to me and you get on with the business of...’ He waves his hand.

‘Finding a wife.’

‘Yes, that. Talk to you later.’

I flop backwards onto my bed and stare at the ceiling, something I’ve never done before yesterday. I find it rather satisfying, as though I’m supplicating to the gods, appealing for divine intervention. Vittoria’s Italian, but we’re in Greece, so does that make this Jupiter’s domain or Zeus’?

‘Whoever’s listening,’ I say to the empty room, feeling mildly foolish, ‘please help me out of this mess before time runs out.’

There’s no answer, so I go in search of something to eat.

* * *

Poppy

‘Hello, you. How are you faring this fine morning?’ Tristan looks a little peaky and I’d describe his overall demeanour as this side of grouchy.

‘Not terrible,’ he replies, making me laugh.

‘English people are masters of understatement, aren’t they?’ I quip, which makes *him* laugh, albeit softly. He sits opposite me at the outdoor table I’ve adopted as my unofficial office, his eyes shielded behind a pair of aviators. ‘Hungry?’

‘Murderously so.’

‘Oh, *murderously*. I said understatement not hyperbole – one of your contradictions, I guess,’ I tease. His brows knit together. ‘Most people are a mass of contradictions,’ I explain. His eyebrows stay put. ‘Never mind.’ I peer into the salon, catching (my new best friend) Stewart’s eye, and he appears at my side almost immediately. ‘Hi.’

‘Yes, Ms Dean?’ I like him so much, I don’t even mind that he refuses to call me ‘Poppy’.

‘Mr Fellows here is ravenous. Are you able to assist?’

‘Of course,’ he replies with a dip of his head. ‘What’s your preference, sir?’

‘Oh,’ says Tristan, surprised, ‘could I possibly have an egg white omelette with whatever vegetables are on offer? And coffee, please. Black,’ he adds. Stewart dips his head again and disappears inside.

‘We’re in Greece, you know?’

‘Sorry, and...?’

‘And, when in Rome...’ I raise my eyebrows at him.

‘Oh.’ He frowns, obviously second-guessing himself. ‘Is there something traditionally Greek I should have asked for?’

‘Mmm-hmm. Black coffee is bang-on. Just needed to add a cigarette.’

He snorts out a breath from his nose – presumably that’s a laugh.

‘Is that what you had?’ he asks.

‘Nah. Berries and yogurt. Total tourist.’

‘Right.’

‘So,’ I say, changing the topic, ‘I’ve spoken to Ursula and we have a plan.’

‘Oh good.’

‘We can go inside if you like.’

‘Why do you say that?’ he asks.

‘You’re squinting behind your sunglasses.’

‘I’m facing the sun.’

‘Exactly. So, we can go inside, or you could come over here.’

He moves next to me. ‘Better?’ he asks.

‘I don’t know. You were the one with the sun in your eyes.’

‘Can we *not* do this this morning? Please?’

‘Do what?’ I ask.

‘Banter,’ he replies. I’ll admit, it stings a little.

‘Your coffee, sir.’ Stewart places a tiny coffee cup in front of Tristan and retreats.

‘What?’ I ask. ‘You’re just staring at it.’

He picks up a spoon and stirs the viscous coffee, then looks at me, grimacing.

‘It’s Greek coffee,’ I say.

‘Are these coffee grounds?’ he asks, dredging the bottom of the cup and lifting his teaspoon to show me.

‘It’s Greek coffee,’ I repeat. He stares at it without drinking. ‘Do you want something else? A cappuccino perhaps? With chocolate sprinkles?’

‘I don’t dri—oh, you were joking.’ He takes a sip, probably just to spite me, and grimaces as he swallows.

‘So, do you want to hear the plan?’

He nods, staring out at the town where rivers of tourists scuttle in and out of souvenir shops and pack into outdoor cafés.

‘Apparently, Vittoria won’t emerge before the early afternoon’ – his lips straighten into a line – ‘but when she does, Ursula is going to give her a serve, lay down the law, tell her what for, and myriad other clichés.’ He gives me the side-eye.

‘*And* she’s going to insist that Vittoria get rid of Salvatore and Carlo. Well, not do away with them or anything – we’re not in the business of murder – just ask them to leave. And *then*, you and I will sit down with her and discuss the arrangement like grown-ups.’

He sighs.

‘Are you going to be in a strop all day or does it typically go away after you’re caffeinated?’

‘I’m going to ignore that question.’

I pin him with my ‘I’m not taking any of your nonsense’ look. ‘Yes, all right, it tends to diminish after I’m caffeinated,’ he admits.

‘Good.’

‘Yes, *good*,’ he says louder than warranted. My god, he’s annoying. How have we reverted to *this* when last night we seemed to reach an accord? ‘So, what are we supposed to do until this afternoon?’ he asks tersely.

‘It’s a super yacht, Tristan. And we’re in *Greece!*’ I add, extending both arms towards the island. ‘There are a million things to do.’

‘What are *you* doing?’ he asks.

Not babysitting my grumpy client, I think, knowing from his hopeful expression that he wants to tag along. ‘I’m going for a walk.’

‘A walk?’

‘Well, a hike really, up there.’ I point to the hill that overlooks this part of the island. ‘There’s an old windmill on top of the hill that’s around four hundred years old but the real drawcard is the view. It’s supposed to be amazing.’

He regards me for a moment.

‘Did you want to come?’ I ask, hoping he’ll say no.

‘I suppose it’s better than facing that,’ he replies tartly, indicating the throngs of tourists along the waterfront.

‘Oh wow, what a compliment – thank you so very much,’ I say. His mouth quirks. ‘Careful now, don’t go ruining a perfectly good bad mood with a smile!’ I tease and it breaks across his face.

‘You’re quite cheerful in the morning, aren’t you?’ he asks, the strain between us easing.

‘Well, yeah. But it’s hardly morning any more.’

He flicks his wrist, revealing a rather fancy analogue watch, one with several dials and doohickies. ‘It’s eleven twenty-two – *a.m.*’

‘Exactly. My dad would have ploughed a whole field by now and be heading in for his lunch.’ This is partially a lie, as the family farm is an orchard (with various animals we mostly kept as pets), but Tristan doesn’t know that.

‘Ploughed a field?’

I point to myself. ‘Farmgirl.’

His head tilts. ‘You’re very unusual,’ he says, but not unkindly.

‘Thank you,’ I say, taking it as a compliment.

Stewart arrives with Tristan’s (boring) egg white omelette. ‘Perfect timing, thank you, Stewart.’ He winks at me discreetly and disappears back inside. ‘Now eat up and meet me at the gangplank in fifteen minutes.’

I leave Tristan to his breakfast and go put on a pair of trainers. It’s time to explore the island and not even Mr Impossible can dull my excitement!

TRISTAN

The sun warms my back as we ascend a steep, narrow road lined with whitewashed and stone-fronted homes, balconies and unruly bougainvillea hovering precariously over our heads. When the road morphs into steps, I have to pick up the pace to match Poppy's, elevating my heart rate. Good thing too, as it's now been several days since I've seen the inside of a gym. Poppy mentioned the yacht likely has one and I intend to seek it out when I have the chance.

'Imagine living up here and having to cart your groceries from the waterfront,' she says in a stage whisper.

Even narrower side roads sprout at random intervals from the vein that we're climbing and I peer down the next one, seeing several scooters and a couple of compact hatchbacks. People who live here must be adept drivers – or thrill seekers. Perhaps both.

Several balconies have plastic bags hanging from them – rubbish, I realise with distaste. I suppose it must be bin day. Many of the homes have cats on the stoops or nearby, most of them lounging in the sun, some mewling at us as we walk past.

Poppy calls out to each one. 'Hello, aren't you sweet?' she says to an orange and white cat who rolls onto its back, hopeful. She doesn't pet it though.

'How you doing back there?' she calls as we approach the top of the hill.

'Excellent. You?' She drops back to walk level with me, sending a smile my way. 'It is nice to stretch the legs,' I say.

‘Absolutely. I walk all the time back in London – often to and from work. And most weekends, I’ll go for a long walk by the Thames. It’s so pretty.’ I’ve never regarded the Thames as ‘pretty’ – more of a sludge-coloured working waterway that bisects London. But I haven’t ever spent time along its banks further out.

‘So, you live close to the agency then?’ I ask.

‘Ish. In Kew, so a couple of miles away.’

‘A flat?’

‘Yes.’ She doesn’t offer any further explanation. ‘What about you? Have you always lived in central London?’

‘Since finishing university, yes,’ I reply.

‘Do you like living in the city?’

‘I like the ease of it, being in the financial district, close to work, just a quick walk to the gym...’ I trail off as a snapshot of my life appears before me – minimalist, as I’ve designed it, but also colourless, devoid of excitement or mystery. Funny how all that’s changed in just a matter of days.

‘Oh, you are so cute!’ For half-a-second I think she’s talking to me, but then a black-and-white kitten scampers towards us and Poppy stoops to pet it. I watch, fascinated by how such a tiny creature can emit such a loud purr.

Poppy stands and continues our walk, taking a small tube of hand sanitiser from her cross-body bag and cleaning her hands.

‘Right,’ she says a few moments later, consulting the map on her phone, ‘we just follow this up to the right and there will be a path.’

We pass more homes, some with pristine paintwork and shuttered windows, some that look lived in, if not a little neglected. Up ahead, the cement walkway narrows, turning to dirt. It’s littered with rocks and sticks so I take more care with my footing. Either side, dried grass and low green shrubs crowd the path and trees dot the hilltop haphazardly.

‘There it is,’ Poppy declares, pointing up ahead to a cylindrical structure, its walls made from cut stone. We walk its circumference, peering inside where the walls have crumbled, revealing graffiti and the detritus of (likely) young people carousing.

‘Hmm, not very impressive, is it?’ says Poppy, making me laugh. ‘Why’s that funny?’ she asks, joining in on the laughter.

I shake my head, not entirely sure *why* it tickled me. ‘Perhaps because most people would “ooh” and “ahh” thinking that’s how they’re supposed to react. But I agree with you – not exactly worth the climb.’

‘That is, though,’ she says, pointing behind me. I turn to see the most spectacular view and without conscious thought, walk towards it.

As we’re atop an outcrop of land, we have views north to the rest of the island, which is mostly covered in low greenery, strewn with white structures and bordered by turquoise water. Sunlight bounces off the sea lending a surreal quality to the entire vista.

‘It’s very nice,’ I say.

‘There’s that understatement again.’ I tear my eyes from the view to share a smile with her.

‘Where in Australia are you from?’ I ask.

She laughs. ‘That was out of the blue. I’m from Tasmania. Why?’

‘Just... I wondered if it’s anything like this?’

She looks around and shakes her head. ‘No, not really. Tassie’s beautiful but different.’

‘How so?’

‘Hmm, it’s greener – really lush: forests, mountains, these *beautiful* bays. *And* lots and lots of farmland...’

‘And where did you grow up? Where’s the family farm?’

‘In the north – Tamar Valley, near Launceston.’

‘Do you miss it?’

Her nose scrunches – perhaps I’ve touched a nerve. ‘I miss Mum and Dad, and it is really beautiful there but...’ She shrugs. ‘I’m where I want to be – London’s a great city. Want a photo?’ she asks, changing the subject.

‘Oh, er...’

‘You don’t have to... it’s just *very nice*.’

‘Oh, you’re teasing me,’ I say.

‘Little bit.’

‘All right then,’ I say. ‘We could take it together.’

‘So, a selfie?’

‘Is it still called that when there are two of us?’

She sighs, exasperated, and holds up her phone. ‘The camera’s on the left,’ she says.

I smile and she takes the photo, her mouth stretched into a broad grin, one I’m not certain is genuine.

‘Right, we should probably get back,’ she says. ‘I’m going to want a rinse before we meet with Vittoria.’

‘A rinse?’

‘A shower. You know, ’cause of hiking up a huge hill in the heat of the day.’

For some reason, thinking of Poppy in the shower embarrasses me. ‘Oh, right, of course.’

‘Come on.’ She heads off, leading the way back to the yacht.

* * *

Poppy

‘So, what’s the deal?’ I ask Ursula as I towel dry my hair. I have her on speakerphone so I can get ready while we talk.

‘Well, I’m sure you won’t be surprised, but Vittoria was less than pleased to hear from me.’

‘Shocker,’ I say. ‘And?’

‘She refuses to send Salvatore away but conceded to moving Carlo along.’

‘Oh, thank god. If I had to sit through another dinner playing whack-a-mole with his hands, I would lose it.’

‘Whack a what?’

‘Never mind. So, Carlo’s been voted off the yacht, but we’re still stuck with Vittoria’s fake husband. Any suggestions?’

‘You could run interference.’

‘Well, yes,’ I reply, silently adding ‘obvs’, ‘but *how*?’

‘I don’t know. Ask him for fashion advice or something.’

I laugh. ‘Ursula, that’s gross stereotyping.’

‘Not if the man in question is a fashion designer.’

‘Oh, sorry. I must have missed that. Right, so fashion advice.’ I file it away. ‘And what about the meeting – has she agreed to sit down with me and Tristan?’

‘Uh, not exactly.’

‘What do you mean? We came all this way to discuss the arrangement.’

‘And to see if Vittoria and Tristan are compatible,’ she reminds me, her tone firm. She doesn’t often pull rank, so I temper my response out of respect.

‘Yes, of course. And to determine compatibility.’ I do not add that Tristan and Vittoria are about as compatible as a hedgehog and a water balloon. ‘So, if she won’t meet with us – formally, I mean – how do you suggest we proceed?’

‘Let them get to know each other organically and you know... enjoy yourself. Treat it like a holiday.’

I roll my eyes, grateful we’re only on a voice call. A holiday. With Vittoria, who makes Morticia Addams seem like

the girl next door, and Tristan, who would rather scoop his eyeballs out with a rusted spoon than spend even a second alone with her. Oh, and Salvatore, the fake-husband-turned-inquisitor. Wonderful.

‘Sounds like a plan,’ I say cheerily.

‘Oh, must dash, Saskia has called an emergency staff meeting.’

‘What? Should I conference in?’

But she’s already gone. I text Freya:

Emergency staff meeting! Eek! Keep me posted?

She starts replying almost immediately and I picture her hurrying to the conference room typing with two thumbs.

News on the leak, apparently – will let you know.

Another message arrives soon after.

How’s Greece?

I reply.

Greece is beautiful. Job is turning into a pain in the arse.

She replies with a smiley face. While I wait for an update, I comb out my hair so it can dry naturally, then finish getting ready. As I’ve been instructed to proceed as though I’m on holiday, I opt for white linen shorts and a flowing silk top. I don’t normally wear much makeup but dab on some peach-coloured lip gloss. My phone chimes.

Seems no news is good news. Nothing on socials and no other promotions for the blog post in the last 24 hours. But no word yet on who’s behind the leak.

Relieved, I send a quick reply.

Thanks.

Freya sends a thumbs-up and a smiley face back, and I navigate to our group chat, where Mia has posted an update. It essentially says the same thing.

‘So we live to fight another day,’ I mutter to myself.

While I have my phone in hand, I should check on Shaz, but call or text? A call could tie me up for a while and I'm meeting Tristan on deck in ten minutes. That's the decider.

How are you? Sending love from Greece. Miss you. xxx

I seriously owe her a girls' night in when I get back. Homemade cocktails, classic romcom, agony aunt-ing, the lot.

* * *

'*There you are.*'

Oh joy, Tristan's in a mood again, though he does look good in his navy shorts and lemon-coloured Polo shirt. Which I should definitely *not* be noticing.

'Hello, Tristan, how are you?'

'Impatient, actually.'

'You don't say.'

'When are we meeting with Vittoria?'

'About that...' I make a cringey face, sucking air through my teeth.

'You're joking.'

'There won't be a formal meeting as such, but you'll get to —'

'*Buongiorno!*' Wow, Vittoria sure knows how to make an entrance. She floats onto the deck in a cloud of spicy perfume, dressed in a multi-coloured silk kaftan, her hair held back with a matching scarf worn as a headband and tied at the nape of her neck. She's wearing the same enormous black sunnies as yesterday and her mouth is glossy red. Salvatore follows in her wake like a terrier crossed with a peacock, equal parts energy and flounce.

'*Ciao, caro,*' Vittoria says to Tristan, landing three cheek kisses. 'Poppy,' she says, which I interpret as, 'Oh, you're *still* here?'

‘Is a beautiful day, *si*?’ she asks no one in particular.

What’s left of it, I think.

She snaps her fingers at a not-Stewart steward and he lifts his chin inquisitively. ‘Champagne,’ she says, her tone curt. Poor guy – maybe he was supposed to divine her request telepathically. He disappears inside and Vittoria stretches across an outdoor settee, tipping her face to the sun. Salvatore perches on a nearby seat.

‘Have you been up long?’ Vittoria asks Tristan.

I watch him for signs that he’s about to fake a headache and excuse himself. *I would*.

‘Hours,’ he replies. ‘Long enough to take a meeting, have a late breakfast, hike to the top of the island, and still be left waiting for more than an hour.’

She laughs as though he’s made a joke and Salvatore titters along with her. I’m torn. The plan for me to occupy Salvatore, so Tristan and Vittoria can get to know each other, seems a lot like throwing Tristan to the she-wolf.

The steward arrives with a tray, on which is a bottle of chilled champagne, condensation already beading on the glass, and four flutes. He shows the bottle to Vittoria and she dips her chin in agreement. He makes quick work of the foil, the cage, and the cork and in moments, she is holding a flute brimming with bubbly. She sips at it delicately without waiting for the rest of us.

Tristan takes his glass with a frown, throwing a look my way. I shrug slightly, hoping he’ll play nice long enough for him and Vittoria to have a proper talk. We didn’t come all this way for a holiday, no matter what Ursula has advised.

As the steward hands me my glass, I catch Salvatore eyeing me up and down, appraising my ensemble and (more likely) me. This may be my only chance to separate him from Vittoria, so I go for it.

‘Salvatore,’ I say, pausing while he takes his glass from not-Stewart, ‘I hear you are quite the *fashionisto*.’

Now I have his full attention.

He feigns modesty, covering his lips and looking skyward. ‘No,’ he says with a wave, ‘I just do some of this, some of that...’ He sips his bubbly, his shoulders shaking with a little shimmy. Shaz would love him.

‘You wouldn’t have any of your designs onboard, would you?’

His eyes widen with both surprise and delight. A captivated – really, captive – audience!

‘*Si*, yes. I will show. Come.’ He stands, waving at me and without even a glance at his wife, he leads the way inside. I look back at Tristan and flash him a surreptitious thumbs-up, which he returns with a scowl.

TRISTAN

Where is Poppy going? And why is she leaving me alone with Vittoria? This is exactly the situation I've been trying to avoid. I sip my champagne absentmindedly, annoyed that it's delicious.

'So, I have you alone.'

Vittoria is looking my way but with those glasses on, it's hard to tell if she's looking at me or just in my general direction. As if she's read my mind, she slips the glasses down the bridge of her nose and pins me with a look. Ugh, that's worse. I sip my champagne and look out at the town.

Out of the corner of my eye, Vittoria swings her long legs off the sofa and sits up. 'So, tell me, Tristan,' she says, 'what's the first thing you will do when you inherit the money?' The question catches me off guard. Last night at dinner, I'd been bombarded with inquiries about where I grew up, went to school, studied, travelled to... question after question about my life experience to date. But this one... not only is it premature, it's... well... *crass*.

'You don't like to answer me?'

'It's not that,' I reply, even though it is.

'You know, it's just... how you say? Means to ends,' she says cryptically.

'Sorry, I'm not sure I follow?'

She crosses her legs, the split in her dress revealing one of her thighs, and I look away in distaste.

‘Money,’ she continues. ‘You do what you have to do to get it – like marry, even when you don’t want to – but it’s just... money. *This* is the fruit,’ she says. When I look at her again, she’s indicating the yacht. ‘*This* is why we do the things to make the money. Means to ends. *No?*’

I glean her meaning – at least I *think* I do – and I agree to some point. But I am not ‘doing the things to make the money’ – in this case, marrying to inherit – so I can live an extravagant life. I like my minimalist lifestyle. The luxuries I *do* buy are utilitarian, like my watch or my audio system. They bring me pleasure, per se, but mostly because I’m contented with their functions.

But if I inherit Grandad’s fortune, I certainly won’t be splashing out on the kind of lifestyle Vittoria lives.

Something occurs to me. ‘So, on that point... you clearly already have means, yet I’m told you need to marry to... to what?’

She lifts her chin but doesn’t answer right away. ‘My father... he is... a hard man. No love. No joy. Just work and duty. He wants me to be the same. *Expects* me to be the same. I disappoint him. And so, he gives me the ultimatum: get married or...’ She shrugs.

‘He will cut you off.’

‘*Si*,’ she says simply.

‘So, you don’t *do* anything?’ I ask. Surely, she contributes *somehow*?

‘How do you mean?’

‘Do you work? For your father, I mean?’

‘Sometimes I entertain my father’s business partners...’

‘Oh!’ I say, horrified. I clap my hand over my mouth. I hadn’t meant to blurt it out like that but having to ‘entertain’? That’s terrible. And it certainly makes me a little more forgiving of her behaviour.

Surprisingly, she laughs. ‘Oh, you English. I don’t *sleep* with them. I just arrange... parties, trips. Is a small thing. Is

nothing.'

'Oh, I see. Sorry.' This conversation is inducing a headache.

She regards me over the top of her sunglasses, her smirk indicating that I amuse her. 'Talking about parties, there is one tonight!'

Brilliant – more 'friends' and hangers-on.

'On my friend's boat, down there,' she says, indicating one of the dozen super yachts behind her. 'You will come,' she says, standing.

There's a clear expectation that I will comply. It's also obvious that this conversation is over and I don't know whether to be disappointed or relieved. Aren't we *ever* going to talk about the logistics of marrying? What does she think will happen? She gets me drunk at some party and we're married by the boat's captain? That's not really a *thing*, is it? Oh god, is that a thing?

'And Poppy will accompany me,' I say right as Vittoria crosses my path to head inside.

She tuts, her shoulders rising with tension. '*Va bene*,' she says, flicking her hand contemptuously. But there's nothing '*bene*' about this entire situation.

My phone alerts me to a new text message. It's Ravi.

Details of the trusts for your cousins sent to Gooch.
How's it going on your end?

I reply immediately:

Poorly. The only way I could marry Vittoria is if we never saw each other.

His reply comes just as quickly and I inhale sharply as I read it.

Remember that inheritance case I told you about. It's got to be believable Tris.

Well, fuck.

* * *

Poppy

Salvatore turned out to be quite fun to hang out with, but it's baffling how this marriage passes for real. The more sketches he showed me, the more effusive and flamboyant he became. Maybe he's good at hiding who he really is around Vittoria's family. He'd have to put in an Oscar-worthy performance to pull it off, though. Instead, I'd bet that he and Vittoria rarely see her family.

I hope he gets what he wants out of this arrangement, which is his own fashion label, as I loved what he showed me today. His interplay of colour and flowing fabrics is incredible. Not really my style but definitely Vittoria's. I wonder if he's designed any of the outfits she's worn. I should have asked him.

I step onto the deck of the cockpit and look about for a steward, hoping I can scrounge a cup of tea and maybe a sweet treat, like those Greek almond biscuits, the chewy ones. I love those.

'Good, you're here.'

'Oh, hi.'

Tristan is alone on deck, his disposition signposting that things didn't go as hoped with Vittoria.

'So, how's tricks?' I ask, already knowing the answer.

'Not good and getting worse by the minute.'

'Do you think you could hold that thought long enough for me to snag a cuppa and a bikkie?' I ask, peering back into the darkness of the yacht's interior.

'A bikkie?' Tristan says to my back.

A steward emerges from the dim salon, a much-welcomed spectre forming before my eyes. The stewards always seem to

show up exactly when you need them – maybe they have magical powers. As far as powers go, it's not a bad one, though I'd still prefer teleportation. Then I could pop home and see Mum and Dad any time I wanted.

I ask the steward for some tea and those 'scrummy almondy biscuits' and ask Tristan, 'Do you want anything?'

'Headache tablets.'

I can't tell if he's kidding, so I ask for those as well, then join him on one of the outdoor settees. They look nice, but they're as uncomfortable as anything. But who needs comfort when you're only lounging long enough to take envy-inducing photos for Instagram?

'So, I'm guessing it did not go well with Vittoria?' I venture.

'Define "well",' he retorts, his tone snarky.

'*Well* would mean that you discussed how a marriage of convenience might work between you, including logistics and parameters, and she is completely in agreement.'

'In that case, you're correct, as none of that even came up. Oh, and she's insisting we go to a party tonight. On one of the yachts down that way.' He indicates to the right with a nod of his head.

'We?' I ask.

'Well, me. Then *I* insisted that you accompany me.'

'I'm sure that went over like a lead balloon.'

'Quite. Poppy, I need to ask you something.'

'Sure,' I reply. The steward arrives with tea, a heaping plate of the *exact* almondy biscuits I was thinking of (yay), a glass of water, and two white tablets for Tristan. I thank him and he dips his head then disappears again. 'Want one of my bikkies?' I ask Tristan.

'Just one?'

I eye the plate. It's unlikely I can eat all of these in one sitting, but I also don't know if there's an infinite supply

aboard. Maybe I should be rationing. When I look back at Tristan, his mouth twitches at the left corner, then stills.

‘Oh, did I interrupt?’ I ask.

‘Sorry?’

‘It looked like you were about to smile.’

He does and I do too. ‘Just that I’ve never seen a person contemplate *biscuits* so intensely before.’

‘You can have more than one if you like,’ I say, holding out the plate for him.

‘Thank you, that’s *very* generous of you, but I’m not actually hungry.’

‘More for me then.’ I set down the plate and take a biscuit, careful not to topple the neat pyramid. ‘You wanted to ask me a question,’ I say before biting off half the biscuit. I moan involuntarily – it’s *that* good.

‘Would you like to be alone?’

I roll my eyes at him, then shove the other half into my mouth and keep chewing.

Suddenly, the mirth is wiped from Tristan’s face as though someone ran a duster over it. ‘Do you think we could leave early? I know we’re supposed to stay another night but...’

I swallow, which is harder than usual because I’ve seen clients in this state before. This is the ‘I give up, it’s too hard’ stage of a case. And as much as I agree that this isn’t going to plan, there’s still a chance Vittoria could be a viable option. If only we could pin her down long enough to have a serious talk.

I look around to ensure we’re alone. Unless a steward is about to appear from thin air – and I wouldn’t put it past them – we are.

‘Tristan, all jokes aside, is there *any* way you could see yourself marrying Vittoria?’

‘That’s just it. Talking to her this afternoon... I had hoped there was *something* behind her façade, something

redeemable, that I could grow to at least *like* her. And, as Ravi has just reminded me, there's a precedence in the UK for this exact situation. Unless I can convincingly marry a stranger, fooling the rest of the world that the marriage is real, this could all be for nothing.'

'And with Vittoria...?'

'Exactly. The façade appears to be the entire sum of her. And if that's the case then... then I can't see how this will work.'

Nor can I. Vittoria already has a fake husband but what she wants is a fake husband who will be her lover as well. The only way I could have made this match work – for both parties – was to convince Vittoria she might have a chance of winning Tristan's affections. And that won't happen if he can't bear to spend time with her.

If I were a doctor and this match was a patient, I'd be looking at the clock and calling the time of death.

'I'm really sorry, Tristan.'

'It's not your fault.'

'Well, it is actually. This is my case and, while Ursula urged me to include Vittoria amongst the potentials, I'm the one who agreed to it. This whole situation is my responsibility. You know, if this were an ordinary case, one without a time crunch, I'd declare that you've simply kissed a frog, and kissing frogs gets us closer to finding you "the one".'

'Well, isn't that still true? Meeting Vittoria *has* helped narrow down what I require.'

I laugh wryly. 'You're being generous. Because you *are* under a time crunch and all we've learnt from meeting Vittoria is that she's madder than a cut snake.'

'You really do use the oddest expressions.'

'Straya,' I say by way of explanation, only it seems to confuse him. 'Never mind. Okay, how about this? Even if we leave the yacht today, I'm not sure how we'd get back to Athens, as I'm pretty sure the last ferry has already left, *and*

we'd also have to reschedule our flights. *Or* we can get our glad rags on, go to this party, eat, drink, and be merry, then leave as planned in the morning by helicopter. How does that sound?'

'It doesn't sound *too* bad, except for one thing.'

'What's that?'

'The helicopter,' he replies, his eyes flashing with fear.

'We *could* try to get ferry tickets. But it's a bit of a milk run from here.'

He breathes in deeply and exhales through his nose. 'All right: party, stay the night, helicopter, then flight home.'

'You sure?' I ask. 'Last chance. I can always scout about for a dinghy to run us to the mainland.'

'Oh god,' he groans.

'I'll take that as a yes to Plan B then. Right, what time is this party?'

'Eight.'

'Make that eight-ish, allowing for Greek time. So, knock on my door at eight thirty?'

'Yes, all right,' he says. 'And what are you up to until then?'

'Working. For when we return to London.'

'I see,' he says, his expression pained.

'I know. It's difficult to think about right now but leave all that to me. And you' – I look about – 'go find something super-yachty to do, have some fun.'

'I'll try,' he says glumly.

I decide not to press him; he's already dealing with a lot.

'Oh, and I'm taking these.' I grab the biscuits and head to my cabin.

TRISTAN

There are butterflies in my stomach when I knock on Poppy's door at 8.28 p.m. Well, at least one butterfly – *something's* fluttering in there. And I'm not sure if it's apprehension about my circumstances – the big daunting picture – or about holding my own at a party aboard a super yacht moored in the Aegean. Who even *are* these people?

'Come in!' Poppy calls and when I open the door, she's seated at her makeup table, her hands behind her neck. 'Hi, sorry. I just can't get this bloody...' She makes a guttural sound of frustration.

Without thinking, I say, 'I can do that if you like?'

Foolish, I think, realising too late that it might not be appropriate to help her with her necklace.

'Yes, please. I hate this clasp – it's so fiddly! Here.' She holds out the ends of the fine silver chain and I cross the cabin her and take them up. She's right. The two halves of the clasp are *tiny* – no wonder she's been having trouble. I'm not sure I'll be able to help either, but I drape the chain around her slim neck and after three tries, I finally hook the small lever under my thumbnail and connect the two halves. The pendant, a silver heart, falls into place on her chest and I consciously look away so she doesn't think I'm staring.

'Thanks.' My eyes slide back to the mirror where her reflection smiles at me, and I can't help but notice how lovely she looks. She's wearing a cocktail dress in dark grey silk and

her hair is pulled up in a loose bun. She's even wearing eye makeup and lipstick.

Poppy drops her gaze to her lips, rubbing them together, then running her fingertip along the bottom one, and my breath hitches, catching me off guard. Ostensibly, Poppy is an attractive woman, but *this*...

'Should we go?' she asks, meeting my eye again.

'Er, yes.'

Even though these cabins are quite spacious, I realise I'm in her way, so I go back to the door and wait there, that lone butterfly morphing into an Atlas moth. This is the first time I've experienced the pull of attraction towards Poppy and it's not only inappropriate, it confuses things enormously.

'You look good,' she says, eyeing my outfit of dark wash jeans and a white linen shirt.

'Really?' I ask. I look down at my clothes, grateful for the distraction. 'I was worried it might be too casual.'

'Nah. Spot on, I reckon.' There are times when Poppy's Australian accent is stronger, usually when she's spouting Australian vernacular, and I wonder if she's aware. Or perhaps she does it deliberately.

I open the door for her. 'After you.'

She shakes her head. 'After you. I have no idea where this party even is.'

I chuckle softly, the moth starting to settle. 'Good point,' I say, leading us down the hallway. 'Apparently, it's six boats over, but I suspect it will be obvious when we get close.'

'How so?' she asks.

'Well, the music, *people*...'

'Weren't you paying attention last night?'

'To...?'

'This place is party central. Nearly every one of these yachts was hosting a party last night.'

‘Oh, that’s right. I’d forgotten.’

‘Completely understandable,’ she says when we reach the top of the staircase. ‘You’ve had more important things on your mind.’

‘Er, yes.’

We depart the yacht, one of the stewards sending us off with a smile, saying, ‘Have a nice evening,’ and begin the short stroll to where the party is.

‘Can you imagine?’ Poppy asks, leaning close. She carries the scent of jasmine and something citrusy. It’s nice but, again, it’s not appropriate to mention it. Or even *think* it.

Distracted by how she smells, I’m slow to respond but manage, ‘Imagine?’

‘Living like this. All this excess.’ She stares intently at each yacht as we pass. They vary slightly in size and vastly in colour but, when they’re all lined up like this, each is essentially a carbon copy of the next. Ostentation rather than opulence. I’m certain that even my mother, who proudly displays her collection of garish-but-costly trinkets, would find these blatant displays of wealth vulgar.

‘They look like they’re having just as much fun,’ Poppy continues, pointing to an outdoor restaurant that’s brimming with diners, many of whom are chatting or laughing. The aroma of seafood wafts towards us and I suddenly realise how hungry I am. With everything going on, I haven’t wanted to eat since this morning – until now.

‘Poppy, would you be interested in having dinner? Before we go to the party?’

She stops and turns to me, delight in her eyes. ‘Brilliant idea, I’m *ravenous*.’

I laugh. ‘Even after all those biscuits?’

‘Yeah, yeah, I only ate... well, *five*. I was thinking I’d hit the waitstaff up for my own tray of nibblies when we got to the party, but a proper dinner is way better. Which one, do you reckon?’ she asks, looking along the row of restaurants.

‘They all look much of a muchness,’ I say, right as she strides off towards one, waving her arm for me to follow. I do.

She approaches the waiter, a harried looking middle-aged man, and less than a minute later, we have a table for two, close to the water.

‘Pretty good, huh? We can people watch,’ she says, doing exactly that.

The waiter shoves plastic covered menus at us, written in English. I suppose we’re not fooling anyone into thinking we’re locals. *Are* there locals on this island or is everyone here a tourist?

‘So, why did you choose this one? The restaurant?’ I ask, curious more than anything else.

She meets my eye, then scans our surroundings. ‘It seems to have the most Greek people – and lots of families. That tends to be a good sign.’

She’s right, there are a lot of children here and now that we’re seated, my ear picks up multiple conversations in Greek.

I eye the menu, but with my limited experience in eating Greek food, I’m a little lost.

‘Want help?’ Poppy asks.

‘Er, yes, please. A little out of my depth here. I’ve had the odd questionable kebab after a late night out – in my younger days – but I’ve never navigated my way around a proper Greek menu.’

Poppy makes a face, her nose scrunched with distaste, which I assume is about the kebabs. It’s a fair point, as they *were* rubbish and probably not even Greek. The waiter returns and Poppy rattles off an order of five dishes, only one of which I catch – tzatziki.

She looks at me. ‘Okay with just water?’

I nod.

‘A large bottle, *parakalo*,’ she tells the waiter. He leaves and she smiles at me across the table. ‘Thank you again,’

Tristan,’ she says.

‘Sorry? For what?’

‘Being so understanding – about this trip... about Vittoria.’

‘Oh, well, it’s not ideal.’

Now *that* is an understatement. Not only did I have to take a Friday off, something I’ve never done since I started working, I’m three days closer to my deadline and back to square one.

Poppy chuckles. ‘I know why you’re laughing at me,’ I say.

‘Not *at* you. Not really.’

The first plate arrives, bearing an enormous serving of flatbread and some sort of dip in the middle.

‘Ooh, yum, my fave,’ says Poppy as she loads up the bread, then takes a bite. ‘Tzatziki,’ she says, her hand over her mouth. She swallows and smiles sheepishly. ‘Sorry,’ she says pointing to herself, ‘my manners go to pot when I’m hungry.’ She indicates the plate. ‘It’s *really* good, though. Try it.’

‘I don’t really eat...’

‘Carbs?’ she asks.

‘I sound like a total wanker, don’t I?’

‘Little bit.’ She takes up a spoon and dollops a heaping serve of tzatziki onto my plate. ‘Here, eat it plain. The pita is just a delivery device anyway.’

I try the tzatziki, my eyes widening in surprise. ‘Oh, wow, that’s...’

‘Uh-huh, and it’s loaded with garlic, so now we’re good.’ She laughs. ‘Nothing worse than talking to someone with garlic breath when you haven’t had any.’

More food arrives – a salad, fried squid rings, tiny fried fish, and some sort of fish, baked and whole. ‘Horiatiki, or Greek salad,’ Poppy says, pointing to the dish, ‘calamari,

whitebait, and baked seabass. Oh! Sorry, you eat seafood, right? You're not allergic?

Now I chuckle. 'No, not allergic. I eat fish from time to time – salmon mostly – so this will be a bit of a culinary adventure for me.' I eye the whitebait dubiously – Ravi orders them all the time at the pub but I've never seen the appeal. 'We're supposed to eat them whole, right – heads, tails, the lot?'

'Yup. They're the chips of the Aegean,' she says, dredging one in aioli, and popping it into her mouth whole. She wiggles her eyebrows at me as she chews.

I repeat her actions and, surprisingly, she's right. It's delicious. 'You must think I'm so unadventurous,' I say after I've swallowed.

'Why?'

'I'm nearly thirty-five and this is the first time I've had whitebait.'

'So, never been to a pub before?' she asks, obviously teasing.

'I have, just... not particularly daring when it comes to trying new things. Or at all, really, another reason this situation has been especially challenging.'

'What about travel?' she asks.

'I do travel – mostly for work and sometimes I'll venture further than the hotel but...' I shrug.

'So, you didn't do the gap year thing when you were younger – backpacking around, staying in dodgy hostels, sleeping with random strangers, eating fried food by the water?'

My stomach clenches at the mention of sleeping with strangers – it's too close to home. Amongst a parade of failed short-term 'relationships', I've had more than my share of one-night stands. And I'd rather not delve into that with Poppy – I don't want her thinking ill of me. I try to trick myself into

believing it's because she's my agent and tasked with finding me a wife. It doesn't work.

'Er, well, I never really had a gap year,' I say, deflecting. 'I know they're the done thing – lots of people at university took a year off before they started – but I'm certain my parents would have disowned me had I done the same.'

'Did you want to?' she asks earnestly.

'I'm not really sure. It wasn't an option, so I didn't dwell on it.'

'What about when you receive your inheritance? Have you considered taking some time off, going on a sabbatical of sorts?'

The question irritates me, but I attempt to temper my tone. 'As it's not a foregone conclusion that I'll even receive the inheritance – especially as that is looking less and less likely – no, I haven't.'

It's obvious that my reply smarts and I regret it as soon as the words are out of my mouth. I watch the passers-by, pondering the best way to apologise. But Poppy beats me to it.

'You're right and, again, I'm sorry. As soon as we return to London, we'll get your case back on track. I promise.'

When I look at her, her expression is neutral, *professional*, and all the rapport we've established has vanished. And it's my fault.

She picks up her fork, but immediately puts it back down again. 'I'm not really that hungry any more,' she says with a false smile. It's something I've heard before – on dates, with girlfriends – other occasions when I have ruined a dinner with my carelessness, *callousness* even. 'Should we get the bill and head to the party?'

'Do you still want to go?' I ask.

Her chin lifts slightly. 'Why not? A great opportunity for more people watching.'

She sits up straighter, turns, and signals to the waiter to bring the bill. Not long after, having exchanged no other

words, we've abandoned what was a delicious dinner and are back on the boardwalk, heading towards a party I have no desire to attend.

POPPY

Stupid, stupid, stupid. The word sprints around my mind, taunting me with its accuracy, like it's doing victory laps. Negative self-talk is damaging. Typically, I would think through a series of affirmations, reassuring myself that I am far from stupid, but have simply behaved in a way that is, as Tristan would say, 'less than ideal'.

But not even *I* can kid myself into believing that. I have been unbelievably stupid and were Saskia here, I'd be pulled aside and asked to explain my actions. That's only happened once before, when I was a novice to this profession and got too close to one of my female clients. The client found out where I lived and showed up with alarming regularity and what had started as a client-agent relationship morphed into something far more nefarious, essentially stalking, 'single white female' style.

Saskia helped me expunge the client from my life and then we debriefed. She was kind but firm and I was instructed that, although we may come to know the most intimate details of our clients' lives, we must retain a professional distance. Always – without exception.

It was a hard lesson to learn but I did learn it. So how has *this* case derailed so dramatically? And I'm not even referring to Vittoria and how misguided it was for me to agree to Ursula's plan. It's that I have wandered into 'familiar' territory with Tristan, letting down my guard, being 'Poppy the person' rather than 'Poppy the agent'.

Thinking back to the moment he helped with my necklace, I recall the shiver that travelled down my spine, activating both a fluttery stomach and something worse, something far more of a threat to this case. Lust.

Objectively, Tristan is a handsome man – bouts of surliness notwithstanding. But tonight, I was *affected* by him, by the soft touch of his hands at the nape of my neck, by his tanned muscular forearms, which looked particularly sexy in the rolled-up sleeves of his stark white shirt, by his woody cologne, and his frown of concentration as he fastened my necklace, making him even more handsome. He didn't say anything about my appearance, but it was hard to miss how he looked at me appreciatively, noticing my dress and the care I'd taken with my hair and makeup.

With a gulp, I force myself to acknowledge the elephant on the boardwalk. Tristan and I are attracted to each other, our feelings no doubt exacerbated by all the time we've spent together, just the two of us, which certainly wasn't the plan.

When Ursula informed me of Vittoria's request to meet with Tristan as soon as possible and in Greece, I'd been on board (so to speak). He'd go to Greece and it would work out or not, but either way, we'd know in a matter of days if the case was closed or if we needed to move onto potential number two.

Even when he insisted that I accompany him, I only agreed because I expected he'd be with Vittoria most of the trip, getting to know her and working out the logistics of their potential marriage. Perhaps naïvely, I didn't anticipate that we'd end up here – me crushing on him and letting my guard down, and Tristan, well... being the same man I met on day one. The real Tristan – a grouch in a pickle. A pickled grouch!

Strictly professional from now on, Poppy, I tell myself as Tristan indicates we've arrived at the party.

I would never have found this yacht on my own; it's much the same as all the others along the marina. As I walk up the gangplank, Tristan close behind me, I scout about for Vittoria. Not surprisingly, she is holding court amid a loose circle of the

type of (beautiful) people I expected to find here. As we board, her laughter permeates the air, cutting through the low thud of electronic dance music. Vittoria catches my eye, immediately ceasing to laugh and without excusing herself, she crosses to us.

‘Tristan, *caro*,’ she purrs, sidestepping me. She plants her usual sticky red kisses on his cheeks. ‘Come, I want you to meet my friends.’ She drags him away by his hand, leaving me standing alone and, this time, he doesn’t look over his shoulder to signal for help. *Stay or go?* I wonder.

‘Poppy!’

Oh, wonderful, it’s Carlo.

‘Hello, Carlo,’ I say. I suppose when Ursula told Vittoria to send him away, she didn’t stipulate he had to leave the island.

He leans in for cheek kisses and I try not to flinch when his halitosis invades my nostrils. ‘*Bellissima*,’ he says, ‘you look wonderful.’

‘Thank you,’ I reply diplomatically.

‘I get you a drink. What do you want?’

My instincts are telling me to decline the offer and head back to Vittoria’s yacht. Tristan is a big boy – he can look after himself. And I definitely don’t want to spend the evening beholden to Carlo. He’s practically licking his lips, his eyes roving my face, shoulders, and (ugh) décolletage, as he waits for an answer. I glance towards Vittoria and Tristan, catching him watching me, a deep crease between his brows. Shit, I really shouldn’t leave him here alone. He may be a big boy but, as I’ve noted before, Vittoria’s the type of woman who gobbles up big boys for breakfast.

‘Uh, I’ll have a martini, Carlo. Gin, extra dry with a twist.’

He grins. ‘I will be back,’ he says, disappearing into the crowd.

Don’t look, I tell myself. Only, I’m suddenly *terrible* at following my own advice and of course I look. Tristan is still watching me. I wave but he turns away.

* * *

I lose Carlo, the only good thing to happen since Tristan and I left the restaurant. Having abandoned dinner a few bites in and downing my martini almost as soon as Carlo handed it to me, I'm tipsy. I'm also annoyed, mostly at myself for being in this ridiculous situation, surrounded by the rich and (semi) famous, along with a slew of wannabes and hangers-on. I've been ignored, sneered at, side-eyed, elbowed in the boob (although, he did apologise), and mistaken for wait staff, despite wearing a cocktail dress.

I open my clutch to check the time on my phone. Great, it's only a little after ten. How much longer will Tristan want to stay? I stand on my tiptoes and search for him in the crowd just as a hand grabs my forearm.

'We need to leave, right now.'

I turn on Tristan, redirecting my annoyance towards him. 'What's the big emergency?'

'I'll explain in a minute.' He palms my elbow and attempts to steer me through the crowd.

'Tristan,' I hiss, 'stop.' He does, his eyes darting about. 'What's going on?'

He looks me in the eye. 'Vittoria just grabbed my arse and told me she wants to fuck me.'

'What?' Earlier, I made the decision to stay at the party because of Vittoria's man-eating tendencies, but I didn't expect her to be so blatant in her efforts. Or so vulgar.

'Yes. To *her*, a marriage of convenience is carte blanche to get into my trousers.'

'Oh my god.'

'Exactly. Now, can we go? *Please?*'

'Of course.'

Relief floods his face and he turns, threading through the crowd. I follow closely and soon we're back on the pier.

'I knew it...' he starts, staring at the ground and shaking his head. 'I just *knew* something was off with her, but...' He looks at me. 'She had to know that I'd turn her down, right? This was supposed to be a marriage on paper! What was she *playing* at?'

'This may sound odd but a woman like that... she'll be used to getting her way. I can imagine it's a rare occurrence that a man turns her down. She's rich, titled, beautiful...'

'But we're only *here* to broker a fake marriage. She needs this as much as I do, so why would she jeopardise it by propositioning me?'

'I'm not sure,' I lie. Of course, I've known all along about Vittoria's hidden agenda. I just didn't want to admit to myself that it might be her *only* agenda. 'Look, we should get back to the yacht. We're leaving in the morning anyway, so let's get some sleep, and after tomorrow we can put all this behind us.'

'Poppy, what if she shows up at my cabin? There are no locks on the doors, have you noticed?'

I hadn't but that's because I'd figured we were safe onboard. But what's the best way to get through the night without subjecting Tristan to unwanted advances?

'Oh! What about swapping cabins?'

'What do you mean?'

'Exactly that. I move into yours and you move into mine. If she does slip into your cabin in the middle of the night, *I* will be there instead of you. She'll get the shock of her life, then hopefully leave you alone for the rest of the night.'

He regards me intensely. 'I suppose we've no other choice. Unless we try to find a hotel.'

I look along the boardwalk in both directions, noting the stream of tourists and decided lack of accommodation. We could go online, but the chances of finding somewhere

suitable last-minute, in high season, and late at night are slim at best.

‘Let’s swap rooms,’ I say. ‘This will all be over in less than twelve hours and then we’ll be on our way back to London.’

‘Fine.’ He starts off towards Vittoria’s yacht and I hurry to catch up.

* * *

To my sheer horror, Stewart the steward catches us mid-swap, each loaded up like pack horses, arms heaping with our belongings. Tristan and I freeze, caught out, and I’m about to fashion an enormous lie when Stewart smirks.

‘Let me guess,’ he says, ‘my mistress is not behaving herself.’ While he’s bang on, it’s not exactly loyal of him to say so. ‘I’d be happy to help,’ he offers.

‘Uh, thank you, but that’s not necessary,’ I reply.

‘Er, Poppy’s right,’ chimes in Tristan. ‘I think we have it all under control.’

On cue, a pair of his underwear falls from his armload of clothes onto the floor.

We stare at them, mortified, but Stewart doesn’t miss a beat. He scoops them up, then takes the other clothes from Tristan.

‘Trust me, this is the most excitement we’ve had onboard in months,’ he says, carrying the pile across the hallway. He deposits it on the roughly made bed – previously my bed – then adds, ‘Besides, she’s made a play for me before – actually, *twice* – and I quite like the idea of her getting some comeuppance.’

If Tristan weren’t here, I’d probably high-five Stewart but I’ve indulged in enough unprofessional behaviour for one night.

‘Right, fresh linens?’ Stewart asks.

‘Uh, we swapped sheets and towels already,’ I say, realising how ridiculous that sounds. We should have enlisted Stewart’s help from the get-go.

He nods, surveying the room. ‘Then it looks like only your suitcase left, Ms Dean.’ We look on as he walks to the open wardrobe and retrieves my suitcase, then crosses the hall and places it in Tristan’s now-empty wardrobe.

‘So, that’s all sorted. Is there anything else I can assist with tonight?’ We shake our heads, both bewildered. ‘Then goodnight. I will be on hand tomorrow morning to escort you next door for your helicopter ride.’

He leaves and I resist the urge to run after him and give him a hug. I just heart Stewart.

‘Well, good night, Poppy.’

I turn to Tristan, ready to share a laugh at the absurdity of this situation, particularly the last few minutes, but there’s no mirth in his eyes, just frustration.

‘Good night,’ I say quietly, retreating to my new cabin.

POPPY

It's impossible to sleep when you're worried that a predatory contessa will slither into your bed at any moment. Fortunately, I don't have to wait long.

I'm staring at the ceiling, barely visible in the dim light seeping through the cabin's tinted window, when I hear the doorknob slowly twist.

I roll over, facing away from the door, and burrow under the covers, then reach for the light switch, so I'm ready. As the cabin door opens, I hold my breath, but then remember that sleeping people typically *breathe*. I school my breath so I sound like I'm asleep.

Vittoria crosses quietly to the bed and from the soft rustle of fabric, I guess she's disrobing. *Eek*. She gently pulls back the covers, crawls into the bed, then scooches towards me. Her breath is hot on my neck, but before she can land a kiss, I flick on the lights, fling back the covers and jump out of bed.

'What the hell are you doing?' I shout, as if I have no idea.

She yelps, then sits up, clasping the covers to her naked breasts, and stares at me with her mouth agape. By the time she comes to her senses, Tristan has burst through the door followed closely by – oh my fricking god – Salvatore. The four of us stare at each other in turn, like one of those scenes in an American soap opera right before an ad break.

After a long beat of silence, Vittoria erupts. 'What are *you* doing in here?' she asks me. 'This is *his* room,' she accuses,

pointing at Tristan. It's a bit rich – make that a *lot* rich – for her to be asking *me* that!

‘The question, Vittoria,’ says Tristan, ‘is what are *you* doing in here? I told you I wasn't interested in sleeping with you.’

Vittoria lifts her chin, defiance flashing in her eyes. She drops the covers, exposing her (perfect) C-cup breasts. I look away right as she says, ‘Even now?’

I glance at Tristan, whose jawline is pulsing with annoyance.

‘Cover yourself, Vittoria,’ he says without looking in her direction. ‘Your cousin is here.’

Vittoria laughs, then throws back the covers, exposing herself further. I can't help but look and, holy shit, her body is perfection (if extremely slender model-like bodies are your thing). She stands, elegant as a gazelle, and stoops to collect her dress, giving me an eyeful. I look away again – not even her gynaecologist would know *that* much about her. In my peripheral vision, I see her step into her slip dress and pull the straps over her shoulders. I scan the floor for her underwear but apparently, she wasn't wearing any.

Then she drops a bombshell so devastating, its shockwaves reverberate around the cabin.

‘Oh, Tristan, you foolish man. He's not my cousin. He's my *husband*.’

I may just commit *contessa-cide* but resist the urge to leap over the bed and strangle her with her own smugness.

‘Your what?’ asks Tristan, incredulous.

‘Tristan—’ I start, but he holds a hand up in my direction.

‘Salvatore is my husband. You see, I already have my “marriage of convenience”, only my darling Salvatore here’ – she cups his chin and blows him a kiss – ‘is gay. *And*,’ she says, rounding on Tristan, ‘unable to perform certain husbandly duties. That's why *you're* here,’ she says, her head tilted and her eyes boring into his. ‘But you turned me down.’

‘Poppy? Did you know about this?’

Vittoria laughs, a vicious cackle and, again, I resist the urge to inflict bodily harm.

‘Oh, you *man*, you,’ she says. ‘Of *course*! She’s known all along.’

‘But...’ Tristan looks more confused than ever.

‘Tristan, I can expl—’

‘No,’ he says, glaring at me. ‘You’ve done enough.’

He spins around and a moment later, his cabin door slams.

‘How could you be so stupid?’ I spit at Vittoria.

She arches an eyebrow at me. ‘Is it stupid to see what I want and go after it?’

I glance at Salvatore, who shrugs at me, arrogance emanating from him, and all the warmth I felt for him earlier today dissipates.

‘Ursula will not be pleased,’ I tell Vittoria, the last arrow in my quiver.

‘Ursula is a dried-up old *hag*,’ she sneers.

My jaw drops in indignation. ‘She is no such thing.’

‘Come, Salvatore,’ Vittoria says as she stalks out of my cabin. He throws me a disdainful look before following on her heels.

I’m still reeling when Stewart pops his head around the door, startling me. ‘It’s all right, they’ve gone,’ he says. ‘How are you?’ he asks, his concern seemingly genuine.

‘Fucked,’ I reply, supplying the first word that pops into my mind.

‘Want to join me for a nightcap?’ he asks. I look down, realising I am standing there in my nightgown. ‘You look fine,’ he says reassuringly.

‘But Vittoria?’

‘She won’t find out. I know this boat far better than she does. Pop on a cardi if you like. I’ll wait for you out here.’

A tiny voice in my head tells me I should try to get some sleep, but with everything that just went on, sleep will be impossible for the foreseeable future.

* * *

Tristan is silent all through breakfast, on our short jaunt to the helipad on the Greek tycoon’s yacht, throughout my reluctant goodbye to Stewart (though now I’m following him on Instagram), on the forty-minute helicopter ride to Athens airport, *and* during check-in and the walk to our gate. Silently *seething*.

When I can no longer stand it, I put down my e-reader (having read the same paragraph twenty times), and angle towards him.

‘Are you ever going to speak to me again?’ I ask. A vein in his jaw pulses and he grinds his teeth together. ‘I can explain,’ I add.

He turns, pinning me with a searing look. ‘Go on then.’

‘Well, you remember at the start of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* when Indie’s in the tomb and he’s holding the bag of sand and he’s going to switch it out with the idol?’ I cup both hands, like I’m Indiana Jones and make the motions of swapping one object out for another.

‘Am I the idol or the bag of sand in this scenario?’ he asks, devoid of humour. At least he’s speaking to me.

‘Well, strictly speaking, Salvatore is already “in place” so —’

‘I’m the bag of sand.’

I shrug, smiling sheepishly while his eyes remain locked on mine. It’s uncomfortable, being beneath his gaze, but I don’t look away. His anger is warranted and at the very least, I

owe him the chance to glare at me for as long as he wants. He eventually looks away, his scowl intensifying.

‘Do I want to know the intricacies of your “plan”?’ He says the word as though it’s venomous – quite apt really considering Vittoria’s behaviour. That woman is toxicity personified.

‘I don’t think it would help,’ I say diplomatically. ‘You’d still be angry with me.’

‘But *why*?’ he says, meeting my eye again. ‘Why would you put me in that position? You had to know what she would be like.’

‘Well, no, actually. She’s Ursula’s client, not mine, and I had no idea she’d behave *that* badly.’ Tristan scoffs. ‘I *didn’t*. Not until we got to the yacht and she introduced Salvatore at dinner. You remember that phone call I had to make, after Vittoria caught us whispering in the hallway? That was to Ursula. I was on your side, Tristan – I *am* on your side.’

He runs a hand through his hair and rubs the nape of his neck, his exasperation palpable. ‘Look, Poppy, this isn’t going to work.’

‘What do you mean?’ I ask, a benign question when it’s obvious he’s pulling the pin.

‘I mean that when we get back to London, I’m calling it. Our little “arrangement”?’ It’s over. I’ll cover the fee for what you’ve done so far,’ he says, his caustic tone indicating that all I’ve managed ‘so far’ is to cock things up. ‘But we’re done.’

Right as I’m about to expound upon the many reasons he should continue with the agency, his phone rings. He takes it out of his pocket and glances at the screen.

‘I need to take this,’ he says, standing. He strides off and steps into an alcove, his back to me.

But I can’t let him walk away. Yes, it will be a blow for me professionally – and for Ursula – but it’s more than that. I genuinely believe that we can find Tristan the perfect woman to pose as his wife for the next two years. If only I can convince him to give me, and the agency, another chance.

As I stare out at the array of planes, formulating a plan to get this case back on track, a niggling thought pops up. *Are you sure your attraction to him isn't clouding your judgement?*

'Shhh,' I hiss at myself. I take out my phone and fire off an email to Ursula.

* * *

Tristan

'In one word, "terribly",' I reply to Ravi's query about how it's going. 'We're on our way back to London now, and then we're done.'

'Who's done?'

'Me and Poppy. Well, me and the agency. They've completely fucked me over, Rav. It was a disaster. Total waste of time.' I rub my forehead, which is starting to throb again – this situation is becoming a literal headache. 'I can't believe I agreed to this,' I mutter, more to myself than Ravi.

'Just hold off for now.'

'Hold off?'

'On cutting ties with the agency.'

'Did you not hear me? This whole weekend was a complete and utter waste of time. I—'

'Tris, your aunt is taking legal action. Gooch just emailed. They're filing in the morning.'

'Well, she's not wasting any time,' I say, stating the obvious.

'Exactly. And even though the law is on our side, she could drag things out indefinitely. The best thing you can do is continue your quest to find a wife. That will give us more leverage.'

‘I don’t know if I can, Ravi. It’s been a lot harder than I thought and believe me, I anticipated a reasonably rough trot.’

‘Just hang in there and trust Poppy. This is the best agency in London. They specialise in this sort of thing.’

‘What? Fucking over their clients?’

‘That’s not...’ He sighs. ‘I get that it’s been challenging.’

‘That’s one way of putting it.’

‘*But* this is your best option. You’ve got to stick with it, all right? Look, why don’t you come for dinner? Jass is making her chicken biryani.’

‘Is that my consolation prize? I agree to continue being tortured in exchange for dinner?’

‘Come at seven,’ he says, ignoring me. ‘Don’t be late.’

‘Am I ever?’

‘And bring wine.’

‘I always bring wine.’

‘White,’ he adds. ‘Something from Australia would pair well.’

Hearing ‘Australia’ brings up images of Poppy. Her unique vernacular, her laughing (mostly at me), her steadfast optimism. Only I don’t want to think of Poppy fondly. I want to wring her neck – figuratively speaking, that is. I am not prone to violence.

But anticipating a proper debrief, not only with Ravi, but with Jacinda, brings some relief to my knotted stomach and throbbing head.

‘I’ll be there at seven and I’ll bring wine. But I’m not promising anything regarding the agency.’

Ravi ignores that too. ‘See you at seven.’

The call ends and I lean against the wall, mindlessly scanning the assembled crowd of passengers. God, it’s back to work tomorrow. Not the most restful weekend I’ve ever had and I didn’t even get a workout in. We land just after 2 p.m.

That means if I hustle home from Heathrow, I can get to the gym and back in time to clean up before dinner – one saving of grace of this rubbish timewaster of a weekend.

TRISTAN

‘Ooh, I love a Riesling. Can you do the honours, Tris?’ Jacinda asks, handing back the bottle I’ve brought to dinner.

I take three white wine glasses from the cabinet on my side of the kitchen island, twist off the cap, then pour.

‘One for the chef,’ I say, handing a glass to Jacinda. ‘Ravi? Wine?’ I call out. He comes in from his office looking agitated. ‘Wine?’ I ask, holding up a glass.

‘I’m going to want something stronger,’ he says, beelining for their drinks cart. He pours two fingers of whisky and takes a slug.

Jacinda and I exchange a look. ‘Ravi, something you’d like to share?’ she asks.

‘This isn’t about me, is it?’ I ask. ‘The inheritance?’

Ravi side-eyes me and gulps more whisky. ‘Are you really that narcissistic? Not everything has to be about you, you know.’

‘Ravi Sharma, that was uncalled for.’

When he meets Jacinda’s eye, she raises her eyebrows at him then goes back to stirring the biryani.

‘Sorry, Tristan,’ he says.

‘That’s all right. You’re probably not far off. Poppy accused me of being a narcissist when we were in Greece. Only I think she was teasing. I hope she was teasing,’ I add, saying that last bit to myself.

Ravi sighs dramatically and flops onto the sofa and I join him with my wine. I'd offer to help Jacinda, but when she's cooking one of her family's recipes, the kitchen becomes sacrosanct. Even Ravi isn't allowed in there.

'So, what is it?' I ask.

He continues to stare into the amber liquid, swirling it gently in the glass.

'Just a setback in the Littleton case. Hostile takeover – *of* Littleton, not by it. My colleague just called to give me a heads up. Something hasn't gone as we'd hoped. It doesn't matter,' he says with a wave of his hand, only it's clear that it does matter.

'Sorry, Rav. I don't have to stay if you need to work.'

'You're staying, Tristan,' says Jacinda. 'I want to hear about Greece.' I swear she has superhero hearing. How did she make that out over the range hood?

'What do you want to know?' I ask loudly as I cradle the wine glass between my palms – not ideal when drinking white wine, but I like the feel of it in my hands.

'What was the contessa like?' she calls out.

'You mean before or after she tried to seduce me?' I call back.

Jacinda stops chopping herbs and comes around to this side of the kitchen island. 'This isn't you being a narcissist again, is it?'

'Thank you very much,' I say with a dry laugh. 'You're supposed to be on my side.'

'Yes, but you're terrible at knowing when a woman fancies you. Half the time you think they do, they're just being friendly and when they *actually* fancy you, you're completely blind to it. You're like the opposite of a savant.'

'That would be an "idiot", darling,' Ravi chimes in.

'You're a love idiot then,' concludes Jacinda.

‘Geez, thanks, you two. You know, if I wanted to feel worse about myself, I’d have phoned my mother.’

Jacinda presses her lips together and looks at me expectantly. ‘So, in your mind, what constitutes attempted seduction?’

‘Well,’ I say, sitting up taller and looking her in the eye, ‘phase one was Vittoria telling me she wanted to fuck me.’

Jacinda’s eyes widen and her jaw drops, her mouth forming an ‘O’.

‘That’s a bit full-on,’ says Ravi.

I turn on him. ‘Really, do you think so? How about her climbing into my bed naked?’

‘What?’ screeches Jacinda. ‘It’s supposed to be a marriage of convenience!’ She perches on one of the bar stools, clearly intrigued.

‘Er, shouldn’t you...’ I say, pointing at the giant pot on the hob.

She rushes back to it, tosses in the herbs and turns down the flame, then returns to the stool. She reaches for her wine and looks at me expectantly.

‘I want to hear every detail.’

‘Jass,’ says Ravi, ‘he clearly doesn’t want to talk about it. Look at his poor little face.’

‘Oh, *now* you’re on my side.’

‘Actually, come to think of it, I wouldn’t mind hearing either,’ he says. ‘It sounds like a right laugh and it might cheer me up. Wait on, though, I just...’ He leaps up to grab the wine I poured him, then sits back on the sofa, looking decidedly cheerier than when he got off the telephone only minutes ago.

‘Are you really going to make me relive the entire fiasco?’ I ask, looking between them.

‘Yes,’ they reply in unison.

‘And leave nothing out,’ Jacinda adds.

I sigh, surrendering. These are the two people I know best on the entire planet – there will be no getting out of spilling every sordid detail of the past three days.

An hour on, the biryani is still simmering and we're onto our second bottle of wine when I wrap up with, 'And that's why I want out of this thing.' I look at Ravi. 'Surely, *now* you can understand why? It was far from a suitable match – not even remotely close.'

'I'll give you that, but you are *not* pulling the pin on the agency.'

'But—'

'Nope, there is no "but",' he says, pointing at me. 'I'm speaking as your solicitor now and you are not abandoning your only chance at finding a wife in time to inherit.'

I had hoped to talk Ravi around over dinner but when he gets like this, there's no changing his mind.

'Fine,' I say, falling back against the sofa.

'She fancies you, you know,' says Jacinda, still perched on her stool.

'Well, thank you for stating the obvious, Jacinda. I believe that was the entire point of the story.'

'Not Vittoria, you darling idiot. *Poppy*.'

'What?' I say, sitting bolt upright. 'But that's absurd.'

She raises her eyebrows and blinks at me with that (annoying) knowing look she has.

'Not only am I right, Tristan,' she says, her voice laced with conviction, 'but you fancy her back.'

This time, it's my mouth that falls open into an 'O'.

* * *

Poppy

‘He hates me and I’m going to get fired.’

‘Excuse me, but *I* am the drama queen in this friendship,’ says Shaz.

I grab one of her throw pillows and shove it over my face and scream into it.

‘I don’t typically prescribe that particular treatment,’ she says when I drop the pillow from my face. ‘Did it work?’

‘Not even a little bit.’

‘Do you want to talk about it?’

‘Not even a little bit.’

She humours me. ‘So, we can talk about me then?’

I sit up. ‘Absolutely. And I’m sorry again that I wasn’t here for you this weekend. I’m a shitty friend.’

‘You’re not a shitty friend. You had to work. And you’re here now.’

‘What was it like seeing him again?’ I ask.

Her wince says it all.

‘Well,’ she says, ‘for the first second or two it was... amazing, like my heart forgot everything that’s happened, and he was just “Michael”, the man I love – *loved*.’ The slip is telling and when she meets my eye, sadness radiates from her. ‘Shit,’ she adds, acknowledging her slip-up.

‘And *she* was there?’ I ask gently. Shaz nods, looking away as her eyes fill. She blinks back the tears and sniffs. ‘Shaz, you don’t have to—’

‘No, I want to. I *need* to.’ She looks at me again. ‘I know that comparison is the death of joy. I *know* it.’ She taps the side of her head, her self-anger obvious. ‘I’m a professional who works with patients on this exact issue – I’d say, at *least* a third of them – yet, there I was, accepting a fucking cheek kiss from the bastard and smiling politely as he “introduced” us.’ She makes air quotes on ‘introduced’. ‘“Oh, you remember Margot, don’t you, Sharon?”’, “Well, yes, Michael, she’s the

assistant who was sucking your cock in the conference room when you were supposed to be having lunch with me!”

‘Did you actually say that?’ I ask, hoping like hell she had but knowing differently.

‘Well, no, because, well, work function. Besides, I didn’t think of it till later when I was two packets of Rolos and half a bottle of wine into self-medicating. I wish I had though.’ She stares at the coffee table, which is covered in paperbacks, mostly romcoms with brightly coloured covers and a few of those steamy romances she likes so much.

Shaz calls herself a hopeful romantic, something I wouldn’t dare dispute, even though she’s cried *many* tears over Michael and before that, Doug, and before him, Gene (yes, really – it was a family name).

‘She’s beautiful, Pop,’ says Shaz quietly, circling back to the comparison thing.

‘So are you.’ Her mouth flattens into a line and she angles her head, her way of chastising me for ‘lying’. ‘You *are*,’ I insist.

‘She looks like a fucking supermodel, Pop. Tall, skinny, big boobs, long hair, gorgeous face...’

‘Your basic nightmare,’ we say together, stealing a line from *When Harry Met Sally*, a shared favourite.

And Shaz *is* beautiful, a natural beauty with thick glossy blonde waves, wideset green eyes, perfect skin, a cupid’s bow that influencers would die for, and a tall curvy figure I’ve always admired. Though, she *hates* me saying so – she doesn’t believe me.

‘Look, Margot may be attractive’ – she flashes me that look again – ‘okay, *beautiful*, but so what? She’s a vacuous cow who thought nothing of stealing your boyfriend-boss – boss-boyfriend. Sorry, what are we calling him now?’

‘Arsehole.’

‘... Who thought nothing of stealing your arsehole.’

At that, her mouth quivers and we both burst out laughing.

‘She probably has a really ugly arsehole,’ I say, making her laugh harder.

‘Oh my god,’ Shaz says, barely getting the words out.

‘That’s my point exactly. If God truly is a woman and *She* made a woman who looked like that, don’t you think *She*’d give her the ugliest arsehole on the planet just to balance things out?’

‘Stop it, please, Pop. Phoo...’ She fans her face and takes deep gulping breaths.

‘Seriously, though, you were the adult in this situation. You may think you’d feel better if you *had* made a big scene, but you were all class, Shaz. You were polite, professional—’

‘Right up until I ran out.’

‘You’re being too hard on yourself. You were with the guy for two years. *He’s* the one who messed up, not you. You did nothing wrong. He didn’t leave you for her because she’s better than you, he finally realised that *he* wasn’t good enough for *you*.’

‘That’s kind, even if it’s bullshit.’

She’s right, it is bullshit – Michael is too conceited to have ever believed that. ‘You deserve better,’ I conclude.

‘Well, that’s true.’ She’s quiet for a moment, thoughtful. ‘Hey, what about Tristan?’

I bristle, hoping I’ve interpreted her question incorrectly. ‘What do you mean?’ I ask, my tone casual.

‘Well, he needs a wife, right? And I certainly don’t have any plans for the next couple of years,’ she says sardonically.

‘Oh, Shaz.’ She so desperately wants to be with someone, and I really wish I could help.

‘You said he’s hot, so there’s the eye candy element,’ she continues, ‘and from what you’ve told me, we’d be very grumpy–sunshine...’

I’ve heard this phrase before – it’s one of Shaz’s favourite romance tropes. ‘I could make that work,’ she says decisively.

Hang on, is she just playing or is she semi-serious?

‘So, should I meet him? What do you think?’

What I think is that she’s been going on about this far too long to just be playing.

‘Um, no,’ I say firmly. It would be incredibly unprofessional to match Tristan with *Shaz*.

‘Why not?’ she asks with a laugh. Several thoughts run across her face and her eyes light up with realisation. ‘Oh no, Pop. *You* like him.’

‘What? I... No, it’s just unprofessional for you and him...’

My words dry up, replaced with images of Tristan flickering in my mind’s eye as if I’m thumbing through a book of photos. Making him laugh despite his best efforts to be stern, his awe at that incredible view atop Poros, bantering morning and night, how his face softens when he talks about his grandfather, those forearms in the rolled-up sleeves of his linen shirt, his smile, the helplessness in his eyes when Vittoria made a play for him... On and on they go, a bombardment of memories that scream ‘attraction’.

Oh my god, Shaz is right. And – *worse* – this may be more than just attraction. I may actually be falling for my client.

‘You know, I was only kidding, before – about meeting him,’ she says gently.

‘I know,’ I lie.

‘But, Pop, you can’t. You *can’t*...’ It seems that Shaz has no words either.

‘I *know*,’ I say quietly. Only this time, it isn’t a lie.

I am so fucked.

POPPY

Was it only last week that I presented Tristan's case at the staff meeting? God, that was also the same day we got the news that someone plans to expose us. With everything that's happened in the past five days, both feel like a millennia ago.

'Hey, Poppy.'

'Oh hi, Nasrin. How are you?'

She regards me intensely. 'More to the point, how are *you*? You look... strange.'

My hand flies to one cheek then the other. I did feel a little warm this morning, but I put it down to stressing over this case. I press my palm to my forehead.

'I didn't mean sick, silly, just... distracted. You were a million miles away when I came in.'

'Oh, right.'

'Everything okay?'

'Truth be to—'

'Good morning, Poppy.'

Good, it's Ursula. Except, I was hoping to speak with her in private before the staff meeting – replying to the email I sent from Athens, she agreed we need to regroup – but now we have an audience. And I don't want Nasrin's input on this. I don't want anyone else to know how badly it went in Greece.

‘Good morning,’ I reply to Ursula. ‘Did you want some tea? I’ve brewed the big one this morning.’ I point to the teapot, feeling more idiotic by the second. Ursula doesn’t even drink tea.

They’re both watching me, odd expressions on their faces. When they exchange a look, I flick my eyes towards the clock on the wall. An out. ‘Oh, look at that. We should get to the staff meeting.’

I grab the largest mug in the kitchen, pour from the teapot, splash in some milk, making a mess I’ll have to clean up later, then leave before Nasrin can tell me again how strange I’m being – as though it’s not patently obvious to all three of us.

It normally takes a lot to rattle me but it’s not just the case going pear-shaped – or the issue with the agency’s leak. After a sleepless night, I’ve admitted to myself that I crossed the line. I definitely have feelings for my client. And – *worse* – those feelings have left me torn. Do I let him leave the agency and never see him again? Or do I force myself to find him a *wife*? Both options suck but only one is professional suicide.

I cross the office and head into the conference room, sliding into my seat right as Saskia and Paloma enter.

‘Good morning, Poppy,’ says Saskia. I fake a smile, then exchange pleasantries with her and Paloma for the several minutes it takes for the others to take their seats, all while sending longing glances at my undrunk tea. At exactly 9.30 a.m., Saskia begins the meeting and I drink down a large glug of it, impatient for that familiar calm to surge through me. My mum always used to say that tea had magic properties. I was twenty-five before I learnt that the ‘magic’ was really L-theanine, an amino acid that has a calming effect on the mind. I’m going to need a *bucket* of L-theanine this morning.

‘So, we have news on the leak,’ begins Saskia. ‘Mia? Can you please provide an update?’

Mia looks around the table, evident excitement bubbling from within. ‘Well,’ she says, milking the moment, ‘I’ve found the anonymous blogger.’

There's a slight loosening of the knot in my stomach – well, of the part that has nothing to do with Tristan and me completely screwing up my case (and potentially my career).

'Oh, thank god!' exclaims George, dramatically flopping against the back of his chair.

'Who is it?' Nasrin and Freya ask together. Nasrin shoots Freya a wink and they exchange smiles.

'Are any of you familiar with Kendall?' asks Mia.

'As in Jenner?' replies George.

'No, Kendall is an influencer – mostly fashion, some luxury travel goods, watches, that sort of thing. Anyway, they have all the usual social accounts but... they *also* have an anonymous blog, one they use to reveal secrets under a pseudonym. Well, they *used* to have an anonymous blog,' she adds, visibly bursting with pride. 'They're the one behind the teasers.'

'And you uncovered that?' asks George. Mia nods shyly. 'Well done, you!'

'Thanks,' she replies with a grin.

'So now what?' asks Nasrin. She turns to Saskia. 'Do you do some sort of legal thing?'

'No need,' Saskia replies. 'Now that we know that Kendall is behind this, we have leverage. An indiscreet tell-all blog may be good for drumming up advertising revenue, but it's terrible for their brand as an influencer. And if they expose us, we expose them.'

'A stalemate,' says Nasrin.

'More like mutually assured destruction,' pipes in Paloma.

'Are we comfortable with that?' asks Ursula. It's a good point. Kendall still has a gun to our head, so to speak.

'For now, yes,' replies Paloma. 'But we're still hoping to find the primary source. It's most likely a former client and if they were prepared to go on the record with Kendall, they'll

likely go somewhere else when they realise we've killed the story.'

'So, in this case, no news is *bad* news?' asks Nasrin.

Freya and I exchange a glance.

'I wouldn't put it like that exactly,' says Paloma, clearly annoyed. Nasrin purses her lips. Oh dear, now *she's* annoyed.

'Anyway,' says Saskia, clapping her hands together and smiling brightly, 'this is progress, and I'm optimistic about the outcome. Well done, Mia.'

There's applause and cheery congratulations and Nasrin whistles with two fingers in her mouth. Mia's cheeks pink at all the attention as she glances up at the rest of us through her eyelashes.

'Let's move onto updates. Poppy?'

What, we're starting with me?!

All the way to work this morning – and I *walked* – the *long* way – I mentally talked through my update. I oscillated between throwing myself on my sword and copping to every single lowlight of what happened in Greece (leaving out the part where I might fancy my client), and breezily playing down the extent of the carnage. I look to Ursula, panicked.

'Ah, Saskia,' she says, 'Poppy and I would prefer to update you in private, if that's all right?'

Shit, that may be worse. Like being sent to the principal's office. Only this time it *was* me who scribbled all over the whiteboard in Mr Dickerson's classroom that he was a dick – in *permanent* marker – and not my so-called best friend, Miranda. Or the professional equivalent. Ninety per cent of this cock-up is *mine*.

Saskia blinks slowly in confusion, then immediately recovers (in true Saskia fashion). 'Of course,' she says with lashings of magnanimousness. This woman is so diplomatic she could work for the UN. Conversely, my inner voice is wailing that if we lose this whale of a client, Saskia will fire me.

I sit through three other updates, not hearing a single word and downing tea like it *is* a magic elixir. Maybe I'll get lucky and it will teleport me to my flat, or to the farm in Tasmania, or even Narnia.

'*Poppy!*' I snap out of my reverie to discover that the staff meeting has ended and Ursula is standing next to me, tapping my shoulder.

'Sorry.'

'Nasrin was right, you are in another world.'

'All good.' Not very convincing. And I know that, if she were able to, Ursula would frown at me.

'Saskia asked to see us in her office, for our update,' she says, watching me closely.

'Right, yes, absolutely' I say, sounding more like Bridget Jones on a bad day than myself. 'So, how do you want to handle this?'

'Well, we need to be upfront about Tristan's position.'

Ah, yes, Tristan's position. Well, no good can come of being upfront about that. Maybe I can Jedi mind trick Ursula into fudging the truth a little.

'What if we, you know, gloss over that bit – just until we can meet with Tristan and get him back onside.'

'That's a terrible idea, Poppy. If Saskia discovered the full extent of his dissatisfaction and that we'd lied—'

'Not *lied*, just tempered the truth a little.'

'No,' she says, melding firmness and kindness. 'That's not the way to go about this. She'd find out. Remember that she knows Ravi Sharma, Tristan's closest friend. And that would paint us in a terrible light. We need to be upfront.'

I sigh heavily, permitting myself some George-like dramatics.

'Okay.'

I stand as though I'm wearing a lead diving belt. Why do I feel so heavy all of a sudden? My psychologist brain kicks in to tell me it's psychosomatic.

'I'll take the lead, all right?' Ursula offers, a microscopic oasis in a desert of shit.

I nod, grateful at least that she won't throw me under the bus. Not that I expect her to – she's too classy for that – but still.

'Come on, let's go,' she says, cajoling me into action.

I feel as if I'm about to disembark an aircraft via one of those jumpy castle slides and I grip my tablet like it's a flotation device, then follow Ursula into Saskia's office. Fortunately, it's just the three of us. Paloma likes to sit in sometimes, and she can be a little... um... judgey.

'Poppy, Ursula, come in, have a seat,' Saskia says, indicating the leather sofa. She closes the door, then takes her seat opposite us in a matching armchair. Normally, I'd allow myself to sink into the baby-soft leather, getting comfortable. This has been the scene of many a productive brainstorming session, like the one when we decided to start doing pro bono cases. It was Saskia's brainchild, but the energy that buzzed around the room that day... all of us were so excited, so energised.

Today, however, I perch on the edge of the sofa and lick my dry lips.

'So,' says Saskia with a smile, 'You wanted to discuss the Fellows case?'

I glance at Ursula checking that she's still on point to begin the update.

'We need your advice,' she begins.

Great tactic! It positions Saskia as the expert – that is, butters her up – *and* indicates that things are not running as smoothly as we'd hoped, establishing reasonable expectations.

'Oh?' Saskia's brow furrows as she regards us thoughtfully.

‘It seems that Mr Fellows wants to wrap up the case – as in, break the arrangement with the agency. Without securing a wife. *Today.*’

‘Oh dear, what’s happened?’ Saskia seems calmer than I’d expected but I suppose we don’t call her The Swan for nothing.

Ursula, who is suddenly behaving very un-swanlike, flicks me a look. It does not instil confidence. ‘Poppy, why don’t you fill Saskia in?’

Me?! What happened to ‘taking the lead’, Ursula? Perhaps she considered her savvy preface enough to set me up for success – like a teammate setting the volleyball so you can spike it. If so, she was wrong! Very, *very* wrong, as I have no idea where to start.

Saskia, a rather unhinged Italian contessa climbed naked into my bed, thinking I was Mr Fellows.

Saskia, you know how we are absolutely NOT to become too familiar with our clients? Well – oops – I am one spine-tingling glance away from having sex dreams about the guy, then wanting to act them out.

Saskia, you may as well fire me right now. I’m about to lose us a huge client because, now that I think about it, I got a little distracted and kind of went on a date with him.

But instead of falling on my sword, I summon Professional Poppy. Until now, she’s done a fabulous job of hiding (the cow), but I draw her out from the darkest recesses of my very being and say, ‘Potential number one didn’t work out, but we have two more solid potentials already lined up. I’m positive I can get Mr Fellows to reconsider.’

Please don’t see through my bullshit.

Saskia’s expression shifts and, unsurprisingly, she’s wary, ‘So, what exactly did you need my advice on then?’

Ursula and I exchange another look. This is me bumping that bloody volleyball into the air and, by god, Ursula, you’d better get it over the net!

‘Which one you think might be the best option to proceed with,’ Ursula says.

‘As potential number two,’ I add, relieved.

Game, set, and match to Poppy and Ursula.

TRISTAN

‘Mr Fellows, I’m heading out for the day if you don’t need anything else?’

‘No, no, all good. Thank you, Adam,’ I reply, glancing up at him.

‘And, Mr Sharma has just arrived,’ he adds, cocking his head inquisitively. ‘He’s not in your calendar, so...’

‘Send him in.’

Adam leaves, his tall form replaced by a considerably shorter Ravi, who wears a laptop bag across his body and bears a brown paper bag.

‘Nice of you to show up uninvited,’ I say, my eyes returning to my laptop.

‘Unexpected is different than uninvited, you know,’ he retorts. He sits opposite me in one of two armchairs. ‘Best friends typically have a standing invitation,’ he adds.

‘Is that so?’ I ask, my eyes still riveted to the report.

‘Well, amongst normal people, yes.’

I look up. ‘Are we not “normal people”?’

‘I am. You? Most definitely not.’

I ignore the jibe. ‘Is that to celebrate or commiserate?’ I ask, nodding at what is clearly a bottle swathed in the brown paper.

‘Mostly the latter,’ he replies. He takes the bottle of whisky from its wrapping and presents it to me like a sommelier checking they’ve brought the correct wine to the table.

‘Give me a minute,’ I say, going back to the report. I add a comment to it, then save it manually, even though it is continuously autosaved (you can never be too safe when it comes to backing up documents). ‘Right,’ I say, closing my laptop, ‘what’s the latest snag in this god-awful mess?’

‘Your cousin – Olivia – she and her sister want to meet you.’

I push back against my chair, tipping it to eighty degrees, and steeple my fingers under my chin.

‘If you were ugly, you could be a Bond villain,’ Ravi quips. I snigger softly. ‘Oh, come on? *That* you found funny? I wasn’t even trying.’

I wave him off. ‘Just lines up with something I was thinking in Greece. About Vittoria...’ I add, offering no further explanation. ‘Anyway, Olivia. Why would she have contacted you, rather than reaching out to me directly?’

He raises his fingertips to his temples and closes his eyes. ‘Hang about, it’s coming to me...’ His brow creases and right as he says, ‘Because—’ I pick up the stress ball Adam left on my desk the week before last and lob it at Ravi’s head, missing. ‘Oi!’

‘Rav, can you *please* just get to it? I was off on Friday, it’s been a hellish day catching up, and I still have another hour’s worth of work before I can knock off. *At least.*’

‘Fine.’ He adopts his solicitor face and rattles off a digest of the latest developments.

‘So, in a nutshell, I remain completely fucked,’ I state when he finishes.

‘Can we crack this yet?’ he asks, pointing to the bottle.

I open the bottom drawer of my desk and take out two glass tumblers, something that appalled the woman I dated this

time last year. She'd scoffed at me, referenced the television show, *Mad Men*, then harped on about the patriarchy for a good five minutes. She wasn't interested in learning that I have them in my desk is because, shockingly, I sometimes like to have a drink after work. Nor did she want to hear that *I'm* the one who washes and dries them after use. I ended it that afternoon, seemingly to her great relief.

Ravi opens the bottle and pours – this whisky is one of his favourites, not mine, though I do like it. He slides a glass across the desktop and I take it, raise it in his direction, and sip.

Ravi mirrors my actions, then speaks. 'The way I see it, your cousins wanting to meet with you... it's a good thing,' he says.

'How so? Won't they just echo their mother's wishes? According to Aunt Lucinda, their share alone is worth fifteen million pounds. We've offered four – in a trust!'

He leans forward, balancing his elbows on his knees, his glass cradled in his hands. 'That's just it. First, it's four million pounds *each*. And that's generous, Tristan, as there's no way they'll win the court case and then they'll be left with nothing. Second, if you agree to manage the trusts for them until they each turn thirty...'

He leaves the notion hanging and I consider it while I take another sip.

'So, what?' I ask. 'I meet with Evie and Olivia and offer them my services free of charge for the next half-a-decade and that will convince them to side with me?'

'It's one idea.'

'It's not terrible.'

'Why, thank you,' he says, his voice thick with sarcasm.

'Thank you, Ravi – brilliant as always.' He nods benevolently and I chuckle. 'But you do realise we're forgetting one thing?'

'What's that?'

‘My birthday is a month away and I am one wife short of a marriage.’

He waves me off again. ‘Details.’

I snort out a derisive laugh and take another sip. I suppose I should be grateful he hasn’t raised the other thing, what Jacinda said about Poppy and me. It’s complete bollocks anyway. There’s absolutely nothing between us other than a common goal to find me a wife. Yes, we were friendly towards each other in Greece but that was, well, a miscalculation. And, as I can’t walk away from this arrangement, it will be strictly professional between us from now on.

‘All right, you, enough of that,’ Ravi says. I meet his eye, seeing that he’s amused by my musing. ‘Come on, I’ve arranged a meeting for us at the agency.’

‘What? Tonight?’

‘Yes.’ He stands and waves a hand at me like a bobby directing traffic.

‘I told you I have to work.’

‘No, you have to find a wife. That takes precedence.’ He flicks his wrist to check his watch. ‘Come on. If we leave now, we’ll just make it.’

‘Do you have a car waiting?’

‘At five fifteen on a Monday? From the financial district to Richmond? Are you mad?’

I sigh, resigning myself to yet another series of Tube rides, this time during rush hour.

* * *

Poppy

‘Okay, so we have...’ I trail off, thumbing the remote to ensure the images of our next two potentials come up in the order we’ve agreed. ‘Alexandra, then Nerida...’

I turn to Ursula, who is placing their printed biographies on the conference table with the precision of surgeon.

‘Right,’ she says, admiring her handiwork. She makes a minor adjustment, squaring off one of the documents with the edge of the table, then lifts her eyes to meet mine. ‘Are you ready?’

I nod, donning a Poppy-the-Professional smile despite my churning insides. It’s like a demolition derby in there – thoughts and feelings zinging around and colliding. Bam. Bam. Bam.

Two fight for dominance:

Don’t lose a major client – especially one referred by a friend of the agency’s Founder.

And

DO. NOT. FALL. FOR. YOUR. CLIENT. YOU. UNPROFESSIONAL. MORON.

It’s no wonder I feel slightly nauseous.

‘Remember,’ says Ursula, ‘Greece is behind us. Time to move forward.’

‘Got it.’

‘And either one of these potentials would make him an excellent wife. I’d stake my reputation on it.’ I refrain from calling her out on the whole Vittoria thing, something else she’d staked her reputation on. Yes, it was ultimately my decision, but when a senior agent all but insists, you defer. I file the lesson away. If I’m ever again tasked with securing a marriage of convenience and Ursula brings up Vittoria as a potential, I will shout ‘NO’ till the cows come home. And believe me, cows can be *stubborn* – sometimes they take ages to come home.

Ursula looks up at the large clock on the conference room wall: 6.25 p.m.

‘I’ll go before they get here,’ she says. It’s what we’ve already agreed, so the only reason for Ursula to say it out loud is that she’s also worried.

‘I’ll call you afterwards.’

‘Good luck, Poppy,’ she says – arguably something you don’t bother saying unless you think the person needs it.

I sit in Saskia’s chair at the head of the table, my eyes trained on the agency’s front door. A couple of minutes after Ursula departs, it swings open and there he is. And – *damn him* – he looks incredible. But then I’ve always been partial to a good-looking man in a well-made suit. Ravi accompanies him, as I’d expected.

I stand and cross to the conference room doorway. ‘Gentlemen,’ I say, channelling Saskia The Swan, ‘come through.’

* * *

Tristan

‘Wow,’ says Ravi under his breath, ‘was she this attractive when we met her last week?’

‘Shut it.’

Though, he has a point. Several days in the Greek sunshine have only enhanced Poppy’s natural beauty – objectively speaking, of course. She smiles at us warmly, which is a little rich considering how badly she and the agency have botched my case. At the very least, she could show some humility.

We join her in the conference room, and she indicates the chairs either side of hers at the head of the table. Two biographies lie in front of me, and I recognise the names from that (odd) meeting in the screening room. I look at Poppy expectantly, hoping to maintain the upper hand. She has no idea that Ravi has forbidden me to cut ties with the agency and I will cling to that leverage as long as possible.

Ravi’s phone rings, a loud intrusion in the otherwise silent room, and Poppy and I watch as he takes it out of his pocket, grimaces at it dramatically, says, ‘I’m afraid I have to take

this,' then steps out of the room before I can object. He closes the door behind him and takes the call. I'd wager the entire thirty million pounds it's Jacinda and he *told* her to phone.

'So, just us then,' says Poppy. I level my gaze at her and wait. 'Right, so before we discuss next steps, I owe you an apology.' Her words surprise me, but I try not to flinch, lest I surrender any ground. 'Actually, *we* do. Tristan, on behalf of the Ever After Agency, please accept our apology. We admit that putting forward Vittoria as a potential wife caused a significant setback in your case and did little to sustain your confidence in us.'

'That's assuming I had confidence in you to begin with.'

'*Touché*, Mr Fellows. Well done you for putting me in my place,' she quips. I feel the bite of her rebuke while simultaneously applauding her audacity. The only people who call me out when I'm behaving like an arse are Ravi and Jacinda. And I have no doubt I am being an arse, even if I believe I'm entitled. This agency doesn't come cheap and I'm on the clock.

'Now that we have that out of the way, I'd also like to acknowledge that with your looming deadline we need to regroup as soon as possible.'

Despite her 'mea culpa' approach, I'm still incensed and I stride into the conversation, guns blazing.

'Yes, I know. Why do you think I agreed to be dragged all the way across town of a Monday evening when I really should be at work?'

Still, nothing – not a flinch or an eye twitch, not a single muscle in her entire face moves. And what *am* I doing? Yes, I'm cross with her, with how she's handled this, but I still *need* her. Working collaboratively with Poppy may be the only way I can meet the terms of Grandad's will.

Are you sure there's nothing else, Tris? A little thing called 'attraction'? Jacinda's voice taunts me, adding to my annoyance. At her. At Poppy. At Grandad. At this whole fucked-up situation.

And yes, at myself.

Mr Dickhead? Table for one? Is there a Mr Dickhead here?

If my dad were in this meeting, he'd say something like, 'Oi, mate, Pop is doing her best, so pull your head in and stop being such a dickhead.'

But no matter how good it would feel to put Tristan in his place, I will not give this man the satisfaction of knowing he's getting to me. At. All. I retain my neutral expression, my years of practicing psychology paying professional dividends.

'Tristan, I've apologised. Attempting to engage me in a squabble is not going to get us anywhere. Can we please move on?'

His jaw tightens – that not-so-poker face betraying him – and he nods curtly.

I press a button on my tablet and a photograph of Alexandra populates the screen above my head. 'You will remember Alexandra from our briefing last week?' He nods again, then picks up her bio and starts flipping through it. 'We believe that she will be the most viable option going forward.'

I advance the slides in (reasonably) quick succession and watch closely as Tristan takes in the images. Alexandra is attractive with a light brown chin-length bob, blue eyes, an aquiline nose, high cheekbones, and the type of English-rose complexion that burns easily in the sun. And in stark contrast to Vittoria, who dressed like a human butterfly, Alexandra dresses austere – mostly in black and neutrals and simple, classic styles.

‘And what was the other one’s name?’ he asks. ‘Melinda?’

‘Nerida.’ That’s the second time he’s got her name wrong.

I advance the slides again, keeping a close watch on Tristan. As his eyes alight on Nerida’s photos, something flickers across his eyes – attraction. I mash my teeth together, mentally kicking myself for being jealous. Argh!

‘But she lives in Edinburgh don’t forget,’ I say. ‘Whereas Alexandra is London-based.’

He nods slowly as if contemplating his options. ‘Can’t I just meet both of them, then decide?’

‘Absolutely not.’ He appears surprised by my vehemence, so I offer an explanation. ‘Matchmaking 101, you see – *one* potential match at a time. Believe me, it’s for everyone’s benefit.’

‘But why? Surely in a time sens—’

‘*Tristan*. Read your contract. We set you up with one potential wife at a time.’

‘Fine.’ He roughly thumbs through Alexandra’s bio again, stopping to read towards the middle, his lips pressing into a line and his brows knitting together. Until now, I did not know a person could read angrily. He flicks back to the first page and tosses the bio onto the conference table. ‘She’ll do.’

‘*She’ll do?*’ The words pop from my mouth unbidden but I don’t stop there. ‘Alexandra is one of the pre-eminent museum curators in the country. She speaks three languages other than English, has her Master’s in Anthropology and a PhD in philosophy. She’s on the board of *two* charities and in 2021, at the height of the pandemic, she was awarded the Mayor of London’s Volunteer Award.’

I glare at him, daring him to shrug or scoff or demonstrate his stifling arrogance in *any* way.

He leans forward. ‘Then why on earth is she still single?’

His question surprises me but I recover quickly. ‘You will have to ask her that,’ I say, my chin lifted in indignation.

‘All right. But here’s a question for *you*: If Alexandra is so amazing, why wasn’t she potential number one?’

I gasp, recoiling as though he’s slapped me. Because it’s the perfect retort. And I have absolutely no recourse because Alexandra *should* have been first.

‘Set it up,’ he commands, standing. He pushes open the door to the conference room leaving it gaping open behind him, just like my mouth is. He strides past Ravi, who rushes to catch up to him while tossing an apologetic look in my direction.

As the agency door closes behind them, I expel the breath I’ve been holding. ‘Well, if I *did* fancy him, even a little bit, *that’s* no longer an issue,’ I say to myself. ‘Bastard,’ I add, liking how satisfying the word feels in my mouth.

* * *

Tristan

‘What the hell was that?’ I ignore Ravi, stabbing at the elevator button impatiently. ‘And that doesn’t make it come any faster, you know.’

‘I’m taking the stairs.’ I look around, find the door, and push it open so hard the slam reverberates through the stairwell. I take the stairs as fast as my legs will carry me, one hand sliding down the railing, then I burst into the foyer, stride across the marble, and emerge onto the street where I take in great gulps of air.

I couldn’t say how long after, Ravi shows up. ‘Tris, are you all right?’

I have no idea how to answer that question. Normally, I’d find something sarcastic to say, downplaying my – let’s face it, atrocious – behaviour. But right in this moment, it all feels too much.

Grandad, the only person in my family who I had a real relationship with, is gone – I’ll never see him again. My aunt is behaving like a vulture, not realising – or perhaps caring – that if we don’t work together on this, none of us will inherit a penny. I’ve got less than a month to find a wife because of a ridiculous clause that was written into a will long before I was born. And the person who is supposed to be helping me is... is... what? Incompetent? Inept? Infuriating?

‘Why the hell wasn’t I introduced to Alexandra first?’ I ask. ‘I mean, she sounds perfect – for this I mean. She’d *better* be perfect.’ I mutter this last part to myself, then meet Ravi’s eye.

‘I just... Why did Poppy have me go all the way to Greece to meet someone *so* unsuitable when I could have met Alexandra last week?’

‘I agree that Vittoria was a little out there.’

‘A little?’

‘All right, more than a little, but Poppy explained. It was a timing matter and if it didn’t work out—’

‘It *didn’t!*’ I shout.

‘Yes, I realise that. And now half of London does too,’ he says extending his arms and looking around, clearly troubled.

I press my lips together, suddenly embarrassed to be talking like this out on the street amongst curious onlookers.

‘And you’re forgetting the reason you agreed. Vittoria has her own money. If it *had* worked out, you wouldn’t have had to pay her the fee – the *sizeable* fee. You know that. We discussed it and we agreed. So don’t put this entirely on Poppy or the agency. You had a say in this and now you’re behaving like a spoilt schoolboy.’

I look away, unable to endure the extreme disappointment emanating from my closest friend. And he’s right.

‘I’m sorry,’ I say quietly, my eyes fixed on the footpath. ‘I don’t think I realised until now how much this is weighing on me. I just want to do the right thing, by everyone. And now the

cousins want to meet and, on the way over here, I got this...’ I take my phone out of my pocket, unlock it, and navigate to my email inbox. I hand the phone to Ravi and he quickly scans the screen.

‘Why didn’t you say anything?’ he asks, handing me back the phone.

‘When was the right time for that? In the packed Tube? On the harried walk over here from the station? In the lift? And I still haven’t processed it. Everyone wants a piece of this – of *me*. Now my mother.’

‘She hasn’t got legal standing, Tris.’

‘Well, no. And she’s probably just doing this to spite Lucinda, but I’m in the middle. All this hinges on me and my ability to find a wife. And that’s just to secure the inheritance. We haven’t even discussed what happens after that, how my life will change.’

‘It is life-changing money, I agree.’

‘But that’s just it, for me it isn’t, not really. I already own my flat – I *like* my flat. I’m not going to move or suddenly buy a *yacht* or anything. Ostensibly, my life will be the same, except for one not-so-minor detail. There will be another person in it. I will be *married*, Rav. And it’s become quite clear that separate domains, separate *lives* will not do. All things going to plan, in five weeks I will have a stranger living in my home. And that’s things “going to plan”! Do you see? My entire life will be turned upside down.’

I’ve worked myself into a lather again and pause to collect myself.

‘I’m not sure I want this. Any of it. Right now, I’m inclined to let the inheritance go to the bloody birds and get on with my life.’

Ravi watches me, his expression pained, and I can’t bear it. I look along the street instead, taking in deep breaths and trying to determine where the nearest pub is. Or perhaps I should just head home – that’s probably a better idea.

‘Listen, how about you come back to ours? We’ll have something to eat and talk, figure it out. What do you say?’

‘If you show up with me in this state, Jacinda will divorce you.’

‘She’d do no such thing. Jacinda loves you.’

I smile, the thought of Jacinda’s sisterly love a brief escape from the maelstrom within me. ‘That’s kind but I’m going home. I need to be by myself, think everything through.’

‘Look, don’t worry about your mother’s solicitor – it’s nothing to worry about, all right? Forward the email to me and I will handle it.’

‘Thanks.’

‘And do you want me to set up a meeting with the cousins?’

‘I... I don’t know. I need to figure that out, along with everything else. No point in meeting with them if there’s no inheritance to discuss.’

‘Understood.’ He watches me for a moment. ‘Look, I’m going to catch the Tube. You?’

‘I’ll just call a car. I can’t face... *people* right now.’

He pats me firmly on the shoulder. ‘Right. Well, hang in there, stiff upper lip and all that.’ I can’t tell if he’s being ironic.

He disappears into the early evening crowd, and I order a car. Thankfully, it only takes a short while to arrive but even as I sink into the soft leather seat, thoughts continue to come fast and thick. One dominates all others. *I should apologise to Poppy.*

For a second, I consider calling her, but that’s a coward’s way out. Besides, she’s probably busy arranging a meeting with Alexandra – as I instructed. Or was it ordered? I recall the shock on her face as I loomed over her in the conference room and feel a stab of guilt. God, this whole mess is turning me into an arsehole – well, some might say *more* of an arsehole.

Oh, Grandad, surely, this isn't what you had in mind?

* * *

Poppy

‘Seriously, Shaz, he’s *such* a dickhead.’ I’m on my sofa, feet propped up on the coffee table, a glass of wine in one hand and my phone in the other.

‘I mean, he was given Alexandra’s bio the same time as Vittoria’s and did he insist on meeting her first? No, he did not. Instead, he agreed to go to Greece and meet Vittoria. He had the final say! And now all of this is my fault?!’

My best friend does nothing to hide her merriment at my sad tale.

‘Why is this so amusing to you?’

‘No reason,’ she says, the corner of her mouth quirking. *Clearly* there is a reason.

‘Oh god, you’re not still on *that* whole thing, are you?’

‘Hey, it’s not *my* “whole thing”, it’s yours. You’re the one who confessed to liking him.’

‘Yeah, well, that’s in the past. *Wayyy* in the—’ I go to wave my hand – the one that’s holding the wine – sloshing it everywhere. ‘Shit.’

‘Do you want me to come over?’

‘To help clean up the wine?’ I ask, reaching for a wad of tissues.

‘To talk you off the ledge.’

‘It’s not that bad.’

‘The past week has been intense, Pop. You’re worried about the agency getting exposed, you’re worried about fucking up this case, you’ve been to *Greece*—’

‘Yeah, but that was mostly good,’ I interject.

‘Sure, okay, “mostly good” but a lot went down and not all of it to plan. You had a naked woman in your bed for crying out loud! And not in a good way,’ she says, making me laugh. Of the two of us, only one has had sexual encounters with women. Hint: It’s not me.

‘You’re right,’ I admit.

‘I often am.’

‘And modest. So modest.’

‘I am the most modest person on the planet. It’s baffling, really, how someone as great as I am could also be blessed with this much modesty.’ We both chuckle at our running joke, one that, over the years, has broken the tension and got us laughing many a time.

‘I love you,’ I say spontaneously.

‘I know, it’s because I’m so modest,’ she deadpans.

‘Bye!’ I sing out.

I end the call and sip the rest of my wine. I really am fortunate to have a best friend who, with a few well-chosen words *and* the odd joke, can bring clarity and reason to my world. And she’s right. It’s been a huge week and I need to cut myself some slack.

At least I’ve steered the case back on track. I’m positive that Alexandra will be the right fit for Tristan. I wouldn’t say that she’d sounded *enthused* when we spoke earlier – more matter of fact, *pragmatic* even – but after Vittoria, I sense she is exactly what Tristan needs.

Whether he likes it or not.

POPPY

The blue of the warm, salty water is a mix of aquamarine and cerulean and my pale legs look distorted as I watch them kicking beneath me. *Ahh, this is the life.* I tip my head and kick hard until I'm floating on my back, eyes closed and the sun kissing my face. My arms and legs lazily drift as I softly bob on the water's surface.

'Poppy, watch out!'

Panicked, my eyes fly open just in time to see a huge yacht bearing down on me, and Tristan leaning over the bow gesturing wildly for me to get out of the way.

I wake with a start, my breath ragged, and push myself up to sitting, sucking in great gulps of air. I'm sopping wet, a hand across my brow coming away slicked with sweat, and my sheets and nightie drenched. Blinking at the darkness, I search for the glow of my phone, which doubles as my alarm clock. 2.37 a.m.

Just a dream, I tell myself. 'Just a dream, Poppy,' I say out loud.

But there's no way I'll go back to sleep, not like this. I flick on the lamp, which in the dead of night – even amid the light pollution of Greater London – feels like the sun. I strip off and have a quick shower, changing into another nightie, then remake the bed, a chore I hate even when it's *not* the middle of the night and I've just woken from a nightmare.

When order is restored – at least outwardly – I climb back into bed, flick off the light and lie there staring at the ceiling.

What the fuck was that? I ask myself, even though a first-year psychology student could analyse that dream. Hell, I could write to the ‘Dream Interpreter’ in one of those supermarket rags and even *they’d* be able to unpack it accurately.

This case is getting to me – I feel out of my depth and like I’m about to lose all credibility as an agent. And obviously Tristan is getting to me. With any luck, he’ll meet Alexandra, they’ll hit it off – as much as two people who are agreeing to marry in name only can – and this time next week, I will be onto my next case. I’ve got my eye on a couple of promising referrals that arrived in the past few days.

Right, so dream neutralised, catastrophising pre-empted and quashed, now sleep.

Only sleep doesn’t come. Not when I talk myself through a meditative stocktake of my body parts, consciously relaxing each one as I go, or when I count backwards in threes from five thousand, or even when I present myself a mental Henry Cavill slideshow. That last one is my favourite and has led to some lovely dreams in the past. But none of my standard panaceas for sleeplessness work, and it’s too late to take some melatonin. I’ll be a zombie in the morning.

I turn the light back on and grab my phone, doing the calculation in my head as I navigate to my contact list and call home. On the third ring, Mum answers. ‘Hello?’

‘Mum, it’s me.’

‘Poppy! Gary, it’s Poppy! She’s phoning from England,’ Mum adds, a fair assumption, even though I was travelling internationally only days ago.

She must have put the handset on speakerphone as I can clearly hear Dad grunt, likely him climbing out of his chair. ‘Old man noises’ he calls them, even though he’s only sixty-four. Mum hurries him up with, ‘Come on. It’s long-distance.’

I don’t bother correcting her that ‘long-distance’ is included in my phone plan. I know all about the ‘olden days’ when a call from my hometown to Hobart was considered

long-distance and could cost a dollar a minute. Oh! This must be why Dad hates lengthy phone calls – he’s been conditioned to be succinct.

‘How are you, Pop?’ he asks, his tone warm and fatherly. It sends a pang of homesickness tearing through me, but I try not to let it take hold.

‘Yes, how are you, love?’ adds Mum. ‘Isn’t it the middle of the night there?’

‘Ah, yes, it is. Can’t sleep, so I called home to see how *you* are.’

‘Oh dear,’ says Mum, obviously latching onto the ‘can’t sleep’ part. ‘What’s on your mind, then?’

‘Do you need anything?’ interjects Dad, his way of asking if I need money. I’ve out earned my parents for most of my professional life but they’ve never stopped offering to ‘help’.

‘Ah, no, Dad. Thanks, though. Just saying hello.’

‘All right, then. I’ll leave you to your mother. Bye, love.’ Yep, right on schedule. I’ve had a variation of this conversation with my dad dozens, if not hundreds, of times. And each one makes me love him more.

‘Bye, Dad.’

‘So,’ says Mum, pressing the phone to her ear, ‘what’s really going on then? It’s not like you to have a sleepless night.’ I don’t correct her assumption. Both my parents have always slept solidly, probably because when you work the land, it’s what your body needs to keep going – that and a steady diet of wholesome homegrown and hand-raised food. But I don’t work the land. I work the landscape of the human heart and mind, which comes with a hefty dose of empathising and very often, overthinking. There’s also the occasional discomfort of playing puppet master.

‘Oh, just my new client,’ I say. ‘He’s a little more, um, difficult than I’d hoped.’

‘Oh, do tell!’

Oh, Noelene, you die-hard gossip you.

I tell Mum as much as I can about Tristan without revealing who he is (or what I actually do for a living), embellishing where possible for her amusement. Twenty minutes later, I've had her laughing out loud several times and, thankfully, the remnants of my dream have dissipated. 'Okay, Mum, I should try and get some sleep.'

'All right, Pop. Love you.'

'Love you too.'

We end the call and I switch off the light, then snuggle under the covers, savouring that delicious feeling that comes right before sleep.

* * *

Tristan

Days like today should be reserved as punishment for crooked politicians – or is that a tautology? I've been in back-to-back meetings since 7.30 a.m., save for thirty minutes in which I fielded three phone calls and answered six emails, and it's now 2.15 p.m. and I've only just scoffed down lunch, a depressing salad Adam says he had to fight a construction worker for at Pret. Though he may have been exaggerating.

'All right, there, Mr Fellows?' he asks rhetorically, for it is plainly obvious to us both that I am far from all right. I barely slept last night, succumbing to bizarre dreams about the sea and waking in a cold sweat at 5 a.m. Unable to get back to sleep, I went for a run along the Thames to clear my head, then headed into the office to take my first meeting, a video conference with Tokyo-based colleagues. And it's been non-stop since.

He places a file on my desk. 'For your two thirty.' I sigh and his eyes flick towards mine. Oops, I've been caught. 'Just this one, then a half-hour break, and another meeting at four,' he says.

‘Is tomorrow like this?’ I ask, navigating to my online calendar. The blocks of colour are less densely packed tomorrow through the rest of the week, but it’s still a little overwhelming.

‘I’ve done my best to prioritise and space things out – ensure you get a proper lunch break for the rest of the week,’ he replies. ‘It’s just that...’ He trails off and I lift my gaze to meet his.

‘Right. We’re still playing catch up.’ He nods. ‘Well, you’ve done a good job getting us back on track.’

He smiles, visibly relieved. I’ve been told that I am not the easiest person to work for and perhaps that’s true. Although Adam has been with me more than a year now, so...

‘Adam, do you like working here? For me, I mean?’

The question obviously catches him by surprise, and I regret it immediately.

‘Er, yes, of course, Mr Fellows.’ Hmm, methinks the gentleman doth protest too much. Though I did ask.

‘It’s all right. I just... Was there anything else?’ I ask when he lingers longer than expected.

‘It’s... well, there have been other calls. Of a personal nature. And some emails – the first one arrived last Friday and there have been more today.’ He holds up a finger, leaves, and returns seconds later. ‘Here you are’ – he hands over a stack of phone messages – ‘and with the emails, I, uh... I wasn’t sure, so I moved them into a folder marked “personal”. You’ll find it in Outlook.’ He pauses while I flick through the first few phone messages, each one causing my roiling stomach to roil even more. ‘I hope I’ve done the right thing.’

I look up at him, realising I need to set him at ease. None of this is his fault and if it weren’t for him and his outstanding organisation skills, I’d be even more lost. ‘You’ve done brilliantly – thank you.’

He practically bows, walking out of the room backwards, the poor fellow. I slide a notepad closer to me and write: *Adam* – *raise*. Then underline it three times. In the twelve minutes I

have before my next meeting, I can either refresh my knowledge of the contents of the folder Adam's just brought me or call Ravi.

I choose the latter.

'Hello,' he says, a little out of breath. 'On my way to court and running late. What is it?'

'You know that episode of *Game of Thrones* – "The Red Wedding"?' I ask.

'That bad, eh?'

'Worse.'

'Hmm,' he says, 'I think it's time we got Mother and Aunt Lucinda in the same room.'

'Then there definitely *will* be bloodshed.'

'You don't have to be there.'

I breathe out heavily. 'We both know that's not true.'

'Wear your best suit of armour.'

'And you yours,' I reply.

'Here now. Got to go.'

'Rav, wait. Just letting you know that I'm meeting Alexandra for lunch tomorrow – Poppy set it up.'

'Alex—oh, the next Mrs Fellows. Sounds good.'

He rings off and I set down the phone a little harder than necessary, miffed at the 'Mrs Fellows' comment. Although, all going well, I suppose he's right.

Seven minutes. I open my laptop and navigate to my email, eyeing the 'Personal' folder curiously. I click on it. Several emails each from my mother and aunt's solicitors, which I delete – they've already contacted me via my personal email address – a handful from my mother, the subject lines shouting at me in all caps, and one from an unrecognisable email address. I open that one.

Hi Tristan,

This is Olivia and I've copied in Evie. We really want to see you. Can we meet up this weekend?

Ox

She's added her phone number and I wonder if she's also left a phone message. Rifling through the stack on my desk, I find it – essentially same message as in the email. I tap the edge of the message slip on the desk. I really can't put the cousins off any longer. Besides, seeing them will help establish where we stand – as a family.

I type out a reply:

Hello Olivia and Evie – apologies, it's been mad. I'll give you a call tonight.

Tristan

I wouldn't typically add an 'x' to an email like this – probably another reason I'm considered a terrible romantic partner – but in this case, perhaps it will put me in better standing with my younger cousins. Before I can overthink it, I add the 'x' and click 'Send'.

'Uh, Mr Fellows?' It's Adam again, likely to remind me that I am dangerously close to being late to my 2.30 p.m. meeting.

I stand and grab the folder from my desk. 'On my way, thank you, Adam.' He smiles, again relieved, and I wonder at how easily he seems to navigate the tricky job of being my assistant.

'Oh, and can you please add a reminder to my calendar for five o'clock?'

'Of course. The reminder?'

'To confirm with Ms Dean about the lunch she's scheduled.'

'I'd be happy to confirm with her if you like?' he offers. 'I take it she's in your contact list?'

'Er, no need. I'll take care of it,' I reply, not wanting to burden Adam further with my personal business.

As I rush towards the conference room, I mentally order my priorities: meet with Alexandra, bring my mother and my aunt to the table, and connect with the cousins.

And I still need to make things right with Poppy, a thought that comes with an enormous dose of remorse.

POPPY

‘Are you sure this is a good idea?’ Freya asks as we thread through foot traffic outside Bank Tube stop.

‘It’s a brilliant idea, but we’ve got to hurry. We need to be seated before Tristan arrives, so he doesn’t know we’re there.’

‘But that’s what I mean—’ Freya is cut off when she runs headfirst into a giant man’s chest. He grunts at her, then begins to shout obscenities. I yank her free from the fray by her elbow.

‘What a fuckwit,’ I say.

‘I didn’t *mean* to run into him.’

I slow my pace. ‘I didn’t mean you, lovely. I meant the oaf. He should have been watching where he was going.’

‘Oh, okay.’

I check my watch. The reservation is for 1 p.m. and it’s already 12.41 p.m. We need to pick up the pace.

‘Do you mind if we jog the rest of the way?’ I ask.

Remembering who I’m talking to, I glance down at Freya’s shoes. Bugger – her usual sky-high heels.

‘Sure,’ she says, surprising me by breaking into a jog – she must be part Carrie Bradshaw. We arrive at City Social a little out of breath at 12.52 p.m., and a quick scan of the busy restaurant reveals that Tristan and Alexandra have yet to arrive. Excellent.

‘Hi. Reservation under Dean for two,’ I say to the maître d’. ‘Well, for one o’clock, but two people.’

She looks at me like I’m an imbecile. ‘Yes, Ms Dean. You requested the table at the far end of the restaurant, furthest from the windows.’ From her tone, I may be the only person in the restaurant’s history to make that request. ‘This way,’ she says, and we follow obediently as she clip-clops across the wooden floor.

When we’re seated, with me facing the rest of the restaurant, I raise the menu in front of my face so I’m peeking over the top.

‘There she is!’ I whisper. Freya starts to turn around, but I stop her. ‘Slowly, all right? No sudden movements.’

Freya rolls her eyes at me which I probably deserve, then surreptitiously glances towards where I’ve indicated. We watch as the maître d’ seats Alexandra facing towards us.

‘Perfect,’ says Freya turning back around, ‘Tristan will have his back to us when he arrives.’

‘You would think it was by design,’ I reply with a wink.

When the founder of your agency is close friends with the owner of a Michelin-starred restaurant, you can drop her name and ask for favours. Well, tiny ones, like seating arrangements. There was a firm ‘no’ when I asked about a freebie lunch, so I’ve already briefed Freya on what we can order – starters only, as I’m paying. It’s not exactly the ‘done thing’ to expense this lunch to the client when the client has no idea I’m spying on him to make sure he doesn’t cock this up.

Actually, that’s not fair. Greece wasn’t Tristan’s fault. If anything, and I’ve been thinking about this more and more over the past two days, the Greek fiasco is on Ursula as much as it’s on me – maybe more so. And she only sort-of apologised, which irks me more than I’d like.

At least I can trust her judgement when it comes to choosing Alexandra (and Nerida, if she’s needed – *please* let her not be needed). Ursula has been selecting potentials since before I started wearing a bra, and there have only a handful of

cases in which we've had to dip back into the pool. Matchmaking may not be an exact science, but extreme consideration and care go into this part of the process – and Ursula is up there with the best. Vittoria notwithstanding.

A waiter arrives with artisan bread, and deftly pours us water from one of those (ridiculously) tall water jugs. If it were me pouring from that thing, I'd have given Freya an unwanted wash. There's a reason I never waited tables.

'What are you having?' she asks me. While I've been performing mental gymnastics, Freya's been perusing the menu.

I drop mine slightly so I can read it. 'Um, the pâté.' I raise it again, where it will stay until Tristan is seated. 'You?' I ask Freya, my eyes remaining locked on the doorway.

'Do you think when it says "scallop" it means one scallop or...?'

'Oh.' I look at the menu again. Yep, there it is – twenty-two pounds for 'scallop'. I doubt it's a typo. 'Just one, I'd say.'

'I can get a sandwich on the way back. I'm having the scallop,' Freya declares.

At twenty-two pounds, this bloody scallop better have been hand-raised by Tibetan nuns. Although, I was the one who invited Freya and it's a small price to pay for her presence. I need a buffer – as in, an *actual* buffer between me and Tristan. Oh, speak of the devil.

'He's here,' I hiss, raising my menu even higher.

The waiter reappears, looking at us quizzically. *Great timing, mate.*

'Scallop,' I say pointing to Freya. 'Pâté,' I say, pointing to myself. He opens his mouth to speak but I cut him off. 'Just those for now, thanks.'

He goes to take my menu, but I clutch it and shoo him away with my elbow. Freya hands him her menu with an apologetic smile, and he retreats, probably to the kitchen where he'll speak of the mad woman on table one.

‘Can I look?’ Freya asks.

‘Not yet. Too obvious.’

The maître d’ leads Tristan to his table, smiling at him flirtatiously as she walks (*eye roll* – be a professional, love!). As he approaches his seat, Tristan checks his watch – probably worried he’s late since Alexandra’s already here. Her lips press together, forming a judgey line. Hmm, not the warmest greeting.

Tristan speaks, then leans down, presumably to give her a cheek kiss, but Alexandra thrusts out her hand and now they’re in this awkward ‘kiss or handshake?’ dance. It’s excruciating to witness. Eventually, Alexandra smiles (albeit feebly) and the tension brought on by the faux pas appears to be broken.

Tristan sits and they begin chatting, gazing around the restaurant and then to the windows where they both look out at the view, with Tristan pointing out something in the distance. I follow the line of his hand and allow myself the little luxury of taking in the vista. Even from the ‘worst’ table in the restaurant, the view is spectacular, dominated by the Gherkin next door, and the Shard a little further off.

London really is a beautiful city – and a far cry from where I grew up – possibly the antithesis of an apple orchard in Tasmania. Dragging my eyes from the view, I find Freya scrolling on her phone.

‘Sorry,’ I say.

She looks up. ‘That’s okay.’

‘I’m rubbish company, aren’t I?’

She sets her phone down with a shrug. ‘I’ve had worse. It’s only been five minutes.’ I grimace apologetically. ‘You know, we could *talk* while you spy on your client,’ she teases. ‘Sure,’ I reply, one eye on Tristan and his date.

‘So, what made you choose this restaurant?’ she asks. ‘Have you been here before?’

‘Actually no,’ I reply, my attention fully back on Freya. ‘Alexandra – Tristan’s date – chose it.’

‘Ah,’ she says, her eyebrows raised.

‘You don’t think...?’ I leave the rest unsaid as Freya and I share a curious look. A Michelin-starred restaurant for a ‘meet and greet’? That warrants alarm bells, right? Well, at least *one* bell. But why didn’t this occur to me before?

* * *

Tristan

She’s attractive in an unassuming way, reminding me of a particular actress whose name I don’t know – the one in that film about Stephen Hawking. Not that it particularly matters, her attractiveness. This is essentially a business arrangement. Once we get past the awkward hello – why did I have to attempt a cheek kiss? – we move onto discussing the view, which admittedly is spectacular, especially seeing the Shard from this angle. I quite like that building.

‘So,’ I say, picking up the menu, ‘have you been here before?’

‘A few times,’ she replies with a reserved smile.

‘And what would you recommend?’ I ask, perusing the options.

‘Depends on your preferences,’ she replies, no help at all. ‘I’ll be having the lobster for starters, the fillet for main, and I’m undecided about dessert – the soufflé perhaps.’

I hadn’t counted on a three-course lunch. Not only is it quite heavy for the middle of the day, I’m not sure I’ll have time, as I have a meeting at three. There’s also the pressure of having to sustain conversation for the duration. Still, in for a penny, in for a pound, I suppose. Or in the case of this lunch, many pounds.

‘Right,’ I say just as the waiter arrives. ‘Not sure I’ll have time for dessert. How about we just have starters and mains?’

Alexandra acquiesces with a peevish-looking nod, then rattles off her choices to the waiter, adding, 'And I'll have a glass of the Dom Perignon to start and the burgundy with my main.' She closes her menu and looks at me expectantly. Two things occur to me: she didn't so much as *glance* at the wine menu, making me wonder if she's been here more than 'a few times' and she also didn't say 'please' when she spoke to the waiter.

'I'll have the pâté and the sea bass, please,' I tell him.

'And to drink, sir?'

'Just a Pellegrino, please.'

He leaves and Alexandra regards me, making me feel like I'm being scrutinised – which, of course, I am. 'So, you need a wife?'

Surprisingly, her candour sets me at ease. 'Er, yes. How much were you told by the agency?'

She counts off on her fingers, beginning with her pinkie. 'You're thirty-five in less than a month. You need to be married by then to inherit. This is a marriage of convenience only. Two years, then divorce.' She gets to her thumb and fingers, pressing it back with her other forefinger. 'And there's a payment. For me I mean. A quarter of a million pounds, payable in two instalments. The first, in a year.'

Well, there's candour and there's crassness. And I had enough of the latter from Vittoria, though at least this is financial rather than sexual.

'That's correct,' I say, reaching for my water glass. I take a great gulp and look out at the view again. What *am* I getting myself into? And not just with Alexandra. Am I *really* about to embark on a marriage with a stranger? Thankfully, our drinks arrive only a short time later, the presence of a third person helping to cut through the tense atmosphere.

'To a convenient marriage,' she says raising her glass.

Before thinking too much about the meaning of the toast, I clink my sparkling water against her flute. She sends me a guarded smile, then sips.

‘You don’t drink?’ she asks, setting down her glass. Her fingertips caress its stem and I can’t tell if the gesture is unwitting or intentional. Regardless, it’s unnerving.

‘Er, I do, yes. But I have meetings all afternoon.’

‘So do I.’

‘Right but surely, at the museum... I mean to say, I work —’

She laughs humourlessly, cutting me off. ‘Oh, I see, yours is a proper job, whereas mine is... what? A hobby?’

‘No, not at all. Oh god, I’ve really put my foot in it, haven’t I?’ Her cocked head confirms that I have. ‘My apologies. I had no intention of insulting you or your profession – as I understand it, you’re at the top of your field – and I mean, the British Museum...’ She blinks at me pointedly.

‘Please tell me I’ve back-pedalled enough for us to avoid an in-depth exploration of my male privilege. I promise, I am not a misogynist, just foolish and unable to get through an afternoon of excruciatingly dry meetings when I’m even the slightest bit inebriated.’

‘I would’ve thought that a drink or two would help,’ she quips, letting me off the hook. I hadn’t included sense of humour when I’d listed my ‘must haves’ in a wife but I’m starting to realise that it doesn’t hurt – especially to help dampen the absurdity of this situation.

‘Quite,’ I say chuckling softly and she smiles, her eyes crinkling at the corners. It’s her first genuine smile since we met, I’m sure of it.

Her lobster and my pâté arrive, both plates placed at precisely the same time by two waiters. We say ‘thank you’ in unison and it may be a small thing, but I note it, nonetheless. Perhaps Alexandra’s earlier lack of manners was simply nerves – this can’t be easy for her either. And I suppose she could have checked the wine menu online before we got here. I need not jump to conclusions.

‘Mmm,’ she groans during her first mouthful. ‘It’s excellent. Would you like to try a bite?’ she asks. It does look incredible but sharing food? On what is essentially a business lunch?

With the woman you may end up marrying, I tell myself.

‘I’d love to, thank you.’

This seems to please her and she prepares a bite, transferring it to my plate with her knife and fork. ‘Oh, that’s...’ I say after swallowing.

‘Right? Lobster’s my favourite.’

It’s unclear whether this means ‘I eat lobster all the time’ or ‘it’s my favourite for special occasions’. Either way, coupled with her mentioning the payment almost immediately, I sense that money may be Alexandra’s primary motivator. But as far as red flags go, it’s probably minor – this marriage *is* a transaction of sorts. What else do I expect? Besides Alexandra is intelligent, age appropriate, London-based, and unlike Vittoria, not presently married. She also seems like someone who could hold her own with my mother, not an easy feat.

‘So, where did you grow up?’ I ask.

‘South London – Brixton,’ she says without even a hint of a South London accent. She takes another bite, her face taut and her gaze locked firmly on the table. I sense a story there but decide it’s for another day, immediately realising what that means: I’m prepared to see where things go with Alexandra. For now, at least.

POPPY

‘They’re gone,’ I say as I wave at the waiter to bring our bill.

‘Thank *god*,’ says Freya, popping out of her seat. ‘Now we can go eat.’ She commences a series of delicate neck and shoulder stretches, a series I’ve seen her perform several times a day since I started working with her.

‘What, you mean you weren’t filled up by your *lone scallop*?’ I ask, with a dramatic vocal flourish.

‘Hardly. Next time I accompany you on a...’ She flaps her hand about.

‘Stakeout?’ I ask, supplying the missing word.

‘A stakeout – yes. Next time, I am bringing snacks,’ she declares.

I don’t blame her. The pâté was *delish*, but this is the sort of restaurant where the portions are modest and you’re supposed to savour every (teeny) bite, eyes closed and uttering sounds of pleasure. Not for women on a modest budget, one of whom (that would be me) skipped breakfast due to another nightmare-filled night and sleeping through her (my) alarm.

‘Agreed. And I’m encouraged by you saying “next time”. I’d have expected you to decline if and when there is a next time.’

She shrugs. ‘Spying is quite fun – even second-hand,’ she says, alluding to my blow-by-blow commentary, delivered so she wouldn’t be tempted to turn around and look, getting us caught.

‘I really think it went really well – they stayed for two courses and they appeared to be talking the entire time.’

‘And she shared her food,’ Freya adds.

‘Exactly. You don’t do that with someone unless you like them – at least a little. I feel good about this match.’ My phone rings and I flip it over. ‘It’s him,’ I say. My stomach clenches at the memory of our last conversation, the one in which he bit my head off. I answer. ‘Hello, Tristan.’

‘Hello, Poppy. Is now a good time?’

‘Of course,’ I say, *right* as the waiter says, ‘Your bill, madam,’ and hands me a leather folder. I clear my throat, hoping Tristan didn’t hear that. ‘How was lunch?’ I ask.

‘Good. Poppy, are you sure I’m not interrupting? Where exactly are you?’

‘McDonald’s’ I say in a panic. ‘Late lunch.’ Freya sniggers at my idiocy. ‘Um, not *the* McDonald’s, of course. It’s a new café close to work. Terrible name – very confusing. Good food though.’

Freya makes the ‘cut’ sign across her neck.

‘How are you? After your lunch, I mean. You said it was good?’

‘Yes, that’s what I was calling for. On the whole, I feel it went quite well. Mostly, she’s as she seemed on paper.’

‘That’s three qualifiers, Tristan – “on the whole”, “quite”, and “mostly”,’ I say, switching from idiot to agent. ‘Anything specific that wasn’t as you expected?’ I’d like to ask about him sharing a bite of her lunch but, of course, technically I didn’t witness that.

‘No, not really,’ he replies. ‘Well,’ he adds after a pause, ‘there was one thing.’

I hope it’s not a deal-breaker, I think, crossing the fingers on my free hand.

‘Oh?’ I ask, my tone light.

‘Just... it’s how she was about money. She brought up the payment.’

‘Really? During your first meeting?’ The word ‘tacky’ comes to mind but each to their own I suppose.

‘In the first five minutes,’ he replies.

‘Wow, that’s...’ I trail off.

‘I thought so too,’ he says. Great, now I’ve confirmed how inappropriate that was. This may be a deal-breaker after all. Literally. ‘And I have a related question for you,’ he continues.

‘Okay?’

‘Did you choose the restaurant?’

‘Uh... no...’ I reply, seeing where this is going.

‘Mmm, I wondered,’ he says.

‘Are you thinking...?’ I ask, telegraphing the rest.

‘It did cross my mind,’ he replies, indicating that we’re on the same page. At least about this.

‘Is it going to be a problem, do you think?’

Please don’t let this be a problem.

‘Well, I wasn’t expecting to be matched with someone who—how do I say this politely?’

‘Might really need the money?’ I proffer.

‘Yes, that – while simultaneously having champagne tastes. And I mean that part literally, as she started with a glass of the Dom.’

‘Oh!’ I saw Alexandra drink bubbly, but I hadn’t even *considered* it was Dom Perignon. That ran at more than fifty pounds a glass!

‘Yes. And look, I’m considering today’s lunch an investment, but... I just want to be sure she’s not the sort of person to take advantage. Of me. Financially, I mean.’

‘Right, yeah, no, you don’t want that.’ I didn’t want that either. Tristan may have been a prize dick to me at our last

meeting – Mr Impossible indeed – but he’s my client and my top priority. Professionally speaking, that is.

‘And don’t get me wrong,’ he continues, ‘whoever I marry, they will not want for anything – I’m well off enough to support another person without the inheritance but...’ He pauses, then expels a breath. ‘I sound awful, don’t I?’

Is that *humility* in his voice? Humility from Tristan ‘arrogance-incarnate’ Fellows?!

‘No, not at all. Leave it with me and I’ll look into it,’ I offer, not entirely sure *how*. This is a first for me. Have we allowed a gold digger to slip through our rigorous vetting process? If that’s what has happened, it will be another mark on Ursula’s near-perfect track record – *and* mine.

‘Thank you,’ says Tristan. ‘Look, I need to go. I’m due in a meeting in a few minutes. So, I can leave this in your capable hands?’

Capable – a far cry from only yesterday when he accused me of doing a shitty job.

‘Yes – absolutely.’

‘Oh, and one more thing. Would you be able to meet with me sometime this week?’

Why on earth does he want to meet? To tear me a new one, yet *again*?

‘Sure, absolutely,’ I say with more enthusiasm than I feel. Freya throws me a look as she bounces from one foot to the other. Poor thing must be close to starving.

‘Good. I’ll have Adam contact you to set something up.’

‘Adam?’

‘My assistant.’

‘Right.’

‘Bye, Poppy.’

‘Bye.’

‘What’s going on?’ asks Freya.

‘I’ll explain on the way back to the office.’

‘You mean on the way to Costa,’ she says, correcting me. My stomach grumbles in reply – I could murder an egg and cress sandwich right now. I make quick work of paying for lunch so we can actually go get lunch.

* * *

Tristan

‘So, just confirming, am I here as your friend or your solicitor?’ Ravi asks, as we pause outside the pub’s entrance.

‘Both. I mean, they contacted you, not me. They clearly have an agenda.’

‘All right, after you.’

We enter, the swell of chatter an assault on the senses. There are pubs and there are ‘pubs’ and this is the latter, situated in a converted warehouse with exposed brick and steel beams and people perched on modern-looking stools at high tables. I’d guess that Ravi and I are a good ten years over the median age.

‘Tristan!’ I hear above the fray. Scouting for the source, I find Olivia and Evie stretched to their full heights and waving madly. Ravi and I approach the table they’ve secured and they race around it, throwing their arms around me.

‘Ooph,’ I grunt, slightly winded.

The words come thick and fast as they release me and return to their perches, signalling for Ravi and me to take the stools opposite them.

‘Don’t you just love this place?’ asks Olivia, the eldest, as we sit.

Before we can respond, Evie leaps in with, ‘We used to come here all the time – well, when we were both living in London, I mean. I’ve barely seen Liv in the past year or so.’

‘That tends to happen when your sister buggers off to *Australia*,’ Olivia teases.

‘Or Italy,’ Evie teases back.

‘Er,’ I say, hoping to leverage a brief respite from the verbal onslaught. ‘So, you’ve not actually met Ravi yet. Ravi, my cousins, Olivia and Evie.’

‘Sorry, Ravi, please forgive our manners. It’s just that we haven’t seen Tristan in an *age* and—’

‘—he’s our favourite cousin,’ Evie finishes.

‘Favourite, huh?’ Ravi asks, eyeing me with amusement.

‘He’s our only one on this side, of course,’ says Olivia, ‘but the Wrens!’

‘Horrid people,’ deadpans Evie.

‘Well, not *horrid*—’

‘Excuse me, Cousin Millicent is a right cow.’

‘Well, that’s true,’ concedes Olivia.

‘And Bernard!’

‘Mmm, you’re right. Total tosser.’

Not wanting them to wander too far on this tangent, I interrupt. ‘So, Australia and Italy?’ I ask, pointing at them in turn.

‘Yes,’ they say together.

‘You go,’ Olivia says to Evie.

‘Liv was in Milan working for this lovely family—’

‘I was nannyng. Darling boys. Theo and Rupert.’

‘Yes, thank you,’ she says to her sister. ‘So, Liv was in Milan and I was in Australia – Melbourne – just, you know...’

‘Shacked up with some gorgeous Australian bloke.’

‘Liv!’

‘What? You were.’

‘Anyway, Liv was in Milan and I was in Melbourne working as a *barista*,’ she says, looking at her sister pointedly, ‘and that’s why we weren’t in London when Grandad died.’

There’s genuine sadness in Evie’s eyes and when I glance over at Olivia, that sadness is mirrored in hers.

‘Yes,’ Olivia says, ‘and we both wanted to come home immediately. I mean, obviously too late to see him one last time but...’

Her voice tightens and Evie leaps back in.

‘But for the memorial.’

‘Right, the memorial,’ adds Olivia, exchanging a look with her sister. She nods at her slightly, her countenance visibly shifting.

‘Only Mummy told us there wasn’t going to be one.’ The sadness in her eyes has been replaced with flinty anger.

‘What?’ Now Ravi and I exchange a look.

‘Exactly,’ says Evie, who I am quickly learning is the more forthright of the two. ‘She *lied*. Only we caught her out, you see. I called the place where Grandad had been staying and they were *so* lovely.’

‘Before we went overseas, we used to visit him all the time, so they knew us,’ interjects Olivia.

I hadn’t known about their visits. It seems I wasn’t the only one who was close to our grandfather.

‘Precisely,’ says Evie. ‘Anyway, they had all the details for the memorial service – time, day, location – but there was no way for either of us to get home in time.’

‘That’s why she rushed it,’ I say, only just now realising. ‘I thought it was odd, having the memorial only two days after he passed. But your mother insisted.’

‘Yep,’ says Evie poking her straw into her nearly empty highball. A vein along her jawline pulses in a familiar way, something I’ve seen reflected in a mirror or a window when I’m angry or frustrated.

‘We’re very cross with her, obviously,’ says Olivia.

‘Understatement of the year. I’m not even speaking to her,’ spits Evie. She sips her drink, sucking the remnants loudly through the straw.

‘Actually, *she* insisted that we not speak to *you*, Tristan,’ says Olivia.

‘What? Why?’

Evie rolls her eyes dramatically as Olivia explains. ‘We’re not really sure, but it has something to do with Grandad’s will. And you. We got that much out of the family solicitor before he went silent.’

‘And that’s why we contacted you,’ says Evie using her straw to point at Ravi. ‘Work-around, you see?’

I don’t ask how they came to determine that Ravi was my solicitor. They’re clearly resourceful.

‘Mummy has no idea we’ve been in touch,’ chimes in Olivia, her chin lifted in pride.

Until now, Ravi has been silent – possibly because, like me, he’s been bamboozled by the verbal onslaught, and now this revelation.

‘Right, so what *do* you know about your grandfather’s will?’ Ravi asks.

‘Just that it came as a surprise – to Mummy, I mean. And that you’re involved, Tristan.’

Something occurs to me, and I turn to Ravi. ‘You know what this means, right? The will wasn’t read until a couple of weeks ago.’

‘She knew,’ he says, his eyes wide. ‘Before he died.’

‘What? Do you mean Mummy? What did she know?’ Evie asks. ‘Oh, that complete and utter—’

‘Eve,’ says Olivia, placing her hand on her sister’s forearm.

‘I hate her! She was *so* horrible to Grandad all those years, *especially* after he went into care... and now he’s gone and...’ Her words fall away as tears fill her eyes.

Olivia rubs Evie’s arm in solace. The interaction reminds me of how they were as children, how close they were – thick as thieves – and it’s heartening to see their closeness is still intact after all these years. Heartening, if not a little envy-inducing.

Evie sniffs loudly and rubs the heels of her hands under her eyes. ‘Soz. Total drama queen, as always,’ she says.

‘Not at all,’ I say. ‘And I miss him too, even though these past few years he’s... well, he’s not been himself.’ Evie nods at that and Olivia smiles sadly. ‘And I had no idea that you were both so close to him. I’m really sorry you didn’t get to come to the memorial. Maybe we could do something, the three of us, to honour him.’

‘Really?’ asks Evie.

‘Yes, although I have no idea what. How about we all think on it?’

‘I like that idea,’ says Olivia.

‘*This* is why he’s our favourite cousin,’ Evie says to Ravi.

‘Evie used to have a crush on you, you know?’ says Olivia.

‘Liv!’ Evie’s face disappears into her hands and I can’t help but chuckle. Even Ravi laughs beside me.

‘What? It was ages ago. You were a little girl, like six or seven,’ says Olivia. Evie shakes her head, saying, ‘No, no, no,’ on repeat. ‘It was so cute,’ Olivia tells me, making her sister protest even louder. ‘She was heartbroken when Daddy explained that you can’t marry your cousin.’

My head snaps in Ravi’s direction.

‘No!’ he says vehemently.

‘It’s legal, though, right?’

‘Yes, technically, but... just, *no*, Tris.’

‘It was just an idea,’ I say.

‘A stupid one,’ he insists.

‘It’s in *name* only.’

‘I’m fairly positive your grandfather didn’t have *incest* in mind,’ insists Ravi, and now that he’s put it like that, I tend to agree.

‘Sorry? What *are* you on about?’ asks Olivia. Evie has emerged from the safety of her hands and they both peer at me, curious.

‘Tristan must marry on or before his thirty-fifth birthday in order to inherit. That’s one of the “surprises” regarding the will.’

‘And when’s that?’ asks Olivia.

‘Four weeks from now.’

‘Oh, and you were thinking...?’ Evie grimaces. ‘That’s... sorry, Tristan, but I’m with Ravi on this one. Yuk.’

‘It was *just* an idea!’ I reiterate.

‘What happens if you don’t get married?’ asks Olivia. ‘And how much is Grandad’s estate worth?’

‘Thirty million pounds,’ Ravi replies.

‘Fuck me!’ exclaims Evie.

‘*And*, if Tristan doesn’t marry in time, it all goes to the Avian Wildlife Trust of the Hebrides,’ Ravi adds.

‘Fuck *that*,’ concludes Olivia. ‘I mean, I like birds as much as the next person, but we can’t let *that* happen.’

I exchange a look with Ravi, telegraphing my feelings about the cousins. To my great relief, they’re on my side. And *absolutely* deserving of the trusts we have planned for them – not only because they’re (actually) quite lovely people but because they loved Grandad as much as I did.

‘And that’s not all,’ says Ravi, picking up on my cue. Thankfully, he’s in agreement to tell them the rest of it.

‘Tristan, why don’t you do the honours,’ he says, handing over to me.

‘So, there is something else,’ I say, ‘and it impacts the two of you.’

POPPY

‘Here, have a seat.’ I pull out the chair next to me and Freya slides into it, propping her elbows onto the table and leaning in to share my laptop screen.

‘So, what exactly are we looking for?’ she asks.

‘I’m not sure, but why don’t we start by reading through Alexandra’s application?’ I pull it up on the screen and we read page one together. ‘Ready?’ I ask. When she nods, I advance to the next page. We repeat this process until we get to the end, then both sit back against our chairs.

‘She was raised in a working-class family, but *that* doesn’t mean anything – a lot of our potentials were,’ I say.

‘And our clients,’ adds Freya.

‘Exactly. And nothing else stands out. She got a scholarship to university and her PhD was fully funded, so no big student loans... she has a good job, she’d be earning well... What’s the missing piece? Why such a focus on the money?’

There’s a tap on the meeting room door and it swings open before we can answer. ‘Oi, you two,’ says Nasrin, jerking her head. ‘Emergency staff meeting.’

Freya and I look at each other, her worried expression mirroring mine. This is the third emergency staff meeting in as many weeks and I’ve been largely ignoring the looming threat to the agency while working on this case. It’s a paltry coping mechanism, I know, but sometimes the only thing you can

control is your reaction to the situation. Keeping busy has also kept me (reasonably) sane.

I scoop up my laptop, then follow Nasrin and Freya into the conference room. There's a low hum of discord as we take our places around the table. George grimaces at me and I shrug, attempting to play down my concern – as much for me as for him.

Saskia, who is still standing, clears her throat. 'As you know, Paloma, Mia, and I have been working on addressing the leak. And while discovering the identity of the anonymous blogger was a welcome win, finding the original source has remained our top priority. As we anticipated, once we cut off their original outlet, they've simply moved onto another – or have threatened to. This came today.'

She presses a button on the console and the large screen fills with a scanned note, handwritten in neat cursive. Saskia steps aside and there is silence while the rest of us read the note.

Nice try. Did you think that would stop me? I will simply go someplace else. You ruined my life and if you think I'm going to shut up and go away, you're sorely mistaken. And I know people – people who've used your agency and I'm not afraid to name them publicly.

I read it three times. We ruined this person's life? *How?*

'What do they mean we've ruined their life?' asks George.

'I'm wondering the same thing,' I chime in.

'More concerning is the threat to name and shame,' says Paloma.

'Shame? It's not shameful to engage an agency to help you find love,' snipes Ursula.

'That's not what I meant. It's just an expression,' Paloma says tartly.

'But how have we ruined their lives?' voices Nasrin.

‘I just asked that!’ George adds crossly.

Mia and Freya remain characteristically silent, but both appear to be as troubled as the rest of us.

‘All right, all right.’ Saskia calls out over the noise and the room quietens. ‘It won’t help us to get overly riled up about this – especially with each other. Obviously, the situation has escalated but—’

‘Do we have *any* way of tracking down who wrote this?’ asks Nasrin, (bravely) interrupting Saskia.

‘Actually,’ Saskia replies, ‘In all the hubbub, I’m not sure we checked the...’ She trails off, leaning over the desk and pressing another button on the console. ‘Anita, can you please bring us the envelope the note came in?’

Moments later, Anita strides into the conference room and hands an envelope to Saskia. George leaps up to read over her shoulder.

‘W8!’ he exclaims.

Those of us with laptops open them and start typing furiously.

‘Got it,’ says Nasrin. She shares to the screen and a list of our clients who live within the W8 postcode appears. All eyes scroll down the names looking for another clue. I read it top to bottom and bottom to top but the only client of mine is a woman whose wedding I attended just last month, disguised as an old school friend. When she returned from her honeymoon, she sent me a thank you bottle of (very expensive) champagne. There’s no way she’s our culprit.

I look around the table to gauge the reactions of the others. Freya meets my eye and shakes her head, Nasrin looks defeated and slumps against her chair, and George is frowning, but it’s a disappointed frown, rather than an ‘Oh my god, it’s one of mine’ frown. That leaves Ursula, whose expression is tricky to read (as always) but she *has* paled significantly. Perhaps she’s recognised a former client who could be the leak.

‘So, what do we think?’ asks Saskia.

‘Excuse me,’ says Ursula, pushing away from the table and making a hasty exit.

There’s a beat of silence and Paloma stands. ‘I’ll go.’

I look to Saskia, spotting tell-tale signs that this situation is weighing on her. Heavy is the head that wears the crown – isn’t that the saying? And in this case, the weight has resulted in dark shadows under her eyes and a tautness that mars her typically serene features. *How long has she been like this?* I wonder, shamed at having been so focused on my case I haven’t noticed that our fearless leader is no longer fearless.

‘This is a huge break-through, Saskia,’ I say, hoping to lighten the gloomy mood.

Saskia responds with a humourless smile.

‘We’ll figure it out, don’t worry,’ says Nasrin.

‘Of course, we will,’ George concurs.

With several more utterances of support, it’s clear that, like me, the others are concerned for Saskia.

‘Thank you, everyone. I’ll go and check on Ursula and see if we’re one step closer to solving this.’

‘One of Ursula’s, do you think?’ George asks me under his breath.

Before I can answer, Nasrin calls out, ‘Saskia?’ Saskia pauses, giving Nasrin the nod to continue. She does, her words underpinned by nervous laughter. ‘On a scale of one to ten, with ten being totally catastrophic, how bad is it if this gets out, if the leak does name other clients? For the agency, I mean?’

Bravo to Nas for being brave enough to voice what we’ve all been thinking. But in the lengthy pause that comes as Saskia takes a deep breath and exhales noisily through her nose, I feel far less assured that everything will be okay.

‘I don’t want to alarm you any more than... Well, I don’t want to alarm you at all but, full disclosure, it could spell the end of the agency as we know it.’ There’s a collective gasp. ‘Exactly. Discretion has always been paramount to what we

do. For some clients, if it were discovered by the media that they used our services, it could impact their work lives, their families, even their relationships. Quite simply, we have to find the source and see if we can come to some sort of arrangement. Short of that, we'll go the legal route and enforce the NDA.'

At first, Paloma said the leak could be good publicity! *Way* off the mark.

'I hope that answers your question, Nasrin.'

Nasrin nods numbly and we disperse, each to our little corner of the office. It's quiet for the rest of the day and I find it extremely difficult to concentrate on digging up evidence about our possible gold digger.

* * *

Tristan

'Ready for this?' Ravi asks.

'Not even remotely,' I reply dryly.

'Excellent, then let's go.' He leads me through the corridors of his law firm's offices to just outside a conference room door, where he pauses. 'Last chance to call this off,' he says quietly.

'I can't. You know that.'

'But we don't have to meet with both of them at once,' he reminds me.

'Two birds, one stone. And this way, we're all on the same page.'

'And what about the other thing? Alexandra?'

'I need to tell Mother sometime,' I say with a shrug.

'Before you've even proposed?'

‘Yes. I’m mostly decided anyway, and this will force me to get on with it.’

I hope I sound surer than I feel.

‘Great attitude, Tris,’ he says. He gives me a tight smile, which matches the tightness in my gut, and swings the door open.

As soon as he steps inside, me right behind him, the onslaught begins. My mother and aunt pop out of their chairs, each hurling wild accusations about the other in my direction. I skirt the edge of the table and take a seat at one end, genuinely astonished that they’ve been seated in this room together for the past ten minutes and haven’t killed each other. Yet. Though metaphoric fur is now flying through the air and we haven’t even begun. At least they both adhered to my request that they come alone, as in ‘sans solicitors’.

‘Please, please,’ says Ravi, holding out his hands like the character in that (silly) *Jurassic Park* film. Although, I wouldn’t mind exchanging places with him – velociraptors would be far easier to tame than these two. Mother and Aunt Lucinda quieten somewhat – murmurings still coming from both sides of the table. They take their seats, sending daggers at each other.

Ravi sits at the other end of the smallish conference table and I can’t help but wonder if a stadium would have been a better venue for this meeting – less chance of being caught in the crossfire – or rather, *mauled*.

‘Mrs Fellows, Mrs Fellows-Wren, I will be conducting this meeting. Little, if anything, will be required of you except to listen.’

Balls of steel has Ravi. I flick a glance left, then right, clocking the mirrored (barely contained) fury of the two sixty-somethings, then catch eyes with Ravi, mine wide with awe.

Ravi sorts through some papers as though he’s reminding himself why we’re all here, another tactic to assert his control and one I’ve seen used to great effect on many occasions. Aside from trusting him outright, I feel a swell of pride. My

solicitor and best friend, ladies and gentlemen – master at keeping his cool.

Not for the first time, I envy Ravi.

‘Let’s start with you, Mrs Fellows-Wren.’ My aunt appears to take this as a sign that *she* is the most important person in the room, likely something she’s believed a thousand times before. She lifts her chin, purses her lips, and sniffs – all with the air of superiority. ‘You should know that the civil suit you have lodged has absolutely zero founding. No KC in Britain will entertain its flimsy claims to your father’s fortune.’

Well, she didn’t like that! In a miraculous defiance of gravity, her eyebrows shoot to just below her hairline and she opens her mouth to speak.

‘I am not finished,’ says Ravi, silencing her. Mother squirms smugly in her seat. ‘It has also come to our attention that, other than ensuring his care was paid for – from his own account, mind you – you did little to assist in your father’s care, particularly since he was diagnosed with dementia. Even if your claims to the inheritance were founded, this alone paints you in an extremely unfavourable light, meaning – again – that you will not receive one penny.’

If Aunt Lucinda *were* a velociraptor, this is where she’d spit venom. Or is that a different dinosaur?

‘Lastly, the Misses Fellows-Wren have indicated that they will not support your claims because’ – he consults a piece of paper in front of him – ‘you lied to them about their grandfather’s memorial, then rushed the occasion through so they couldn’t attend.’ He lifts his gaze, pinning her to her chair. ‘While your daughters cannot seem to fathom *why* you did this, I can hazard a guess that it was simply to serve your own agenda and, possibly, to hide that you had neglected your father in his later years.’

‘I absolutely did not!’ How very restrained of Aunt Lucinda not to speak until now. That’s even more surprising than her not having murdered my mother before we arrived.

‘Lucinda, you always were a hateful person, even as a girl,’ hisses Mother from across the table.

‘I will not sit here one moment longer and listen to this vitriol, these *lies*.’

And she doesn’t. She stands (with far more dignity than I could muster were I in this situation), gathers her belongings, strides to the door and flings it open, her head high. At the doorway, she pauses, pivots, and looks at us each in turn. ‘I loved my father. And I will get what I’m entitled to.’

‘Oh, I hope so, Lucinda,’ says my mother, ‘I *really* hope so.’ I half-expect her to break into a witchy cackle.

‘Humph!’ As soon as Aunt Lucinda leaves, Ravi gets up and closes the door. Mother looks like the cat that ate the canary, then got the cream, and *then* spent the afternoon lounging about in the sunshine. Knowing what’s to come, I doubt that feeling will last.

‘Mrs Fellows,’ says Ravi.

‘Oh, Ravi, how many times do I need to ask you to call me Helen?’

As far as I know – including this time – it’s one.

Ravi laughs it off, the pro that he is. ‘Helen,’ he says with a smile.

Mother beams at him. Of course, she does, he just slayed her greatest nemesis.

‘Now that we’ve laid that little issue to rest, we need to discuss *our* little issue.’ He raises his eyebrows at her like a schoolteacher chiding an errant pupil. ‘I’m sure, as you’re such an intelligent woman’ – blimey, he’s *really* laying it on thick – ‘you already know that you do not have a legitimate claim on the deceased Mr Fellows’ estate.’

‘Oh that,’ she says with a flap of her hand. ‘I only started legal proceedings to scare off Lucinda – and *you’ve* accomplished that. Masterfully, I might add.’ She smiles at him, then leans down the table to pat his hand approvingly.

Wonderful, Ravi has become the son my mother always wanted.

‘Excellent,’ says Ravi with a clap of his hands.

I’d expected that to be far more difficult than it was. Perhaps Mother is being truthful about her lawsuit being a red herring. I wished she’d told me that before I’d spent the night stewing over it.

‘Now,’ continues Ravi, ‘we have some good news. Well, Tristan does. Tristan?’

‘Oh?’ Mother swings her hopeful gaze in my direction.

‘Mother, I’d like to bring someone to the house this week to meet you, someone I’m going to propose to.’

‘Tristan! Are you sure?’ She looks between me and Ravi.

‘Well, yes,’ I say, committing to the most terrifying thing I’ve ever done in my entire life.

‘But... but...’ She looks to Ravi. ‘You were going to circumvent the terms of the will. So that Tristan didn’t have to marry in order to inherit.’

‘Yes, well, we can all agree that would be ideal,’ says Ravi, ‘but the terms are fixed. If Tristan doesn’t marry in the next few weeks, it all goes away.’

Mother looks back at me, disbelieving. ‘So, who is she?’ she asks, her voice tinged with suspicion.

‘Her name is Alexandra.’

‘And how did you meet her?’

‘Through Ravi and Jacinda, actually.’ Only mostly a lie.

‘Hmm,’ she says scowling at him. Oh dear, poor Ravi is no longer in her favour. Fickle, is my mother.

‘Yes,’ I say, forging ahead, ‘she’s a museum curator at the British Museum – a scholar as well, with a PhD.’

‘From?’

‘Cambridge.’

Mother's lips purse. She considers Oxford to be the pinnacle of tertiary education – that's where I went – but Cambridge is a close second.

‘And when will I get to meet her?’ she asks.

With that question, I know we've won this round. Now all I need to do is propose. Oh, and tell Poppy.

POPPY

My phone rarely rings in the middle of the night, so when it does, my first thought is of Mum and Dad. I snatch it off my bedside table and answer without looking at who's calling.

'Hello?'

'Pop,' says Shaz through tears. Oh no! Maybe it's *her* Mum and Dad. This is the hardest thing about living across the world – being far away if something bad happens. 'It's Michael,' Shaz manages before she succumbs to sobs.

'Oh, Shaz, I'm so sorry,' I say, even though I have no idea what I'm commiserating about.

'I just... Can you come over?'

I take the phone from my ear to check the time. It's 1.07 a.m. And it's a workday tomorrow. 'How about we just talk about it on the phone?' I ask hopefully.

She cries some more, great heaving sobs. 'I need a hug.'

'Isn't Alfie there?' I ask, hoping her flatmate can oblige. It's now undeniable – I really am a shit friend.

'At his boyfriend's. I need you, Pop. You have to stop me from re-re-plying.'

'Replying?'

'Mmm-hmm. He sent an email.' She sniffles loudly. 'He wants to get back together.'

Michael, you absolute fucker! If the fates don't do away with you – some falling piece of scaffolding or getting run over by a reckless cyclist – *something* – then I may do it.

‘I’ll be right there.’

I fling back the covers, throw on some clothes, check that I’ve got my keys, then book an Uber. Two minutes until it gets here. I race downstairs so I don’t keep them waiting, jump in the car and twelve minutes later – this part of London is dead tonight – I arrive. Shaz throws herself into my arms the moment I’m through the door and I gently pat her back as she cries it out. Eventually her sobs subside, and we move to the sofa.

‘Let me see it.’ She hands me her laptop and it’s on the screen when I open it up. ‘How many times have you read it?’

‘I lost count after ten.’

‘Oh, Shaz.’

I skim-read, snatches of text leaping from the screen: ‘I forgive you’, ‘it was both our faults’, ‘seeing you again’, ‘the old spark’, ‘moving back to London’.

Wait, what? I glance at Shaz but she’s staring across the room, glassy eyed. Second time through, I read the email properly, the crease between my brows deepening as I read. By the time I finish reading, a trench halves my face.

‘He’s moving back to London?’

She nods numbly. ‘Yep.’

‘And what’s all this shit about forgiving you? Forgiving you for what? You didn’t do anything wrong.’

‘I’m guessing he means me going to HR – after he ended things.’

‘You never said.’

She meets my eye, but her expression is still vague – shock, maybe.

‘I know.’ She looks away. ‘I was embarrassed. After what happened with you and Malcolm... What is it your mum says?’

Learn from the mistakes of others, 'cause you haven't got time —'

'—to make them all yourself,' we finish together.

'Exactly. I watched you go through that nightmare with Malcolm – I mean he *broke* you' – I can't say I enjoy hearing her put it that way, even if she is right – 'and yet, I walked straight into a toxic relationship. Schtooping the boss! Genius, Shaz!' she chides herself.

'I take it HR wasn't very helpful?' I ask, attempting to steer her away from some brutal self-scourging.

'The woman I spoke to said that since it was consensual, I had no recourse.'

'He was your boss! And he cheated on you with another employee!'

'Yeah – also consensual.'

'What sort of HR policy is that? He sleeps with two women, both junior to him...' I shake my head at the absurdity – and the injustice – fury bubbling up inside me.

'I know. But they must have said *something* to him, because he wrote me a very nasty email right after he moved to Paris, telling me off for "making trouble for him".'

'*You* made trouble for *him*?!' I screech, properly pissed off. Shaz winces. 'Sorry,' I say quickly. Sometimes you want your bestie to be your champion, fighting injustice on your behalf, and other times you just want a hug and a friendly ear.

'I'm pissed off at the practice though,' I say, unable to hold my tongue about that. 'They should know better.'

You'd think that a psychology practice specialising in *mental wellbeing* would be right onto impropriety by one of the partners, especially when his actions adversely impacted the wellbeing of one of their employees. It's not the first time I've thought Shaz would be better off professionally if she hung out her own shingle and worked for herself.

'So, what do I do now?' she asks, her voice childlike.

‘First you come here.’ I scooch down the sofa and wrap her up in another hug. She starts crying again but this time, I sense it’s more of a cathartic cry. Sometime later, she lifts her head and runs the back of her hand under her nose.

‘Sorry,’ she says getting up, ‘that’s gross. Be back in a sec.’ She goes into the bathroom to clean herself up and when she comes back into the lounge, her skin is still blotchy but she looks a little brighter.

‘Do you want me to stay over?’ I offer.

‘It’s okay. I know you have work in the morning. Anyway, I feel better now.’

‘You sure?’

She nods. ‘I think I know what I need to do.’

‘About Michael?’

‘About all of it. I’m quitting my job.’ I blink at her in surprise. ‘I know it seems like I’m giving up, that I’m letting him win but—’

‘No, no, not at all. I think it’s the bravest, most grown-up thing you could do.’

‘Really?’

‘Hell yeah! The guy emails you, asking to get back together and spouting all sorts of emotional abuse and your response is, “Fuck off, Michael. Fuck off, HR. Fuck off, the lot of you.” Shaz, I think it’s brilliant.’ I stand and cross the room to hug her. ‘I think *you’re* brilliant.’

She gasps out a sob but when I pull back, she’s grinning.

‘Thanks,’ she says. ‘Will you be a reference for me?’

‘Duh. Of course!’ Her grin turns into yawn, which is contagious and my cue to leave.

* * *

Tristan

‘I’m actually a bit nervous,’ says Alexandra as the cab pulls up.

‘So am I, to be honest,’ I reply.

‘It’s all a bit back to front, isn’t it?’

‘That’ll be thirty-two quid,’ says the driver, interrupting.

‘Right, sorry.’ I lift up my phone to indicate contactless payment. He huffs impatiently, as though most people *didn’t* stop using cash ages ago, but completes the transaction regardless. I join Alexandra on the footpath outside Jacinda and Ravi’s. ‘Sorry, you were saying?’

She shakes her head. ‘Nothing. Don’t worry about it.’

‘Ready?’ I ask. She expels a loud breath. ‘They’re harmless, I promise.’

She doesn’t appear to believe me, her mouth moving to one side of her face. Even though this is only our second meeting and I barely know her, she seems less self-assured than when we met at lunch – no doubt the nerves she mentioned.

‘Come, on,’ I say, putting a hand on her shoulder. It feels odd, but if I’m going to marry this woman, I need to get used to basic physical contact with her. It needn’t ever go past cheek kisses and handholding – and only when we’re around others – but it does need to appear natural, like we’re a genuine couple.

We walk up the front steps and I knock, both of us silent as we wait.

‘Hello!’ Jacinda cries warmly as she opens the door to us. Her eyes lock onto my hand on Alexandra’s shoulder – of course, they do – before she turns towards Alexandra. ‘You must be Alexandra,’ she says leaning in for a cheek kiss.

‘Hello, yes.’ I doubt Alexandra could look any more uncomfortable if she tried. ‘We brought this,’ she says, handing over a bottle of wine.

‘Oh, lovely. Thank you. Well, come on in then.’ Jacinda ushers us in, throwing me a look behind Alexandra’s back.

‘Behave,’ I mouth. She pokes her tongue out, then breaks into a smile the instant Alexandra turns back to us.

‘You have a lovely home,’ she says.

‘Thank you. We like it. Much more homey than Tristan’s austere bachelor flat, wouldn’t you say?’

‘Do not disparage my flat,’ I protest, right as Alexandra replies with, ‘I haven’t actually seen it yet.’

‘Exactly, she hasn’t seen it yet.’

Jacinda looks between us. ‘This is strange, isn’t it?’

‘What’s strange?’ Ravi asks as he makes his entrance.

He holds out his hand for me to shake. ‘Where have you been?’ I ask.

‘Meeting,’ he replies.

‘Right. I should have guessed.’ Ravi often makes meetings after hours.

‘Hello,’ he says, turning to Alexandra, ‘I’m Ravi, the one who keeps him out of trouble.’ Alexandra sniggers at that, somewhat breaking the tension. ‘So, what did I miss? And why doesn’t anyone have a drink yet?’

‘They just arrived,’ says Jacinda. ‘Besides, the barkeep was on the phone with the Sydney office for an *age*. Here.’ She hands him the wine. ‘Our guests brought this.’

She returns to her post in the kitchen, dons an apron, and stirs something in a large pot – one of her family recipes, I hope. Regardless, it smells delicious.

‘Ooh, this looks rather nice,’ says Ravi, mostly to himself. ‘We’ll have it with dinner, how does that sound?’

‘Sure,’ I reply. ‘That smells incredible, Jass,’ I call out over the sound of the range hood. She glances over with a smile and starts chopping fresh herbs.

‘You two go make yourselves comfortable and I’ll make drinks. G&Ts all round?’ Ravi asks, focused mostly on Alexandra.

‘Lovely, thanks. Uh, sorry, what gin do you have?’

Ravi’s eyes flick to mine – I mentioned Alexandra’s penchant for the finer things in life before we came.

‘Uh, we have Bombay Sapphire and Hendricks and, uh...’ He crosses to the bar cart to conduct a mini-stocktake. ‘Let’s see.’

‘There’s the Four Pillars your colleague brought back from Australia,’ Jacinda chimes in. ‘That’s quite fancy.’

‘Oh, I’ll try that,’ says Alexandra, seemingly without any understanding of what she’s just confirmed about herself.

‘Right, of course,’ Ravi replies with the polite smile he typically reserves for difficult clients.

He goes about making the drinks while I struggle to think of something to say – to my future wife! God, no matter how many times those words loop around my head, they don’t feel any less bizarre. Rather than making conversation, we both pretend to be fascinated by the collection of books and bric-a-brac that fill the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves.

‘Do you like to read?’ I ask when the silence becomes unbearable. ‘Fiction, I mean. I’m sure you read all the time in your line of work.’

‘I do read a lot for work, yes – research. Sometimes it’s tedious and then when I get home, well, the last thing I want to do is pick up a book.’ Her mouth migrates to the side again. ‘So, no, I don’t read much. You?’

‘Same. I’d like to read more but after a long day, I find it more appealing to collapse in front of the telly – you know, watch something mindless the Americans have dreamt up.’

It’s hard to know if that was the right thing to say, as she simply stares at me.

‘Here we are,’ says Ravi, arriving at the perfect time with our drinks. ‘Jass,’ he calls, ‘come join us for a toast.’

Jacinda rushes from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a dishcloth which she slings over her shoulder, and accepts her G&T from Ravi. ‘Thank you, darling.’ They share a quick kiss on the lips and Alexandra clears her throat.

Ravi turns back to us and raises his glass. ‘To Alexandra and Tristan,’ he says, catching me by surprise. I narrow my eyes at him, but he continues unfettered by my obvious annoyance. ‘May you have the perfect marriage of convenience, then amicably part ways in two years’ time.’

Alexandra shifts uncomfortably besides me – and no wonder – and Jacinda claps her hand over her mouth, shaking her head. ‘Rav,’ she says between her fingers.

‘What? Too soon?’ he quips. ‘We all know why we’re here. Why pretend? Alexandra, we genuinely welcome you to our odd-bod little family.’

‘Rav, I haven’t—’ I start. ‘*We* haven’t—’

I look to Alexandra for a lifeline.

‘Tristan hasn’t asked me to marry him yet,’ she tells Ravi.

‘Exactly,’ I confirm.

Ravi looks genuinely confused, then his expression shifts considerably. ‘Well, why not? Do you think attractive, intelligent women – women who will agree to pose as your wife – grow on trees?!’

‘*Rav.*’ Jacinda lays a hand on his arm.

‘I’m serious. Seventeen days and counting, Trist.’

‘I haven’t even introduced her to my mother yet,’ I retort.

‘But your mother knows about her,’ he replies.

‘Excuse me. I’m standing right here,’ says Alexandra. ‘Can you please not speak about me as though I’m part of the furnishings?’

‘Sorry,’ Ravi and I reply in unison.

‘You’re forgiven,’ she says to Ravi, ‘but only because you called me intelligent and attractive.’ Her mouth quirks,

revealing a smidgen more of that Sahara-dry wit I'm coming to know.

'Oh, I like you,' says Jacinda. 'Come, keep me company while I finish up dinner. We can pretend it's the 1950s.' Alexandra shrugs and follows Jacinda, flashing me a loaded sideways glance as she goes.

'Thank you very much,' I hiss at Ravi, chasing my words with a deep pull from my glass.

'How was I supposed to know you hadn't asked her?'

'Because I would have told you!'

'I figured you were coming to introduce your fiancée.'

'Clearly.'

The silence stretches between us while I try to determine if permanent damage has been done. 'Do you think she'll say yes?' he asks. '*Now*, I mean.'

'After you embarrassed her like that?'

'Yes.'

'Well, there's only one way to find out.' I take another slug of my drink for courage and stride off to talk to Alexandra.

POPPY

‘Hi, Poppy, I have Tristan Fellows for you. Line three.’

‘Thank you, Anita,’ I reply. To myself, mutter, ‘Why isn’t he calling me on my mobile?’ before hitting ‘3’ on the desk phone. ‘Good morning, Tristan,’ I say in my ultra-professional voice.

‘Poppy!’ he exclaims. He sounds surprised that calling my place of work during office hours and being transferred to my desk has resulted in us speaking. Perhaps it’s his first time calling a landline. I don’t respond, forcing him to get on with it.

‘I, er... I have news.’

Hmm – I have zero news. No amount of research on Alexandra has provided any confirmation that she is, in fact, a gold digger. And I’m hesitant to engage the agency’s investigator, as that would likely alert Saskia to a possible issue.

‘Is now a good time?’ he asks, interrupting my thoughts.

‘Sure.’ I swivel back and forth in my chair, one hand fidgeting with my memo cube – flick, flick, flick.

‘Good. Can I come up?’

‘Sorry, what?’

‘I’m outside. That’s why I called the office – to make sure you’re there. Well, here.’

This is an incoherent as he's ever been. Something is up. Oh, bugger, Alexandra is a 'no' and we're moving onto Nerida. Actually, that might be for the best, all things considered, if a little tight timewise.

'Uh sure, come on up. I'll get us a meeting room.'

Less than five minutes later, Anita escorts Tristan into the scene of our last (fraught) meeting and – shock, horror, stun, amaze – he's *smiling*. Has he forgotten that he was a complete arse to me the last time he was here?

'Hello,' he says, hesitating at the door.

'Hi. Are you coming in?' I ask.

'Right, yes, sorry. Er, I brought you these.' From behind his back, with what I can only describe as a flourish, he produces a white box tied with string – no lie, a *flourish*. I eye the box from across the table, clocking the seal, which reads 'Athena's Greek Bakery'. 'It's those biscuits you like, the ones you had in Greece.'

'I remember,' I reply coolly.

I'm a little suspicious of him being so, well, *nice*. I expected more dickishness. Curious, I slide the box towards me, slipping my thumbnail under the seal. The aromas of almond and sugar waft into the room and my mouth instantly waters – traitor. Lifting the lid, I can tell these are 'proper' Greek biscuits made by someone who knows what they're doing. I close the lid so I'm not tempted to gorge on them, especially in front of Tristan. 'Thank you,' I say.

'Ravi said they'd be better than flowers.'

'Sorry? I'm not following. Ravi told you to buy me biscuits?'

'Sort of. I mean, I wanted to get you something... as an apology for my behaviour – you know, the last time I was here.'

'Yes, I remember that too. I don't think we need a blow-by-blow recount, do you?' I ask.

‘No. Anyway, I didn’t know what your favourite flowers are, s—’

‘Sunflowers.’

Now, *why* did I tell him that?

‘Oh, I see. Anyway, Ravi suggested something more personalised than a generic bouquet so, I thought, well, biscuits.’ There’s the flourish again.

‘You don’t apologise very often, do you?’ I ask, treading dangerously close to rudeness. I’m about to backpedal, as I can’t abide rudeness – even if justified – when he replies.

‘No, I don’t and you’re right to say so. I’m sorry for my behaviour the other day. It’s not an excuse, more of a reason, but I’m finding this whole situation extremely stressful.’

‘You don’t say,’ I tease.

‘I do say. And I apologise for taking it out on you. I know you’re just doing your job.’

‘Well, thank you for the apology. And the biscuits. Ravi gives good advice.’

‘He does. Mostly.’ He smiles, his eyes alive with mirth, and it catches me off guard how much impact it has, his smile. And now that I’m no longer mad at him...

NO. Stop it, Poppy. Argh!

‘So,’ I say, wrangling my composure, ‘you said you have news?’

‘Yes. A lot has happened since I saw you last – beyond remorse for my behaviour, I mean. First is that my cousins are onside – my side, that is.’

‘Oh, well, that’s good.’

‘Yes, and an enormous relief. As I mentioned in Greece... the precedence – you know, relatives challenging inheritances and winning when the marriage is shown to be...’ He struggles to find the right description.

‘A marriage of convenience?’ I offer.

‘Yes. That. Although, this is more of a marriage of inconvenience, isn’t it?’

I smile, acknowledging the joke, even though in my line of work I’ve heard it a dozen times before.

‘Well, I’m glad that’s no longer a concern.’ I’m especially glad, as I hadn’t known how much that concern was adding to his stress. No wonder he’s been a total arse.

‘Well, no – I mean, yes, it’s good news about the cousins, and they were delighted that we’ll be setting up generous trusts for them’ – I hadn’t known about that either – ‘but I’m still wary about my aunt. I’m certain she will leap at any opportunity to have the inheritance overturned should she discover... well, you know.’

‘I see.’ This is a lot to take in and I *really* wish I’d known the full extent of this particular issue. I should loop Saskia in, so we’re ahead of any legal ramifications – whatever that may mean and if it’s even possible.

‘Yes, which leads me to my actual news,’ he says brightly. ‘I’ve proposed to Alexandra.’

I blink. I heard him but this comes as a massive surprise, especially as it was only a couple of days ago that he expressed his concern about her attitude to money. And I haven’t even addressed that yet.

‘Okay...’ I begin.

He deflates. ‘You don’t seem pleased.’

‘Oh, no, I am.’ *Case closed, Poppy – that’s what you’ve hoped for all along.* ‘It’s just... you had concerns.’

‘I did but...’ He sighs. ‘Look, as you’ve said this isn’t an exact science and no one will be a perfect match. Especially not with the time pressure. If we had a year perhaps... Besides, Alexandra is amenable – and she seemed to get on reasonably well with Jacinda and Ravi.’

‘Oh, you’ve already introduced her to your friends?’

‘Well, yes, and she’s meeting my mother this evening.’

‘Things are progressing quickly then,’ I say, attempting to ignore the unease building inside me.

‘Poppy,’ he says, his buoyant countenance markedly shifting. ‘Mother knows about the terms of the will, of course, but I’ve misled her regarding how Alexandra and I met. She doesn’t know this marriage is arranged. She would never approve of me engaging your agency...’

As he trails off, my mind immediately goes to the leak. Tristan is exactly the sort of person who could be adversely impacted if word got out.

‘Our discretion is a given, Tristan. Without exception.’ It’s a promise I hope I can keep.

‘Excellent. Well, I don’t want to keep you any longer.’ He stands. ‘Goodbye, Poppy,’ he says with an outstretched hand.

I ease halfway out of my chair and reach over the table to shake it. ‘Goodbye, Tristan, and good luck.’

He leaves, glancing at me as he passes through reception. And, just like that, the case is closed.

‘You okay?’ asks Freya from the doorway. She’s caught me staring off into space, myriad of thoughts and emotions zinging through me.

‘Uh, yep. Tristan has proposed to Alexandra and she’s accepted.’

Freya lingers in the doorway, narrowing her eyes at me. ‘And?’

‘And nothing,’ I lie with a faux smile. I can hardly tell Freya the truth – that of everything I’m feeling right now, the dominant emotion is disappointment. Only, I can’t say why.

* * *

Tristan

‘I hope that wasn’t too much of a baptism by fire?’ I ask, looking across the backseat of the Uber. Mother was well-behaved (for her), but she certainly ran Alexandra through the gauntlet. Alexandra impressed me with how well she handled the inquisition, even sticking to our cover story without any slips.

‘Your mother is a formidable woman,’ she replies.

‘Hah!’ I laugh. ‘That’s one way of putting it. We won’t have to see much of her, I promise. Just the odd dinner, once a month or so.’

‘Twenty-four dinners. I think I can handle that. Although, I prefer Jacinda and Ravi’s company.’

‘That makes two of us.’

‘They’re very nice, Tristan. They obviously care about you a great deal.’

‘Yes. Ravi’s been like a brother to me – well, ever since school, and Jass is...’

‘Like a sister?’

I smile. ‘Exactly. Do you have a sister?’ I inquire, vaguely recalling from her biography that she does. Or perhaps it was Nerida. No, wait, she has brothers. Not that Nerida is still relevant, of course.

‘I do, actually. She lives in America.’

‘Oh, how often do you see her?’

‘Rarely. We’re not close.’

‘And what about your parents?’

‘I don’t see them much either.’

It’s unclear from her response if she doesn’t see her parents because they’re estranged or because they no longer live in London, but she leaves it at that, so I don’t press.

‘Did you want to come back to mine?’ I ask instead. Her head swivels towards me so fast it’s clear I’ve offended her. ‘No, not like that. Sorry.’ I shake my head. ‘Look, it’s only just

gone eight and you've not seen my flat yet, that's all. I could give you the tour, show you your room... I mean, you don't need to move in right away – I'm sure you'll want to sort things out and pack and whatnot—sorry, I completely botched that, didn't I?

'First time having a fake wife?' she whispers, shooting me an understanding smile, and I appreciate both the good humour and the discretion.

'First and last, I hope,' I reply, relieved that she doesn't think I'm a degenerate. 'I really am sorry.'

'It's all right. Just took me by surprise is all. And are you sure about me moving into yours? I could just stay at mine after the ceremony. We barely know each other.'

Understatement of the century. And in a week, she will be Mrs Fellows.

'True, but I think it's for the best. Ravi does too – from a legal standpoint, as well as for appearances. My mother, for one, would find it very strange if we had different abodes. And my aunt... well, as I've said, she seems intent on contesting the will and we want to avoid giving her any ammunition.'

Alexandra nods thoughtfully.

'I'd like to see it,' she says eventually. 'Tonight, I mean.'

'Oh good. Er, driver, a change of destination, please.'

'Put it in the app, mate.'

'Right.' I always forget that. I change the destination in the app and less than fifteen minutes later, we pull up outside my building. Now the nerves *really* kick in – another surreal realisation that this is actually happening. I fumble with the key as I unlock the door but once inside, I flick on the lights and step aside so Alexandra can enter the main room, a combined lounge–dining–kitchen.

As she looks around, I do too. It's an odd feeling seeing one's home through another person's eyes. Jacinda referred to it as my 'austere bachelor flat' but I like the simplicity, each item in its place. And while Ravi and Jacinda have walls and

walls of densely packed bookshelves, I have a few carefully selected pieces of art and little else. A sideboard next to the rarely used dining table bears the only souvenir from my rather limited travels, a glass bowl from Murano.

‘It’s very nice,’ she says taking it all in.

‘My room is that way, and the guest room – your room – is through here,’ I say, leading the way. ‘You have an en suite and a walk-in wardrobe. There’s also a study nook with a desk,’ I say, nodding towards the alcove near the window.

I watch her, hopeful that she’ll think this a suitable place to stay for the next two years. It’s a spacious room and decorated in a neutral pale grey – ‘dove’, the decorator called it.

Alexandra runs a hand over the bedspread.

‘Of course, you can redecorate – bring your own bedroom furniture – whatever you like.’

She crosses to the desk, a sleek modern piece acquired by the decorator, and sits on the desk chair, turning slowly from side to side as she surveys the room.

Eventually, she stills and meets my eye. ‘The room is perfect as is. I won’t need to change anything. I’ll just bring my clothes and some personal belongings. Books mostly.’

I recall what she said at Ravi and Jacinda’s about not reading much but perhaps she means non-fiction.

‘And what will you do with the rest?’ I inquire. ‘Your household items, I mean. I’d be happy to pay for you to store them, so you have all you need when we... well... part ways.’

‘Thank you, but I don’t really have much. I’m living in a shared flat at the moment.’

‘Oh.’ This comes as a surprise. She’s a professional in her thirties. But it may be judgemental of me to assume she’d have different living circumstances.

‘I know how strange it is – believe me. Especially as all my flatmates are ten years younger than me.’

‘How many are there?’

‘Three. At least I don’t have to share a room like the others. They’re all in one room together.’ She smiles feebly and I instantly imagine her crammed into a box room.

‘Right.’

‘I’m saving for something, you see – something important – and every penny counts,’ she explains.

Speaking of pennies... this one drops, and the niggling questions I’ve had about her attitude towards money now make some sense.

‘What are you saving for?’ I ask, preparing myself. What sort of savings strategy means foregoing basic comforts?

‘A baby.’

There is no way in a million years I could have predicted that.

‘I’m saving up for more rounds of IVF,’ she continues. ‘That’s why the money is such a drawcard for this arrangement – that and getting to live here, of course, enjoying the perks of your lifestyle. Nothing wrong with enjoying luxuries, especially when you can’t really afford them yourself.’

I’m speechless, yet she persists, undaunted – perhaps relieved that the cat’s out of the bag and she can be completely honest about her motivations.

‘I make good money, as you must realise, but IVF is expensive. I’ve already had six failed rounds – my parents think I’m mad, “wasting my money”.’

And that explains the estrangement then.

‘But I want a baby more than anything in the world. That’s why I’m marrying you.’

POPPY

‘This was an inspired idea,’ says Shaz.

We’re in my lounge, each of us wearing our PJs and those gloopy face masks that make us look like Jason from the *Friday the 13th* films. We’re also sipping prosecco – and not the four-pound stuff from Aldi, but the thirteen-pound stuff from Tesco!

‘It’s been a week,’ I say.

‘It’s been a bloody year! Or two!’

‘I’ll drink to that,’ I say, holding out my glass. She clinks hers against mine, nearly tumbling out of the beanbag (yes, I have a beanbag).

‘Oops,’ she says, wiping up the bubbly she’s sloshed on the carpet with her cuff.

‘Don’t worry about it. At least it wasn’t a red,’ I say.

‘How long till the pizza arrives?’ she asks.

I check the clock on the stove. ‘Fifteen minutes.’

‘Argh! I’m starving!’

‘You ate most of the crisps!’

‘And your point is?’

‘I’ve got olives,’ I say, leaping up and heading into the kitchen. I bring back a bowl of glossy green Castelvetrano olives and a smaller bowl for pips.

‘You are the consummate hostess,’ she says.

‘I try.’ I flop back onto the sofa and take a swig of my bubbly.

‘You okay?’

‘Tristan’s case closed today. I’m still not sure how I feel about it.’

‘What?’ She sits up, sloshing more prosecco, and I get up for some kitchen towel. When I return, I hand her a thick wad. ‘Thanks. And sorry,’ she says wiping up the mess. ‘Also, why didn’t you tell me?’

‘I’m telling you now.’

‘So, he went with the British Museum chick.’

‘Yep.’

‘And when’s the wedding?’

‘Next week and it won’t be a wedding, just a marriage ceremony.’

‘Right, so are you going?’

‘No, why would I?’

‘You’ve been to client weddings before.’

‘This is different.’

‘How?’

I sigh, impatient and wanting to move on from this topic – even though I started it. ‘Because this isn’t a love match. When a client falls in love and gets married, it’s an honour to be invited to the wedding. I don’t even mind pretending to be a long-lost cousin, but this... I wouldn’t want to watch Tristan marry Alexandra.’

‘You’re usually much happier when you wrap up a case.’

‘I *am* happy.’

‘Yeah, I can tell from all the jumping around and joyful laughter.’

‘The case ended successfully and netted the agency a sizeable fee. I’m happy.’

‘And what about the other thing?’

‘What other thing?’ I ask, knowing *exactly* what she’s referring to.

‘You coming back from Greece with feelings for Tristan.’

‘I didn’t – it was a momentary lapse in judgement,’ I insist. ‘And I’ve come to my senses.’

‘Mmm-hmm.’

‘Besides, he’s revealed his true colours more than once since we got back,’ I insist harder.

‘You mean, like bringing you your favourite Greek biscuits?’

‘That was Ravi’s idea. And no.’

‘Okay, fine. The biscuits were Ravi’s idea. But, just playing devil’s advocate for a sec. If you *did* like Tristan – romantically, I mean – and he felt the same way, which’ – I scowl at her – ‘*which*, from what you’ve said may *actually* be what’s going on here, why couldn’t *you* marry him?’

‘No!’

‘You could hang out, date, get to know each other – like Margaret and Andrew in *The Proposal*.

‘Don’t!’ I say, holding up my hand.

‘What?’

‘You were going to do your Ryan Reynolds impersonation, which is *terrible*.’

‘Mean!’

‘True!’

‘Fine, but it’s the perfect solution.’

‘Marrying Tristan so we can date?’ I ask, incredulous.

‘Why not?’

‘Because! First, I don’t have feelings for Tristan. He’s annoying and rude and... *British*.’ Even Shaz won’t pay that one, sending an eye roll my way. ‘*Second*, he doesn’t even like me – as a person, I mean, because if he did, he wouldn’t be so annoying and rude—’

‘And British?’ she quips.

‘Third,’ I continue, ignoring her, ‘Alexandra is perfect for him – smart, accomplished... smart. And fourth – and most importantly – I’d be fired. From the job I love!’

‘The job that may go away any minute now if they don’t figure out who’s threatening to bring down the agency?’

‘Can you please stop being so bloody logical?’

‘Never. At least, when it comes to your life. When it comes to mine...’ She shrugs, alluding to her not yet giving notice at work. ‘Anyway, back to your stuff. Let’s say all of that is true – you don’t like him, he doesn’t like you, Alexandra, the losing your job thing... all of it. It’s all true. Why are you so in your head about it?’

‘I... I’m not.’

‘Physician, heal thyself!’ she cries out, exasperated.

‘Like you can talk!’ I throw back.

‘I’m dry,’ she says, wriggling out of the beanbag.

‘Only ’cause you spilled half your glass on the carpet.’

‘Top up?’ she asks pleasantly as she passes.

‘Oh, yes, please,’ I reply just a pleasantly. That’s the thing about being best friends – you can call each other out on your shit and have (what appears to be) a huge argument and it all dissipates the moment one of you offers a top-up.

The door buzzer rings. ‘Hallelujah!’ says Shaz, changing directions to let the pizza guy into the building.

She presses the button and shouts, ‘Come on up!’

‘You don’t need to shout, Shaz, they can hear you.’

‘Poppy? Is that you?’

Shaz and I exchange confused looks, then she peers closely at the grainy black-and-white screen. She releases the ‘talk’ button.

‘Um, Pop, I don’t think it’s the pizza guy.’

I get up and join her to have a look. ‘Fuck me, that’s Tristan.’

She squints at the screen. ‘Geez, he *is* hot. At least I think he is. Hard to tell.’

He buzzes again and I’ve never been more grateful for a one-way security camera. I hit the ‘talk’ button.

‘Hello, Tristan.’

‘Poppy! So sorry to come by unannounced, but I need to see you. It’s an emergency.’

‘Come on up!’ says Shaz, pressing the ‘door’ button. I slap her hand away, but it’s too late. He’s already letting himself into the building.

‘Shaz, I’m in my pyjamas!’

‘Yeah, and you’ll want to get rid of this too,’ she says, snatching the mask off my face.

‘Oh my god! Think, Poppy, think,’ I say to myself. ‘Okay, you stall him and I’ll put some clothes on.’

I go into my bedroom and close the door, Shaz’s extremely annoying laugh echoing in my ears.

* * *

Tristan

I knock on the door to Poppy’s flat and it opens to reveal a tall-ish blonde woman wearing pyjamas. She also has a white sheet on her face, with holes cut out at the mouth and eyes.

‘Hi, I’m Shaz, come on in.’ I hesitate, but she waves me inside with, ‘DBS – don’t be shy. I won’t bite.’

‘Right. Er, is Poppy...?’

‘Yep, just getting dressed. We’re having a girls’ night in, hence the attire.’ She looks down, indicating the pyjamas.

‘I’m interrupting.’

‘Yep.’

‘I should g—’

‘Nope, you’re here now. Have a seat,’ she instructs, pointing at the sofa. I sit down, somewhat comforted by being told what to do as, for the past hour, I’ve had absolutely no idea. ‘So, what exactly constitutes a matchmaking emergency?’ she asks with a tilt of her head.

‘Oh, er, I’d rather discuss that with Pop—’

‘Tristan!’ Poppy emerges from what I presume is her bedroom wearing jeans and a T-shirt, fresh-faced and her shoulder-length hair hanging loose. It occurs to me that I haven’t seen it like this – she usually wears it pulled back. ‘Can I get you something to drink?’ she asks. ‘Water? Tea?’ She goes into the kitchen, which opens directly off the lounge room and looks at me expectantly over the countertop.

‘Er, water please.’

As she reaches into a cabinet for a glass, I glance at her friend who has plopped onto a beanbag – or is it *into* a beanbag? Whichever, that sheet thing on her face is rather disturbing. She must catch on to my discomfort, because she peels it off, then pats her face. ‘Don’t want to waste any,’ she says.

‘Here you are,’ says Poppy, handing me a glass of cold water.

I take a sip. ‘Thank you.’

She sits opposite me in an armchair and props her elbows on her knees. ‘First, how did you know where I live?’

She must have forgotten. ‘We exchanged contact details before travelling to Greece, remember? In case of an emergency.’

‘Oh, that’s *right*. Yeah, I forgot. Just a little... discombobulated.’

Her friend snorts out a laugh. ‘Sorry,’ she says to me. She looks over at Poppy and jerks a thumb over her shoulder. ‘I reckon I’ll sit this one out. Mind if I hang out in your room, Pop?’

‘Go for it.’

We both watch Poppy’s friend leave – I know she told me her name, but I didn’t catch it. Too anxious.

‘Okay,’ Poppy says to me, ‘what’s the big emergency?’ She leans closer, indicating that she’s waiting for an explanation, but when I open my mouth to speak nothing comes out. My mind has gone blank.

‘Okayyy,’ she says, drawing out the word. ‘How about I ask questions and you answer?’

Helpless to do little else, I nod, then sip more water.

‘Is it about Alexandra?’ she asks.

‘Yes.’

‘Has she got cold feet?’

‘No.’

‘Okay. Did it go badly with your mother? You introduced them, right?’

‘Yes – I mean, yes to introducing them and no, it didn’t go badly. It went fine.’

‘So, *you’ve* changed your mind, is that it?’ I nod again, inducing a heavy sigh. ‘Tristan, *why*?’

‘Because she wants to have a baby,’ I say, finally finding my words.

‘What? Did you say “baby”?’

‘Yes.’

‘With you? She wants to have a baby with you?’

‘Not exactly.’

‘Okay, look, this is the part where you need to start talking. And in full sentences. I need to know what’s going on.’

I take another sip of water, swallow, then inhale a deep breath. To her credit, Poppy doesn’t seem to lose patience with me as I collect myself, and while I recount the conversation with Alexandra, she listens intently.

When I conclude with, ‘So, you see? I can’t possibly marry her,’ Poppy sits back, an intense look of concentration on her face. In the lengthy silence that follows, all I can do is hope she’s on my side and will help me – only hours ago I informed her the case was closed.

‘You can’t marry her,’ she says eventually, her eyes fixed on the corner of her coffee table.

‘No, I can’t,’ I reply, encouraged by her firm stance.

‘There would be too many questions – about her child’s paternity... about your place in the child’s life – even if she fell pregnant long after the marriage ended, there would still be questions.’

‘Precisely. And I wouldn’t feel right about asking Alexandra to wait before the next round of IVF. It’s *two* years. But then *that* would mean—’

‘She’d have a child while you were together. Oh! She might even try to stake a claim on the inheritance on her child’s behalf. She’s obviously desperate to be a mother. How far would she go to secure the child’s future?’

‘Well, yes, there’s that. I thought the same thing. But Poppy, even worse, what if I bonded with the child? How could I possibly say goodbye not knowing if I’d ever see them again?’

She makes eye contact. ‘You’re right. That would be heartbreaking.’ She stares hard at the floor. ‘No,’ she says decisively a moment later, ‘you absolutely cannot marry her. It’s too risky – on all counts.’

I gasp with relief, clapping my hand over my mouth. I’d said as much to Alexandra – once I’d composed myself enough to voice a coherent thought – but she’d pleaded with

me, telling me over and over again that she didn't want anything from me bar the agreed payment. I drop my head into my hands and take steadying breaths.

'Hey.' Poppy is suddenly kneeling beside me, her hand resting lightly on my knee. 'Are you okay?'

'I just... I keep thinking how close I got to marrying her. What if she'd never said anything about wanting a child until after we were married?'

'I'm not sure. Ravi would probably have had to work some legal magic and get the marriage annulled, or something.'

'I suppose. But wouldn't the damage have already been done.'

'In part at least, yes.' She sits back on her heels. 'I'm really sorry, Tristan. I knew something was off – especially the way she was about money – but I couldn't figure out what it was. And I *dug*, believe me, for *days*.'

'I know you've done your best.'

'That's the thing, though...' she says with a wry laugh. She returns to her chair as though she has the weight of the world on her shoulders, then meets my eye. 'Now I've let you down *twice*.'

'There's no way you could have known about the IVF if she didn't mention it when she applied to the agency.' From the shake of her head, Poppy doesn't agree. She can't honestly expect herself to be omniscient.

'Okay,' she says quietly, as if to herself, 'that's seventeen days to go. *No*. Shit. It's sixteen, isn't it?' She looks up. I nod, confirming that, yes, my birthday is in sixteen days. 'Well, we'd better get you to Edinburgh then. Tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow?'

'Sixteen days,' she says simply.

'Right. Tomorrow then,' I reluctantly concur – at least tomorrow is a Saturday and I don't have to take off from work again.

‘I’ll contact Nerida first thi—’

‘Will you come with me?’ I ask abruptly. Actually, it isn’t abruptness, it’s desperation and I’m positive Poppy can smell it on me.

‘What?’

I’m right, she can, but at this stage there’s no point in playing coy. I *am* desperate.

‘Please. I need you there to ensure everything goes to plan – that Nerida is exactly who she says she is and if she isn’t... well, then, you will have to work some of your magic and find me a fourth potential wife.’

‘Tristan, I...’

‘Please, Poppy. It feels like I only just accepted my fate but now... And it’s not just for me. The cousins... they’re lovely girls and I don’t want to let them down. Grandad wouldn’t have wanted that.’

‘All right,’ she says after what feels like an age. ‘I’ll come with you.’

‘Thank you. I mean it, thank you.’

A loud buzzer goes off and the bedroom door flies open. ‘Finally, the pizza’s here!’ shouts Poppy’s friend, bursting into the room.

‘Geez, Shaz.’ Poppy shakes her head and then turns to me. ‘Feel like staying for pizza?’

Despite having had dinner at Mother’s only a couple of hours ago, I’m suddenly ravenous. Though, coming off a surge of adrenalin will do that, I suppose.

‘If there’s enough, I wouldn’t mind having a slice.’

‘There’s enough,’ says Shaz, who has just let the delivery person into the building. ‘We always order two.’

‘Cold pizza for breakfast,’ says Poppy. ‘Guilty pleasure,’ she adds with a shrug I find rather endearing – even though I will never in my life eat cold pizza for breakfast.

POPPY

‘I’ll call you as soon as I’ve met with Saskia and Ursula, okay?’

‘Yes, all right.’

‘But pack a bag and be ready,’ I instruct.

‘I will. And, Poppy, thank you again – for listening, for re-opening the case – but also for agreeing to come with me.’

‘Of course, it’s no problem at all,’ I lie. ‘Good night, Tristan.’

‘Good night, Poppy. See you tomorrow.’

After seeing Tristan out of the flat, I lean against the door with frustrated sigh. ‘Well, fuck.’

‘I’ll say,’ says Shaz. ‘I felt like a third wheel the whole night.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘What are *you* talking about?’ Shaz narrows her eyes.

‘The case!’ I push off the door and start clearing away pizza remnants from the coffee table.

‘Oh, yeah, well *that’s* gone to shit.’

‘Thank you, Captain Obvious.’ I toss her an annoyed look. At least she’s helping clear up.

‘I mean, he *really* dodged a bullet there – a frigging baby! Would never have seen that coming,’ she adds.

‘Wait, how do you know about Alexandra wanting a baby? You were in the other room.’

‘A combo of very thin walls and a distressed client.’ I scowl at her. ‘What? You would have told me anyway,’ she says, going back to squashing the empty pizza boxes into the recycling bin.

‘That’s fair,’ I concede. I start loading the dishwasher. ‘Hang on, go back. What did you mean by “third wheel”?’

Shaz stops what she’s doing and leans against the counter, her eyes boring into mine. ‘You and Tristan.’

I frown at her, confused. ‘He was only here an hour and spent most of the time talking to you. You were like Graham Frigging Norton. “Tristan Fellows, what’s it like being a wanker banker?”’

She snorts. ‘Oh, come on, he laughed at that. And that whole story about wanting to be like his grandad – that was sweet.’

‘Well, yeah, but still.’ I go back to loading the dishwasher.

‘And that’s not what I mean.’ She folds her arms across her chest. ‘I’m talking about all the looks between you – him watching you when you weren’t looking, you watching him when he wasn’t. Both of you exchanging little glances and smiles.’

‘We were not.’

‘It was a bit like being in a real-life regency romance. I was three seconds away from shouting, “Get a drawing room!”’

I snigger at that – Shaz can be really funny when she’s not wallowing in romantic misery.

‘You have feelings for each other,’ she states simply – psychologist Shaz now, straight up and without humour.

‘That is completely inaccurate,’ I declare, deflecting. I’m like Wonder Woman with her bulletproof bracelets – I-ping-DON’T-ping-HAVE-ping-FEELINGS-ping-FOR-ping-TRISTAN. ‘Besides, we already talked about that.’

‘You and Tristan?’

‘No! You and me.’ The disbelieving angle of her head speaks volumes. ‘And like I said, *if* there were feelings – and there *aren’t* – there’s no way anything could happen between us anyway.’

‘You are deluding yourself,’ she says, returning to the lounge room.

‘That’s not very nice.’

‘You want “nice”, or do you want a best friend who’ll tell you the truth?’

‘*Nice.*’ She tuts at me – I deserve it. ‘Wait, what are you doing?’ I ask as she rummages in her overnight bag and takes out her jeans. ‘I thought you were staying?’

‘Not tonight.’ She steps out of her PJ bottoms and slips on her jeans, then pushes her feet into her trainers. ‘You’ve got work to do and I’m guessing an early start – and that means no sleep-in for me,’ she says, nodding towards my fold-out sofa. She picks up her phone from the coffee table and shoves it in her back pocket.

‘Shaz, wait, are we fighting?’ This feels different from our little tiff before, maybe because she’s *leaving*.

‘What?’ She looks at me as if I’ve grown an extra head. ‘No, you dork. We’ll hang out when you get back from Edinburgh.’

‘You sure?’

‘Yes. We’re not fighting and I’ll see you in a few days.’ She swings her overnight bag onto her shoulder and smacks a kiss on my cheek. ‘Now, get your head in the game and other applicable sporting metaphors – Tristan needs you at full bottle.’ When she gets to the door, she pauses, pinning me with a look. ‘And don’t schtoop your client,’ she says with a wag of her finger.

‘Hey!’

She leaves, cackling over her shoulder.

‘Or *do* schtoop him, but I want details!’ she shouts out just before the door closes. My neighbours will be thrilled.

I stare at the closed door, shaking my head. Shaz is right about one thing, however. I *do* have to work before I can go to bed. The first thing is to send a message to Saskia and Ursula:

Sorry to derail your Saturday but we need to meet first thing about Mr Impossible. Case re-opened. On to potential #3. Going to Edinburgh asap. 8 too early to meet?

Ursula will hate the early hour, but she’ll be there if Saskia okays it.

Next, deciding to go old school, I grab a notepad and pen from my beloved antique secretary by the window (a gorgeous spot on sunny days – so approximately ten days a year – #haha #London), then flop onto the sofa and start scribbling:

* *Tee up meetings w/Nerida – call tomoro & Sun in Ed*

* *Book travel*

* *Legal stuff: cousins, aunt, revised preup for #3(?)*

After staring at the third bullet for nearly a minute, I add ‘IVF’ to ‘legal stuff’. It was a huge oversight on the agency’s part to put forward a potential wife whose (real) aim clashed so monumentally with our client’s. I can’t even imagine what would have happened if Alexandra hadn’t revealed that critical piece of information before they’d married. I shudder, a goose not just walking over my grave but pausing to do the ‘Macarena’.

The pen hovers over the page as other thoughts come to mind, ones I can’t bring myself to write, conflicting thoughts that joust and parry as I try (desperately) to parse Shaz’s assertion that Tristan and I have feelings for each other.

He’s ridiculously handsome – you fancy the hell out of him, admit it.

He’s also ridiculously annoying and arrogant and superior.

He’s funny sometimes – and some of those times are on purpose!

This makes me laugh aloud but the thoughts keep coming, my brain zinging from one to another like monkeys swinging through the jungle, goading each other on.

He looked SO GOOD tonight – distress aside. Blue’s definitely his colour. It makes his whisky-coloured eyes pop. That blue linen shirt he wore in Greece...

He’s been an arsehole to you on numerous occasions.

But with good reason. He just lost his beloved grandfather and there’s all the pressure from his family. He brought you your favourite biscuits!

BECAUSE HE’D BEEN A TOTAL ARSE!

Okay, that last one’s got sticking power. We get along, yes – well, *sometimes* – but so what? That’s just us getting along because it makes working together easier.

It’s attraction, pure and simple, and even that’s unrequited. Tristan dates *beautiful* women, women who could grace magazine covers. His eyes almost popped out of his head when I showed him Nerida’s photos for the second time.

And I only pushed him towards Alexandra because that was ‘more convenient’, him marrying a London-based woman. Nothing to do with her just-slightly-above-average level of attractiveness.

‘Nothing to do with that at all!’ I reiterate aloud.

Wonderful. I’m cracking myself up, I’m talking to myself, my best friend just announced to the entire building that I may or may not have plans to schtoop my client (I don’t). No doubt the other residents are holding a meeting right this minute to officially name me as The Odd Woman in Flat 3F.

Good thing there’s no clause in my lease prohibiting bizarre behaviour. If there were, Mrs Brahimi wouldn’t be permitted to stay – she walks her cat on a lead! Well, drags it more like, the poor thing.

My phone chimes – Saskia.

No apologies needed. See you both at 8.

I add an item to my list:

** Fancy coffee and treats for S&U*

Last thing I do before my bedtime beauty routine is send an email to Nerida, introducing myself, explaining that we have a potential marriage-of-convenience match (which is extremely time sensitive), and emphasising that I'd 'greatly appreciate it' if we could speak first thing tomorrow and could she send her availability for Sunday as soon as possible.

'Fingers crossed,' I mutter, then get ready for bed.

* * *

I show up at the agency at 7.40 a.m. wearing an ultra-professional shift dress and matching blazer (even though it's a Saturday) and armed with caffeination for Saskia and Ursula (double cupped for extra insulation) and a generous selection of sweet treats (mostly to butter Saskia up so she doesn't fire me).

While my tea brews, I set up the conference room, including projecting the agenda onto the large screen on the wall. When you wake up at 4 a.m., your stomach tight with nerves, you end up distracting yourself by making slides and trying to convince yourself that you're *not* going to be fired. The one saving grace was that Nerida appears to be a night owl and had already replied to my email, agreeing to both a call with me this morning and a meeting with me and Tristan tomorrow in Edinburgh. Phew.

'Good morning, Poppy,' says Saskia. Startled, I spill a few drops of water onto the conference table. I wipe them with my sleeve – can't take me anywhere. Glancing at the clock, I see that she's early. Of course, she is – she's Saskia! I should have arrived at 7.30 a.m.

'Good morning.'

'Oh, these look delish,' she says, eyeing the pastries. 'Do you think I could sneak one home for Andrew?' she asks, one

of the (extremely) rare times she's mentioned her husband to me.

'Oh, yeah, for sure. Plenty for everyone!' I screech and she gives me an odd look. 'Be right back. Tea,' I throw in to explain.

I head to the kitchen, giving myself a good talking to on the way – or rather, a good muttering to. 'Get a grip, Poppy. Right, points to cover: the case has derailed (again) – but this time it's not my fault; I need Saskia and Ursula's help to get it back on track; and I do not have feelings for my client.'

I stop short.

What the hell am I thinking with my panicked, sleep-deprived brain? I absolutely CANNOT mention that last bit. And now my tea has over-brewed, meaning it will be bitter and tannic, but I will finish making it and I'll drink it as penance for... for what?

For screwing up this case, Poppy!

But it's not my fault!

Wonderful, I really am going not-so-slightly mad.

'Hello, Poppy.'

For the second time this morning, I'm startled by someone's entrance.

'Good morning, Ursula.' She reaches for a coffee cup from the cupboard. 'Oh, no need for pods today,' I say. 'I brought you your favourite. A mochaccino.' A grateful smile alights on her face – well, sort of, but I've learnt to read the micro-movements of Ursula's mostly static face. 'Saskia's already here. Should we go in?'

At the mention of Saskia, a cloud descends over Ursula, but she nods and follows me into the conference room.

* * *

‘So, that’s it in a nutshell,’ I say twenty minutes later. *If the nut were the size of the London Eye*, I think. I look between them, attempting to divine how my news has landed.

‘There’s quite a bit to unpack, isn’t there?’ asks Saskia cryptically. She sips from her oat-milk latte.

‘Yes,’ I reply. ‘And I know it’s on top of the leak and—’

Ursula clears her throat and fidgets with the lid of her takeaway cup then flicks an anxious glance at Saskia. Is her strange mood because of this case or the leak?

‘No, no,’ says Saskia. ‘You were right to bring this to us.’

With Saskia contemplating this latest dilemma, I turn to Ursula. ‘Ursula, would you sit in on my call with Nerida?’ I’m eager (i.e. desperate) for her to say yes. She has far more experience with situations in which a potential is third on the list, but we don’t want them to feel like second best – or in this case, *third* best.

‘Ursula?’ Saskia prompts.

Ursula heaves out a ragged sigh and to my great horror, tears up. Saskia and I exchange a worried glance.

‘Ursula,’ Saskia says, reaching for her hand, ‘what’s wrong?’

‘Isn’t it obvious? This is all my fault.’

Something niggles in my mind, trying to get a foothold – my annoyance at Ursula for her part in the Vittoria episode – but I shush it. I do not need to pile onto the poor woman.

‘How do you mean?’ Saskia asks her gently.

Ursula turns towards me. ‘I practically forced Vittoria on you.’

‘Nooo,’ I protest, even though she absolutely did. ‘We decided that together. And yes, it was a longshot, but there were benefits too – if it had worked out, I mean. Tristan wouldn’t have had to pay that huge fee to his future wife, for one.’

I don’t mention it’s the only benefit I can think of.

‘That’s generous, Poppy, but we both know it’s not true. She was never a viable option. And now this situation with Alexandra and that’s on top of the le—’ She stops speaking abruptly and throws Saskia another look. *Something* is going on. ‘I’ll handle that by the way,’ she says to me. ‘Alexandra.’

‘You don’t need—’

‘It’s my mess, Poppy – I vetted her. And the poor girl probably needs some support. It must be quite the blow thinking she’d be getting that much money and now... nothing.’ Ursula shakes her head, then looks over at Saskia. ‘I’m sorry I’ve let you down.’

‘Is something going on?’ Saskia asks gently, ignoring the apology. ‘Something outside of work?’

The tears make another appearance but Ursula blinks them away. ‘Sorry.’

‘You don’t need to apologise,’ I assure her just as Saskia says, ‘It’s all right, just tell us what’s going on.’ She and I exchange another look.

‘It’s... it’s Barney.’

‘Barney?’ I inquire.

‘Ursula’s toy poodle,’ Saskia says.

‘He’s got cancer, the poor love, and rather than putting him through another course of chemo, Richard wants to have him put to sleep. Part of me knows it’s the right thing to do – he’s often in so much pain – but I can’t bear it! I can’t bear thinking of a life without him.’

Tears splash down her cheeks and even I have to blink back my own. I know exactly what it feels like to have a pet so long that they feel like a part of you. I still miss Rusty, even though technically he was a working dog and not my pet. He still slept at the foot of my bed every night for eleven years *and* he had a way of intuiting when I needed a cuddle, which during my teen years was often.

‘I’m really sorry, Ursula,’ I say, grabbing her other hand and giving it a squeeze. She nods then snuffles.

‘I know he’s just a dog—’

‘Don’t say that,’ says Saskia, getting up to retrieve a box of tissues from the sideboard. ‘He’s family and it must be very difficult, for both of you.’

Ursula nods again, wiping her nose and face. She meets my eye and then turns to Saskia. ‘I’ve been off my game of late. I’m very sorry. None of this would have happened if I hadn’t been so distracted.’

‘Ursula, you’re one of the best matchmakers in London,’ says Saskia, ‘and this is just a minor blip in an illustrious career, all right?’

Wow, Saskia is being *beyond* magnanimous. I’ve been the recipient of her saint-like understanding before, but this is next level.

‘So, I’ll sort through the legal end, make sure there are no unforeseen implications, you contact Alexandra and conduct a full wellbeing check and let me know if there’s anything we can do for her.’ Ursula wipes under her eyes and nods her head, composing herself. ‘And Poppy?’

‘Yes?’

‘As soon as we finish here, I’d like you and Ursula to perform a thorough re-examination of Nerida’s bio. If you’re in agreement that all is well, call her and proceed with your plans for Edinburgh. If not, let me know and we’ll go from there.’

‘On it,’ I say.

Now, after having fallen on my sword, been absolved from any wrongdoing, gaining insight into Ursula’s recent mistakes, *and* getting the green light for Marriage: Impossible Phase 3, I am suddenly ravenous. I reach for a Danish and take a huge bite.

‘Oh, Poppy, one more thing?’ says Saskia.

Of *course*, she asks me something when I have a mouthful.

‘Mmm?’ I ask.

‘There wasn’t something else you wanted to add, was there? About Tristan? He hasn’t behaved inappropriately, or anything, has he? I mean, he did show up at your flat.’

Top life hack from me: You cannot breathe chewed-up Danish. That said, my body gives it a good go and I end up coughing and spluttering my way through (what I hope is) the most convincing lie I’ve ever told.

‘Nope. All good.’

Saskia looks at me a moment longer than is comfortable, then breaks into a smile. ‘Excellent. Keep me posted on your progress, both of you. I’ll work from home for the rest of the day and update you if needed.’ She takes a pain au chocolat. ‘For Andrew – thanks again.’

She leaves and I can’t say who is more relieved – me or Ursula.

TRISTAN

‘What time is your train again?’ asks Jacinda from the front seat of the car.

‘In half an hour.’

‘*Ravi.*’ I’m not sure what invoking his name is going to do. It’s not like he can Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bang us out of here.

‘Yes, I know, I know,’ he says, his eyes meeting mine in the rear-view mirror.

‘I could have taken a cab, you know,’ I tell them.

‘And be stuck in traffic with a stranger?’ Jacinda scoffs. ‘What kind of friends would we be?’

‘Friends who had a lie in on a Saturday morning,’ mumbles Ravi.

Jacinda lightly backhands him with a tut, then spins in her seat and pins me with her ‘tell me everything look’. ‘So, what’s the plan if this one goes pear-shaped? Are you going to Poppy?’

‘What?’ I ask rhetorically, my stomach spasming at Poppy’s name. Or that could be nerves about missing my train – or meeting Nerida tomorrow – or this whole mess becoming, well, a bigger mess.

‘You still fancy her, right?’

‘Jass,’ growls Ravi, ‘leave it.’

‘I’m not “leaving it”,’ she says, looking between us. ‘How long have I known you?’ she asks me – rhetorical but I answer anyway.

‘Around seven years.’

‘Exactly. Almost as long as I’ve known him.’ She jerks a thumb in Ravi’s direction. ‘And what I’ve seen over those seven years is a man-child unable to properly commit to any woman—’

‘Jass!’

‘Shhh,’ she tells him. To me, she says, ‘I’m saying this with love, Tristan.’

I sigh, resigning myself to a good talking-to, especially as I’m being held captive – by the car, by the traffic, and by Jacinda’s intelligent brown eyes.

‘Hit me,’ I say. I’ll take my verbal lashings but only because they’re from Jacinda and I know they *are* said with love.

She tosses a smug look in Ravi’s direction, then comes back to me, her tone softer this time. ‘Look, relationships, marriage, they’re not for everyone – and until all this inheritance nonsense, I would have expected you to remain a bachelor till your dying day.’

I shrug – it’s a fair assumption.

‘*But*, over these past few weeks, I’ve seen glimpses of a different side of you. And you know I love the old Tristan, our dear friend Tristan – but this Tristan is different. He’s gentler, humbler.’

Ravi snorts out a laugh.

‘That’s enough from the peanut gallery, thank you,’ she says. Jacinda fixes her attention back on me and I squirm in my seat. This is far from fun for me. ‘Now, I have no idea how you were around Vittoria.’ I grimace. ‘Well, that’s a clue, there,’ she says pointing to my face, ‘but we did see you with Alexandra and that was...’ She looks to Ravi. ‘Help me out, darling?’

‘Oh, now I’m allowed to speak?’

‘Rav.’

‘Alexandra was a trainwreck.’

‘Poor choice of words, don’t you think?’ I toss in, reminding Ravi where we’re headed.

‘Sorry,’ he says, inching into the other lane. I’m not sure the left lane is going to move any faster, but I’ve never been one to backseat drive.

‘He’s right, though,’ says Jacinda. ‘Not *her* per se but you two together. You dodged a bullet there, Tris. It would have been a disaster.’

‘What? You told her you liked her!’ I say, baffled.

Jacinda’s head inclines as though she’s talking to a child. ‘I was being nice – and, if you’ll recall, my husband had just put his foot in it and I needed to defuse the situation. But it was a tense dinner, Tristan.’

I think back over that night – was it only this past week? It feels like months ago. But Jacinda is right – it was a tense dinner and I spent the entire evening trying to convince myself that it was fine.

‘Anyway,’ says Jacinda, still in ‘loving sisterly chat’ mode. ‘Of *all* the women we’ve met—’

‘You make it sound like I’ve introduced you to dozens of women. It’s been maybe eight – at *most*.’

‘Of *all* the women we’ve met,’ she continues, ignoring my protestation, ‘and all the ones you’ve told us about, the only time I’ve ever seen your face light up – your expression soften, Tris – is when you’ve mentioned Poppy.’

‘That’s not... that’s not true.’

‘It is. Again, said with love.’

‘But how can you—when have I—? That doesn’t make any sense whatsoever. I’ve been *furious* with her!’ I insist, defending my stance.

‘That just means she’s under your skin,’ says Jacinda, like she’s spouting doctrine. ‘If you didn’t have feelings for Poppy, then you’d treat this whole endeavour like one of your deals that’s gone south – cool-headed, collected. Typical Tristan.’

Slumping further into the seat, I attempt to parse Jacinda’s conclusions. It’s not often I examine myself – emotionally speaking, I mean – but I’m positive that most of what Jacinda has said is bollocks. I think back to last night, how understanding Poppy was about me showing up to her flat. But that was just her doing her job. And I’ve already admitted to myself that I think she’s attractive. That doesn’t mean she’s ‘under my skin’, as Jacinda said!

‘Finally!’ declares Ravi, as traffic starts to free up.

Jacinda reaches back and pats me on the leg. ‘I do love you, Tris, and if it works out with Nerida, then we’ll welcome her with open arms.’

‘All right,’ I say, somewhat sulkily.

‘But even though I’ve never met her, I still like Poppy best – for you, I mean. And a little for me. I think we’d be friends.’

‘Jass, *seriously*,’ I say, wanting out of the hot seat. She laughs and turns around to face the front, then advises Ravi on the best way to get to King’s Cross in time to catch my train.

* * *

Poppy

‘Where the bloody hell are you, Fellows?’ I mutter to myself. Checking my watch for the fiftieth time, I start pacing the platform, never straying too far from my roller bag. I’m so rarely anxious about a case, but this one has proven to be especially challenging – and that’s not even considering my confusing feelings FOR. MY. CLIENT.

It’s been easy to shove them aside this morning with so much else to focus on – the meeting with Ursula and Saskia,

organising travel, and connecting with Nerida. She was so lovely when we spoke earlier. And Ursula may have been off her game of late, but she was the epitome of professionalism on that call. I was in awe of how she imparted the urgency of the situation while making it seem like a match with Nerida was the perfect – and only – solution to Tristan’s inheritance matter. I still have so much to learn from her – I hope she’s going to be okay. Losing a pet is rough. On that, I fire off a quick text to her:

Thinking of you. Px

I check my watch again. Two minutes until departure. Argh!

‘Sorry.’

He’s here – out of breath and flushed, but here.

‘Everything okay?’ I ask, resisting the urge to throttle him.

‘Yep. Traffic – a protest. So, should we board?’ he asks impatiently.

He’s impatient? That’s rich!

‘Ticket,’ I say, thrusting it at him. He stares at it as though he’s never seen a paper ticket before. I wouldn’t normally print them out – it was just another task to fill the hours between waking and going into the office this morning. He finally takes it, and I grab the handle of my overnight bag and stride towards our carriage.

We’re the last to board and the sound of the doors closing behind us is a reminder of how close we came to missing this train. I navigate the curved vestibule and go through the sliding glass door into the first-class cabin, scanning the seat numbers for the ones I’ve booked.

‘Here we are.’

I stop next to a small table with two seats facing in opposite directions. My roller bag fits neatly behind the first seat and I’m about to sit when I realise that Tristan is still standing *and* he’s looking at me.

‘Yes, Mr Fellows?’

‘Er, it’s just that I get motion sickness – remember? Do you mind if *I* face forward?’

I had forgotten that.

‘Oh, yeah, that’s fine.’ I make a (too) big to-do about moving my bag behind the other seat and by the time I sit, plopping my handbag on my lap, the train has already left the station. ‘Cutting it close,’ I say, choosing not to temper my annoyance.

‘I told you,’ he says with a sigh, ‘there was a protest. We were stuck in traffic for at least half an hour.’

‘We?’

‘Ravi and Jacinda. They drove me.’

I soften a little, thinking how sweet it was of them to do that – seeing their friend off as he embarks on a(nother) journey to find a wife.

‘That was nice of them.’

‘It is. Although, it was Jacinda’s doing. Ravi made it clear he would rather have had a lie in.’

God, *I* wouldn’t have minded a lie in. I won’t be getting one tomorrow either, as we’ve got the breakfast meet-up with Nerida. I also doubt I’ll be able to sleep properly until this case is closed – *again*.

‘I’m sorry I was late,’ he says, pulling me back to the present.

The apology surprises me and I soften even further. ‘That’s all right – couldn’t be helped. And you made it with a minute to spare.’

We exchange a smile and it only now occurs to me what a mistake this was, booking seats where we have to look at each other for the next four hours. I should have got us side-by-side seats, so we can politely ignore each other like normal people. Very hard to ignore someone who’s wearing a blue button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up to just below his elbows, showing off those extremely sexy forearms and making his whisky-coloured eyes pop. He’s also sporting stubble on his

usually clean-shaven face and if it's possible, he's even more handsome than ever.

Bugger.

'So, can I ask why a train journey instead of a flight?'

'A couple of reasons. One – my client hates to fly.'

'You're not wrong, but I can bear short jaunts like the one to Edinburgh.'

'Two,' I continue, 'I hate Heathrow with an intense passion – and braving it twice in a month? Uh, *no*.'

He barks out a loud laugh, then glances around, cringing slightly as other people in the carriage look our way. 'Sorry,' he mouths and it's endearing to see him so vulnerable. Like it was last night when he showed up at my flat begging me to help him. Seriously, was that only last night? Time seems to be taking on new meaning in this case. Sometimes, it feels like the days are clicking over so rapidly, my head is spinning. And on others, fourteen hours can feel like *days*.

'Anyway, those reasons aside, I considered how long it would take us both to get to Heathrow, especially you, factoring in that they want you there at least an hour early, added some buffer time, flying time, baggage claim, and getting from Edinburgh airport to the hotel, and guess what?'

'About the same as taking the train?'

'A little *less* time to fly but a million more times the hassle.'

His mouth quirks. 'A million?'

'Yeah, yeah, you're not the only one who like to hyperbolise. Besides, the train station is right next to the hotel, so...'

He studies me for a few moments, those whisky eyes boring into mine. I shift my gaze to his mouth, a dangerous undertaking given his next move – biting his bottom lip. Fuck me, he's hot. Suddenly, *I'm* hot and I look above me to see if the train has those air jets like planes do. With enormous gratitude for British train design, I open the vent all the way.

‘Stuffy in here, don’t you think?’ I ask.

‘I’m comfortable.’

Of *course*, he bloody is. He only has to look at me, whereas *I* have to look at Mr Handsome over there.

Poppy, get a grip. Refocus and be a frigging professional!

‘Do you mind if I read?’ I ask, hoping that diving into some maiming and murder will distract me from the off-limits man across from me.

‘All right,’ he replies with a slight frown. Had he hoped we’d converse for the next four hours? About *what*?

‘Tickets, please.’

A reprieve! But the business of showing our tickets only eats up a minute at best and then we’re alone again.

‘Fancy anything from the refreshments car?’ Tristan asks.

‘You know it’s table service, right?’ I reply, taking out my phone and pulling up the website. ‘There’s a menu and everything.’ I click the link, then show him.

He glances at it, nodding, then looks both ways down the aisle of the carriage. I do the same – not a waitperson in sight – and my stomach growls with uncanny (and embarrassing) timing. I’ve only had that Danish since I woke up.

‘From the sound of that...’ he says, glancing at my stomach. I cross my arms over it, heat flooding my cheeks. ‘... You may not make it. How about I go in search of something to tide you over?’

He leans back to retrieve his wallet from his front pocket.

Don’t do that, Tristan! I think, as I aggressively try to ignore how his shirt tightens over his (impressive) abs. Extra big *argh!*

‘Um, I guess a tea would be good,’ I say, willing him to leave – immediately. I prefer to ride embarrassment out solo. ‘Please,’ I add, remembering my manners.

Tristan stands. ‘Just a tea? Nothing to eat?’ He eyes my stomach again, raising his eyebrows inquisitively.

‘Okay, yes,’ I say, relenting. ‘I’d kill for a sandwich – egg and cress, if they have it. Or ham and cheese, or cheese and tomato. In a pinch, cheese and pickle.’

He chuckles. ‘So, really, any sandwich they might have.’

I shrug. ‘Yeah, pretty much.’

‘Be back in a jiffy.’

‘A jiffy?’ I tease. He pauses, looking down at me confused. ‘Never mind,’ I say, waving him off.

He leaves and – goddess help me! – I watch him go.

‘Fuck me, he looks good in jeans,’ I mutter softly to myself.

I shake my head hard and fast to dislodge the thought. I really, really, *really* need to stop doing that. Maybe I should give Shaz a quick call. Or would she just tell me to go with it? *Think!* I whip out my phone and send a message.

Help! Cannot stop perving on Tristan.

Now that I read the words onscreen, I feel even more idiotic. I am supposed to be a professional HEA agent. What good am I to Tristan if I can’t set my lustful feelings aside – and that’s all they are – and do my job?! I start deleting the message and just as the word ‘Help!’ disappears from the screen, my phone chimes with a new message.

They have every kind of sandwich known to humanity.
First choice? Egg and cress?

Trust him to be considerate at a time like this.

Yes please. Ta x

I hit send before my brain catches up, but when it does, I sit bolt upright and stare at the screen in disbelief. I added a kiss. A fucking *kiss*. I am officially losing it – my mind, this case, and almost definitely my job.

TRISTAN

I'm so busy staring at the 'x' on my phone screen, I only vaguely hear the woman behind the counter tally up the order. She reaches over and taps me on the back of the hand. I look up, still perplexed. 'Sorry.'

'That's eighteen pounds fifty,' she says. I hold up my credit card and she nods towards the card reader. 'Here you are, love,' she says, handing over a large carry bag. 'And make sure you keep it upright.'

'Er, yes, thank you,' I say but she's already moved onto the next customer. I make my way back through the train, taking my time as my mind spins its wheels on one pervading question. Did Poppy mean to add a kiss to her message? I recall a time when Jacinda accidentally sent *three* kisses to her manager in an email. She'd been mortified, of course, but the next time they spoke, she courageously brought it up. They'd shared a laugh over it and that was that.

Surely, this was just a glitch, a habitual 'x' added without any meaning behind it?

Arriving at the sliding glass door to our carriage, I see Poppy looking out the window, her face etched with concern. I wait. What should I do? Pretend it didn't happen? Bring it up so we can laugh about it? But will Poppy be able to do that? We seem to butt heads quite regularly and often out of nowhere. What if raising a silly little 'x' sparks a disagreement? We've got several more hours on this train –

and we're sitting opposite each other. It's not as if we can ignore each other.

Besides, I need her onside to shore this up. Nerida may be my last hope of securing the inheritance.

I watch Poppy a moment longer. Perhaps it *was* a mistake and she's chastising herself. She needn't – we all make mistakes. With that in mind, I hit the button to open the door and walk purposefully towards her. 'Here we are,' I say brightly. I set down our drinks – tea for her and coffee for me – and slide into my seat, then decant the bag onto the table. 'The sandwiches come with crisps so I got two different kinds – you can choose.'

She watches me with an odd look on her face – probably because I'm talking a mile a minute, which is unlike me.

'Sorry about the kiss,' she says.

'The kiss?' I ask, feigning ignorance. She inclines her head, her mouth quirking. 'Oh!' I say too loudly. The "x". I wave my hand. 'Think nothing of it – barely even registered.'

It's a relief when she laughs. Poppy has a wonderful laugh – melodic and infectious – and I can't help but join in.

'You're a *terrible* actor,' she teases, when her laughter subsides. "'Oh, you mean the 'x'!'" she mimics, kicking us off again. "'I see! Well, that's neither here nor there, Poppy",' she manages through her laughter.

God, her eyes look especially lovely when she smiles.

When the joke is eventually exhausted, Poppy moves onto inspecting the crisp packets, opting for salt and vinegar – her favourite, apparently. She flashes me a smile across the table, and I can't help but be pleased at the inadvertent win – small though it is.

We eat, seemingly both avoiding eye contact, which is my preference. I've never understood the appeal of eating a meal across from another person, particularly on dates. It's so awkward watching another person eat, asking questions and having to wait for them to swallow or vice versa. Where is the romance in that?

Hold on. Why am I associating *romance* with a simple lunch of pre-packaged sandwiches on a train with a sort-of business associate? It's an odd line of thought to have entertained – even for a moment.

And then it hits me. The 'x'. I'm disappointed it wasn't deliberate.

She's under your skin. Jacinda's words reverberate inside me, and I school my expression as I mull them over. It doesn't take long for me to land on a jarring realisation. Jacinda is right. I *am* attracted to Poppy. And not just physically, though a quick glance only confirms that she *is* an attractive woman. But there's also something beguiling about her good nature, and there's her sharp wit – even her ability to put me in my place is somewhat appealing. I've never known a woman to do that before.

But none of this matters, I remind myself. She's my agent. I'm her client. And as Ravi said the day I met Poppy at the agency, I can't marry her. She'd be sacked, for starters, and Poppy loves her job.

That tiny little 'x' has opened an enormous can of worms.

'So,' says Poppy, stacking up the rubbish from our lunch. 'How 'bout I walk you through the call I had with Nerida this morning? She's *really* lovely, by the way.'

Oh, for fuck's sake. Make that a tiny 'x' and a redhead called Nerida.

* * *

Poppy

It's a desperate ploy, bringing up Nerida. But hopefully, shifting focus to the task at hand is exactly what's needed to quell the attraction fizzing between us, as I'm now convinced this isn't one-sided. And he's being so bloody *nice* – and funny! Where's the arrogant, annoying, arsehole Tristan?

Where's that guy? Clearly, we left him on the train platform because this Tristan and I keep having *moments*. I absolutely cannot be having *moments* with my (extremely hot) client, especially on a journey to meet the woman he will (fingers crossed) marry. The thought lurches straight from my mind into my stomach where it roils and tumbles, making me feel queasy.

And this seating arrangement has gone from being a stupid oversight to the worst idea ever. Where am I supposed to look, for crying out loud?!

Tristan doesn't respond to my question. Instead, he appears dumbstruck – no doubt by my remarkable beauty (as if) – so I launch into a (ridiculous) monologue about Nerida, spouting her plethora (I actually use that word) of outstanding qualities, including her impressive career as head of a non-profit organisation.

'Poppy,' Tristan says, his voice low.

I pause mid-sentence and look him right in the eye. Well, fuck, it's another bloody *moment*!

'What?' I ask in a half-whisper.

'I know all this. About Nerida, I mean. It's in her biography.'

'Right.' My eyes fasten to his. He bites his lip again, a crease appearing between his brows, and I inhale a jagged breath.

What are we doing? I scream inside my head.

Right as I'm about to say something – something that could end my career as a matchmaker – my phone rings, popping the bubble.

I look away and fumble in my handbag for my phone – simultaneously relieved and disappointed. 'It's Shaz. Do you mind if I...?'

He shakes his head and I get up, happy to be free of the twin tractor beams of Tristan's eyes. I rush down the aisle,

bang on the button to open the sliding door, and burst into the vestibule before answering the call.

‘Hi,’ I say, out of breath.

‘I didn’t interrupt anything, did I?’ she says.

‘What? No. What do you mean?’

‘Chill,’ she says with a laugh. ‘I was just kidding. But why *are* you out of breath?’

‘Oh, Shaz, I am so royally fucked.’

‘Ooh, do tell!’

‘Not like that!’

Shaz laughs again and she’s extremely lucky she’s not here because she’d be in mortal danger – though, she did call at exactly the right time, so I owe her that.

‘Hello? You there?’ asks Shaz.

‘I’m here.’

‘And where’s here?’

‘In the vestibule, between carriages.’

‘Okay. So, what’s going on?’

I raise my free hand to my forehead and squeeze it, wishing I could banish all my inappropriate thoughts about Tristan.

‘Shaz, Tristan and I... There’s something between us.’

‘That’s what I was telling you last night,’ she says gently and I’m beyond grateful that she’s not lording this over me.

‘Well, I see it now – right as we’re on our way to meet the woman he’ll probably marry. What am I going to do?’

She’s quiet for a moment. *Please let her be coming up with a solution.*

‘All right, let’s look at it this way. What is in your sphere of control? In this specific situation, I mean.’ It’s a psychologist’s question – perfect for this situation – and even

though I know exactly what the answer is, I don't want to say it. 'Poppy? Come on,' she urges.

'My behaviour towards Tristan.'

'Yep. That's it. You can't control how *he* feels or behaves. You can't control how it will go with Nerida. But you can only control *your* behaviour.' I nod, even though she can't see me. 'Have I lost you?'

'Sorry, no – just thinking. You know, he's a pain in the arse sometimes, but he's also really considerate and funny and—'

'Hot.'

'I was going to say "smart" but yes, he's also good looking.'

'Extremely.'

'That's not helping.'

'Sorry, and look, I get it. After everything you'd told me about him before last night, I was expecting him to be a prize dick. But he wasn't. He's just a decent guy in a shitty situation who sometimes *acts* like a dick because of the shitty situation.'

'Is that your professional opinion?' I ask.

'Feel free to translate that to psych speak if you like.' I chuckle softly to myself, a small reprieve from my predicament. 'Pop?' she asks.

'Mmm.'

'You could just call Saskia right now and come clean.'

'What?' I replied, horrified. 'No! That's... *no*. I can't do that. We have a very strict code at the agency. I'd be choosing between Tristan and my job and—' I stop, not wanting to finish.

'And?'

'It's just a crush, Shaz.'

She sighs impatiently.

'It *is*,' I screech. 'And if this were anything more – if we were in love' – I scoff at that with a derisive laugh – 'this

would be a different situation. And I *would* go to Saskia. But I'm not risking my career over a hot guy who I have a slight crush on – *and*, I might add, would have to *marry!* *Marry*, Shaz. As in matrimony. As in living in the same flat and pretending in public to be in love and meeting his mother and being Mrs Fellows!

'Okay, okay, calm the farm. You don't want to get any more worked up over this. You're on the job, Pop.'

'I know!'

I realise I'm pacing the (tiny) vestibule, and stop and lean against the wall, a little out of breath – spiralling can really take it out of you. I focus on the view out the nearest window, my breath steadying as I stare at the English countryside whizzing by. It's beautiful with its copious shades of green and hills dotted with white woolly sheep. We pass another town, its church spire reaching proudly toward the sky.

'Calm the farm,' I say, amused. 'I haven't heard that one in ages.'

'Well, you know me. I aim to please. So, this is what you're going to do. Go back to Tristan. Be polite, professional, friendly, but not familiar, okay?'

'Friendly but not familiar,' I parrot.

'Exactly. Pretend he's a psych patient.'

'Ugh.'

'You have to, Pop. You're decided. Nothing can happen and you have to keep your distance. Emotionally, I mean.'

'I know,' I say quietly, more for myself than Shaz. I tear my eyes from the mesmerising view and look over my shoulder at the back of Tristan's head. *What is going on in there?* I wonder.

'You've got this, Poppy. You are a matchmaking beast.'

I snigger softly. 'Good pep talk, Shaz.'

'I learnt from the best.'

'Oh, sorry, why did you call?'

‘Just checking in.’

A wave of warmth washes over me. ‘Well, perfect timing. Love you.’

‘Love you back, you big dork. Now go be a professional matchmaker. *Professional*, Pop.’

‘Yeah, yeah.’

TRISTAN

‘God help me, Ravi, this has turned into a debacle.’

‘Where is she now?’

I glance down the aisle. ‘Still pacing in the vestibule.’

‘Right. Well, you only really have two courses of action – abandon Nerida and confess your love to Pop—’

‘I’m not in love with her, Ravi, for fuck’s sake. I just... *like* her.’

‘You sound like a sappy schoolboy.’

‘You’re not helping.’

‘Fine. Option one: tell Poppy how you feel and convince her to lay her job on the line.’

‘Ugh.’

‘Option *two*,’ he continues, ignoring my groan, ‘forge ahead with Nerida and forget Poppy.’

‘That’s worse!’

‘Then you have your answer. Look, it’s not as if you didn’t know all this before you called me.’

‘Put it on speaker,’ says Jacinda in the background. ‘Hi, Tris,’ she says, her voice louder.

‘Hello. Look, I don’t have a lot of time.’

‘So I gather. Can I be the voice of reason here?’

‘*Please*.’

‘Isn’t a love match far better than a marriage of convenience? Logistically speaking, I mean.’

‘Oh, I...’

‘I asked about a love match when we first met with the agency,’ Ravi chimes in unhelpfully.

‘And?’ asks Jacinda.

‘It will require a bit of rejigging the arrangement, but overall, much simpler, yes.’

‘Well, there you have i—’

‘*Simpler?*’ I ask, coming to my senses. ‘Are you forgetting that she works for the agency? How is that simpler? If anything, it’s another complication.’

‘It doesn’t have to be,’ says Jacinda.

I check on Poppy’s whereabouts again. ‘Oh, bugger, she’s off her phone. Talk later.’

While I wait for Poppy to return, I replay the conversation with Ravi and Jacinda in my head. *Love match... much simpler... another complication.* Words and phrases swirl in my mind, confounding me further. One thing comes to the fore, something Ravi said.

You have your answer. But do I?

If I truly want to be with Poppy, I only have until breakfast tomorrow, when I’m supposed to meet Nerida, to convince her to... to what? Abandon her career with the agency? That would never work. Even if she agreed, she’d eventually come to resent me for it. And that’s if she even has feelings for me. This could all be one-sided and moot.

‘Sorry about that,’ she says, sliding into her seat. She’s flushed and appears somewhat agitated.

‘Everything all right?’ I ask, even though the question skirts dangerously close to a discussion I’m not prepared to have.

‘Um, yes, sorry. Just work stuff.’ And there it is, not thirty seconds into the conversation – the biggest obstacle in our way

– well, *my* way.

‘Oh?’

She waves me off. ‘It’s all good.’ But it doesn’t seem ‘all good’. Then something occurs to me.

‘It’s not Alexandra, is it?’ I expel a heavy breath, feeling the full heft of my actions. ‘I really do feel for her—’

‘No, not that, and Ursula will be meeting with her this week, making sure she has the support she needs. We spoke to her this morning, actually.’

‘And how was she?’

Poppy frowns at the question as though it frustrates her, but I can’t fathom why.

‘Understandably, she’s disappointed.’ She presses her lips together and I wonder if she’s holding something back. ‘But we think she will be all right. Obviously, we need to rethink her “role” as a potential, if we retain her on the books at all.’

‘What if I were to help? Financially, I mean. Not the full quarter of a million, of course, but a substantial sum to add to her savings?’ Poppy appears pained by my suggestion and drops her head into her hands. ‘What have I said?’

‘Nothing.’ She lifts her head and shakes it rapidly, then smiles at me broadly; though the smile doesn’t reach her eyes, confounding me further. ‘That sounds like a generous offer, Tristan. When we get back from Edinburgh, I’ll connect you with Ursula so you can set that up. Sound good?’

‘Yes, all right,’ I reply, directing my words to ‘Poppy the professional’. I’m already missing the Poppy from earlier, the one who laughed unfettered – mostly at my expense, but still. ‘So’ – I check my watch – ‘just over three hours to go. How are your Mum and Dad?’

The left corner of her mouth twitches and a moment later, there it is, that winsome smile. ‘Are we really resorting to small talk, Mr Fellows?’

‘It’s hardly small talk, inquiring after your parents.’

She regards me for some time, and I shift slightly under her gaze. ‘They’re doing well. Thank you for asking.’

‘Now *that’s* small talk,’ I tease, turning the tables. ‘How *are* they? What are their names? How about we start there?’

She watches me again, the machinations of her thoughts, whatever they may be, playing behind her eyes. Finally, almost as though she’s surrendering, she says, ‘Noelene and Gary – possibly the most Australian names ever after Bruce and Mavis.’ I chuckle. ‘I’m not kidding – about their names or how Aussie they are. I came this close’ – she pinches her fingers together – ‘to being called Charlene.’

‘Why Charlene?’

‘That’s the character Kylie Minogue played in *Neighbours*.’

‘I see. I had no idea.’

‘Not a *Neighbours* fan?’ she asks with a smirk.

‘Unlike most of my generation of Brits, no. So, which one of them put a stop to “Charlene”?’

‘Dad. Mum was the Kylie tragic. Dad was... the opposite. Poppy was his grandma’s name.’

‘I like Poppy.’

‘Thanks. Me too.’

‘And a middle name?’ he asks.

‘Elizabeth. Pretty traditional but also a family name.’ I nod. ‘And what about your mum?’ she asks.

‘My mother? Sorry, what about her?’

‘How is she? You asked about my parents, so...’

‘Oh, I see. Well, it’s Saturday, so Mother will be at the LLC – the London Ladies’ Club – where she will boast to all and sundry about her latest art acquisition or cosmetic surgery procedure, declare her grave disappointment that I don’t visit her enough, commiserate with other mothers, as apparently, no

son ever visits enough, and drink enough Pimm's to sink a battleship until it's time to go home.'

'Okay. Maybe we should go back to names.'

'Probably a safer topic.'

'So, what about Tristan? Where did that come from?'

'It's Celtic. My mother was obsessed with Celtic lore. "Tristan and Isolde" – does that ring a bell?'

'Yeah, it does. It's a love triangle, from memory.'

The realisation is like being struck by lightning. A love triangle – Me–Poppy–Nerida. Good grief, is my own name a talisman for this very situation?

'Er, that's right,' I say. 'Very messy though – infidelity, false identities, something about a leper colony.'

'Yikes. That's not very romantic.'

'No, I suppose not,' I reply, hoping to move on to a more palatable topic.

'If I was a boy, my dad wanted to call me Shane.'

'Shane's not terrible.'

'Just the *third* most Australian name for a boy. Lucked out by being a girl.' She laughs heartily. 'I don't know. It's strange how our parents name us, don't you think?'

'How so?' I ask.

'Well, it's so personal. It's our *name* yet we have no say – well, as children anyway. Of course, some people change their names when they're older.'

'Would you ever change yours?'

'Poppy? No. Probably not. I don't even think I'll change my last name if I get married. I was born Poppy Dean and that's who I am.'

Something about that appeals to me, even though my mother would be appalled. Perhaps that's *why* it appeals.

Poppy chuckles. ‘If I’d had my way when I was six, I’d be Maisy Madeline. Maisy Madeline Dean. Characters from my favourite books,’ she clarifies.

‘I see.’

We’re quiet for a moment, that thread of conversation being thoroughly exhausted, and I look out the window. England really is a beautiful country, especially once out of London. And there’s something mesmerising about watching the rolling hills and hamlets pass by. Even the sheep add to the charm of the countryside.

‘Do you miss it?’ I ask, my attention back on Poppy. ‘Pastoral life?’

‘You mean the farm?’ I nod. ‘I miss Mum and Dad and, sure, where they live is a beautiful part of Tassie – actually, scratch that, *all* of Tasmania is beautiful – really varied topography for such a small island.’ She shakes her head. ‘Sorry, I think I told you that in Greece – *and* I sound like a travel brochure.’

‘Not at all. I’m interested in hearing more, especially about your family’s farm.’

‘Okay. Well, Mum and Dad have an apple orchard, which is the commercial side, but they also grow all kinds of vegetables, so there was never a shortage of fresh produce on the table, and Mum’s a decent cook. They also have the usual farm animals – chickens, ducks, goats, a ram who has no idea how big he is.’ I chuckle. ‘No, seriously, he was supposed to be a stud for a station my dad’s friend owns, only he failed epically in that department – the ram, not my dad.’

I laugh again and she flashes me a smile.

‘Anyway, Dad couldn’t stand the idea of him being euthanised, so we adopted him. Roger the Ram – gentle giant. He goes bonkers for biscuits – charges right across the paddock if he gets a whiff. Terrifying if you don’t know what a sook he is.’

‘Does he get that from you?’ I ask.

‘Being a sook?’

‘A strong attraction to biscuits.’

‘*Oh*, right. Yeah, nah,’ she replies, sounding particularly Australian. ‘Thank you for those, by the way. That was very considerate, and I didn’t thank you properly.’

‘You were annoyed with me because of my behaviour at the airport.’

‘I probably deserved it. No,’ she corrects herself, ‘I did. We kept Vittoria’s situation from you and that’s not how I like to operate. And then, Alexandra... Part of me is shocked that you’ve stuck with us.’

‘I did consider engaging another matchmaker – I mean, you can’t swing a dead cat in the centre of London without hitting two or three dozen.’

My weak joke elicits a weak smile.

‘Well,’ she says, adopting a beaming smile, ‘I am positive that this match will be exactly what you need.’

And that is exactly what I’m worried about. This may be what I *need*. But what about what I *want*?

* * *

Poppy

I’ve been to networking events that were less excruciating than trying to keep my conversation with Tristan ‘friendly but not familiar’. Having failed at least seventy-five times over the past few hours, I’m relieved to be off that train, but I’m now more confused than ever.

‘This way,’ I call over my shoulder as I navigate the crowd of (mostly) tourists and head out of the train station, around the block, and towards the entrance of the hotel.

Thank goodness Tristan *finally* got the hint – me casting longing looks at my e-reader – and about an hour before we arrived in Edinburgh, he took out a book of his own.

‘Not quite reading by the fire, is it?’ he asked.

At first, I missed the call-back to the day we met, but when I got it, adding another point to the ‘Tristan is no longer a complete arse’ side of the tally sheet, I simply smiled politely and immersed myself in my book. Actually, that’s a total and utter lie, unless ‘immersed’ is code for ‘read the same paragraph on repeat while sneaking surreptitious glances at the hot man across from me while *he* read’.

At the reception desk, I am all business. *Poppy Dean, serious professional woman, at your service.* Or rather, the hotel staff are at mine – and Tristan’s. The Balmoral is a five-star hotel. Excellent service will be coming out of our ears by the time we leave.

The woman on reception hands over our key cards – adjoining rooms, for some reason, but that connecting door will be remaining firmly shut! I wonder if the hotel has a blowtorch on hand, just to make sure.

The staircase may be impressive, but it’s been a long day and despite only being on the third floor, we ride the elevator with assurances that our bags will follow shortly. We exchange smiles outside our respective doors before parting, and when mine closes with a decisive thunk, I lean against it.

Think, Poppy!

What if I just hid in here until it’s time to meet Nerida for breakfast? I can beg off from dinner – blame train lag or something – order room service and try to find an old movie to watch on telly. Then tomorrow morning, I’ll quickly broker the marriage and get on the next train to London. Perfect.

I scope out the room, which is lovely, just not really my taste with its floral and checked fabrics power clashing across the room. The high ceilings are nice, though, and so are the swaths of light pouring in through the gauzy curtains.

I push off the door to check out the bathroom, which is so lux, I could cry. I’m pretty sure my whole combined lounge–dining room could fit in here. The lure of that bathtub alone is enough to make me want to lock myself away for the duration.

But this isn't a holiday, it's a work trip, I remind myself.

In lieu of a lengthy bubble bath, I open the tube of hand lotion and apply a liberal amount, sniffing the delicious fragrance as I rub it in. This, along with the rest of the toiletries, is coming home with me.

There's a discreet knock at the door and I open it, expecting it to be the porter with my roller bag, but it's Tristan.

'Oh hi,' I say, hoping I don't sound rude. 'Did you need something?'

'Er, not exactly. I just wondered if you might like to have dinner with me tonight. There's a lovely French bistro not far from here.'

'You want French food? In Scotland?' I reply – hardly the 'hard no' I had planned.

He chuckles, reaching up to tug at the back of his neck. 'I suppose that's a fair point,' he says with a self-deprecating smile. He drops his hand and thinks for a moment, meaning I have *ample* time to say, 'No thank you, Tristan, I will eat alone in my room – a penitent meal of stale bread and tepid water,' but don't.

'How about Angels with Bagpipes then?' he asks. 'Do you know it?'

'Uh, no, but I've only been here twice before and both times for work. I've just eaten at the hotel,' I add with a shrug.

'Well, the food is outstanding and I assure you, it will be a journey through Scotland's best culinary offerings.'

Wonderful! How am I supposed to say no to that?!

'Sure, sounds good.'

'I'll call and make a reservation – eight all right?'

'Mmm-hmm,' I reply, not trusting myself to refrain from shouting, 'You are so ridiculously hot – stop being so nice to me!'

'Excellent. And it's supposed to be a nice evening. We could even walk – it's not too far.' I give him a thumbs-up,

making him blink at me in amused disbelief. ‘Knock on your door around seven thirty?’ he asks, recovering from my social ineptitude.

I respond with a slow head nod and a maniacal smile, then close the door.

Poppy, you idiot. You now have a *date* with your client.

POPPY

It is a gorgeous evening in Edinburgh. When we leave the hotel, the sun has set but a golden glow hovers over the city, and that castle! It stands sentry, proud and glorious, repeatedly drawing my eye. I just love this city – I promise myself that the next visit will be for pleasure and not so perfunctory.

However, it's much chillier than when we arrived late this afternoon and, like a rookie, I've underdressed for the first throes of Scottish autumn. With the type of chivalry that would make a staunch feminist weep, Tristan offered me his sports coat, draping it over my shoulders. I half-protested – lip service, really, as *brrrrrr* – and I'm now enveloped in his (delicious) cologne (damn him). Where's the grump, the wanker banker, Mr Impossible? Where's *that* man?

'So, you've been to Edinburgh a lot?' I ask. 'You seem to know your way around.'

'Long-standing client,' he says, 'so yes. Actually, Edinburgh's one of the few cities I've really explored. A perk of managing a fund for a Scottish earl, I suppose.'

'Oooh, fancy,' I tease – immediately regretting the familiarity.

Tristan chuckles. 'Quite right. I am verra fancy.'

'That is hands down the worst Scottish accent ever.'

'Wow. All right. What's the opposite of "high praise"?' he quips.

‘Hmm... “low criticism”?’ I look up at him with a cheeky smile, then immediately look away. Those damned whisky-coloured eyes, all the more potent when they’re creased at the corners.

‘So, you said that you’ve not really had the chance to explore – when you’ve been here before, I mean.’

‘Correct,’ says Professional Poppy. Nearby, bagpipes begin to play and I can barely prevent myself from wailing, ‘Oh, come on!’

‘Would it be condescending to offer some titbits about the city?’ he asks.

‘Would it be condescending to mention that no one says “titbits” any more?’

‘You are in fine form this evening.’

I am? Then I need to stop that!

‘Titbit away,’ I say with a wide sweep of my arms.

We take the long way – more scenic and with more juicy morsels of Scottish history and architecture, apparently – heading west along Princes Street, past the Scott Monument (which Tristan knows way more than a titbit about), alongside the gallery (I really must see ‘The Monarch of the Glen’ in person – or rather, in *painting*), then up a steep hill that bears a lion’s share of whisky bars, cafés, and souvenir shops. By the time we hit the Royal Mile, I am a little puffed out but I’m unsure if it’s the exertion or breathing in Tristan’s cologne.

‘Are you all right?’ he asks.

I pause on the street corner and shrug off his sports coat.

‘All good,’ I say, handing it back. ‘At least I went with boots,’ I add, looking down at my feet. I was *this close* to wearing heels – until I reminded myself that A) I would be doing a lot of walking and B) Not a date, therefore *no heels*. Why I even *brought* them is something to unpack another time.

‘It’s this way,’ Tristan says, pointing in the opposite direction to the castle.

‘Oh, I...’ I spin around and look down the Royal Mile, slightly saddened that with the curve of the road, I can see little more than one tower.

‘We can walk up there later if you like. After dinner.’

After dinner, I am going straight back to the hotel to bed. *Alone.*

‘Let’s see, shall we?’ It’s what my mum would say anytime I asked for something we couldn’t afford, like the Year Ten ski trip. But Tristan seems satisfied with my response and we head off again, any attempts to walk side by side made impossible by the throng of tourists streaming towards us.

When a man with a pushchair knocks into me, making me stumble, Tristan catches me before I fall – of *course*, he does – and it seems like the most natural thing in the world when his hand slides down my arm and clasps mine.

‘Nearly there,’ he says, his voice low in my ear. He confidently leads us the rest of the way to the restaurant, my hand in his and deftly threading through the foot traffic while my heart hammers out a beat.

I am so screwed. I am so screwed. I am so screwed.

* * *

Tristan

We make it to the restaurant just before eight and I reluctantly let go of Poppy’s hand. I’m surprised she let me hold on to it as long as she did, or at all – she’s been running hot and cold with me since we boarded the train this morning.

She walks ahead of me into the restaurant, where we’re greeted warmly then seated next to a large mirror. I find it a little disconcerting – seeing myself in my periphery – but the smells emanating from the kitchen remind me why this restaurant is a firm favourite in Edinburgh.

Poppy studies the menu while I study her. She looks especially lovely tonight, the soft grey of her silk blouse making her grey eyes look almost blue, and she's worn her hair up in a loose knot, which is unusual. Most of the times I've seen her it's been in a low ponytail, neat and professional. This hairstyle is *pretty* and I wonder if the added care she's taken with her appearance is for me. Then I wonder when I became such a narcissistic prat. Ravi would argue that I've always been one, and Jacinda would counter that I'm only a prat on the outside but have a heart of gold.

But do I? If my heart truly is 'golden', how have I made it to my mid-thirties with no one to love and only two close friends? One of whom inherited me. Maybe that heart of gold has been in stasis, frozen since childhood by a cold and distant upbringing.

'Are you okay?' Poppy asks, pulling me out my reverie.

'Oh, er, yes, sorry.' She scrutinises me, her eyes roving my face so intensely I drop my gaze, embarrassed.

'Having second thoughts?' she asks.

My eyes lift to meet hers. 'Second thoughts?' I ask, confused.

'About meeting Nerida.'

'Oh, right,' I say, my voice strangled. Poppy is far too close to the truth.

'Third time's a charm, they say,' she quips with uplifted brows, but I get the sense that her merriment is a front.

'Good evening,' says the waiter who has suddenly appeared beside us, 'I'm Fergus and I'll be looking after you. Can I get you started with some drinks?'

Poppy and I exchange a glance, then scan the menu. 'Prosecco,' says Poppy, naming the first item on the drinks list.

'Two, please,' I add. He smiles politely then leaves. 'That's always the way, isn't it?' I say to Poppy.

‘What, so busy talking, you’re not ready when the waiter comes to take your order?’

I laugh. ‘Exactly.’

‘And they always ask for your drink order first. I’ve never figured out why they do that. Half the time, I don’t know what I want to drink till after I choose what I want to eat. I mean, let’s say I start with a Syrah but then choose the fish. Now, I have to go backwards.’

‘Backwards?’

‘From red to white. Very uncouth.’

‘Is this the world according to Poppy?’ I tease.

‘Just the world of dining out according to Poppy,’ she retorts, her eyes alive with mirth. Seconds later, they cloud over and she busies herself with the food menu, making a show of reading each item thoroughly.

Disappointed by her sudden shift in mood, I read the menu as well. It changes seasonally, so I’m not familiar with most of these dishes, but decide on my starter and main.

‘Are we having dessert?’ Poppy asks out of the blue.

‘Oh, I hadn’t—’

‘Because if we are, then I need to choose my first two courses carefully. Save room.’

I can’t help but smile at her considered approach. ‘Is this more of Poppy’s “dining out” philosophy at play?’

She drops the menu on the table and lifts her chin, pinning me with those blue-grey eyes. ‘Are you making fun of me?’

‘Er, no. I would nev—’

‘Got ya,’ she says with a wink.

Blimey, being with Poppy is like vacillating between the sauna and the plunge pool.

‘Here you are, sir, madam.’ Our waiter places our glasses of prosecco before us, then takes a small notepad out of his pocket. ‘And what have you decided?’ he asks.

I nod at Poppy to indicate that she should go first, and she rattles off the exact dishes I've selected for starters and main. For a moment, I wonder if I should change my order to something else, lest it seem like I'm copying her to curry favour. But the concern passes as I feel the prick of hope that we finally have something in common. 'I'll have the same,' I tell him.

'Very good, sir,' he replies, collecting our menus.

When I look back at Poppy, she's watching me and wearing a cryptic smile. 'Maybe we can share a dessert later,' she says and I don't know if she's being flirtatious or if that's just wishful thinking on my part.

* * *

Poppy

I've worked in the HEA biz for four years now and if I had me as a client, I would slap myself upside the head. What the actual fuck am I doing? I'm flirting, that's what. And over the course of dinner, I've amassed a tome's worth of rationalisations for my (appalling, inappropriate, and unprofessional) behaviour.

He took my hand – not the other way around. It would have been rude to pull away.

After tomorrow, this case will be closed, and I will never have to see him again. Where's the harm in a little fling?

It's been an age since a man ignited anything resembling lust inside you. Enjoy it!

It's been an age since a man has been inside you. This, though true, makes me laugh, which I disguise (poorly) as a cough, banging on my chest to really sell that something went down the wrong way.

'So,' says Tristan, usually a tell for an incoming (and likely clumsy) segue, 'you know all about my love life – such

that it is. What about you? Have you had any long-term relationships in your past?’

Now something actually *does* go down the wrong way and I cough and splutter so much, Fergus is sent over to see if he needs to administer first aid. I wave him away with a combined smile-splutter-cough.

‘Are you really all right?’ Tristan asks, his face etched with concern.

I nod, then explode into another coughing fit. I hold up a hand to excuse myself and head straight for the toilets. Once inside the ladies’ room, I bend at the waist, attempting to clear my now-sore lungs. Success! When I right myself, I catch sight of myself in the mirror. Good god! I’m so flushed, I look like I’m sunburnt. I grab a wad of paper towel and wet it, blotting my cheeks and neck. Then I lean against the basin and look myself in the eye.

‘Poppy Dean, you are absolutely *not* going to schtoop your hot client. Or kiss him. Or hold his hand – *again*. You will not even *look* at him unless absolutely necessary. Do you hear me, you total and utter slapper?!’

Someone clears their throat in one of the stalls and then a toilet flushes. I’m instantly rooted to the spot, the intense desire to scurry away *impotent* against the paralysing effect of a stranger hearing what I’ve just said. When the toilet stall door opens and I lock eyes with a woman my mum’s age, I’m even more embarrassed. Couldn’t it have been someone from my own generation? Someone who might understand my predicament? She smiles at me in the mirror as she joins me at the basin.

‘You’re being too hard on yourself, love,’ she says in a lilting northern-English accent. ‘If he were *my* dinner companion, I certainly wouldn’t be holding myself back.’

She wiggles her eyebrows at me, dries her hands, and leaves me staring after her, gobsmacked. A moment passes, then another. I’ll need to get back to the table soon or Tristan will think I’ve fallen in. I look myself in the eye again,

wanting to be firm with myself no matter what that strange woman said.

‘Oh, who am I kidding?’ I ask aloud.

I go back to the table and call Fergus over to order dessert.

TRISTAN

After Poppy returns to the table, recovered, she surprises me by calling over our waiter and ordering dessert, the olive oil cake – one serving, two spoons. Perhaps naïvely, I consider this a good sign, especially considering how badly I’ve stuck my foot in it. But my optimism quickly dies. Conversation has stalled, and the cake arrives and is eaten with barely one word exchanged. Before I know it, we’re outside on the footpath and Poppy is shivering again.

‘Here,’ I say, draping my sports coat around her shoulders. She accepts it with a reluctant smile. ‘Did you still want to walk up to the castle?’ I ask. The question clearly pains her, confirming that I’ve made an enormous misstep, so I leap in with an apology. ‘I’m so sorry about earlier, raising the topic of former relationships – that was tactless of me.’

Her countenance softens somewhat, and she gestures in the direction of the castle. ‘Come on, let’s walk back.’

‘To the hotel?’ I ask, catching up. ‘So, not to the castle?’

She looks up at me. ‘It’s late. And we have that... you know.’

I mentally complete the sentence. We have that breakfast meeting with Nerida.

‘All right,’ I mutter, finally accepting my fate. Poppy has rebuffed my (clumsy and overwrought) romantic overtures and my only hope is to make things work with Nerida.

We walk in silence for some time. At least the throng of tourists has eased and we can walk side by side – though sans the handholding, sadly. As we turn on to the steep hill that will take us back past the gallery, Poppy speaks.

‘I did have someone once. Back in Melbourne.’

My breath hitches slightly at this revelation, but I rebuke myself. I should know better than to indulge in any sort of hope; this is just Poppy being friendly.

‘He was older than me – quite a bit older – twelve years – but he was charming and handsome and even though there were dozens of red flags, it took me two years to figure out that he was married.’

‘Oh dear.’

She smiles wanly. ‘Exactly. And not “I’m in a miserable marriage that I’m trying to get out of” – though, married is married in my book and even *that’s* not an excuse – but “happily married with three children”.’

‘How did you discover...?’

‘That my boyfriend, who I had just been on holiday with to Bali, was a cheating, lying bastard from the pits of hell?’ she asks, her pitch rising. I remain silent. ‘His wife came to my place of work.’

I halt, placing a hand on Poppy’s arm. ‘Are you serious?’

‘As a heart attack,’ she quips, walking on.

I lengthen my stride until we’re side by side again. ‘I’m so sorry, Poppy. I may not be the *best* romantic partner – actually, Ravi says I’m the worst boyfriend in the history of humanity.’

‘That’s a little harsh,’ she says. ‘I know *plenty* of men who would leapfrog over you and proudly clamour for first place.’

‘Well, your ex for one, I suppose.’

‘Mmm-hmm.’

‘Poppy.’ I touch her on the arm again and this time, she pauses and meets my eye. ‘I am so sorry someone did that to you. I can’t imagine how h—’

‘Horrible?’ she supplies.

‘Well, yes, but I was going to say “heartbreaking”. That must have been just awful.’

‘It was.’ She shrugs, a wry smile alighting on her face but I can tell it’s bravado, and a fury begins to burn within me. How could any man look into those eyes and want to deceive and hurt this woman? She’s so lovely and caring... and brilliant and funny. Before I realise what I’m doing, my face inches closer to hers, enacting an acute and sudden longing to kiss her.

Her eyes widen in surprise, and I leap back, shocked at my gall. Poppy has made it very clear that ours is not a romantic relationship in any way, shape, or form. So, it’s all the more shocking when she grabs my shirtfront in her fist and pulls me towards her. Our eyes lock, the air between us fizzing with electricity.

‘Are you sure?’ I whisper, my eyes scouring hers for any sign of reluctance.

‘Just kiss me.’

My breath is sharp and shallow from the anticipation, my mouth quivering before it touches hers, then the sensation of those soft, full lips pressed against mine envelops me, a current shooting up my spine, leaving a tingling sensation in its wake. My hands find her waist, winding around it and nestling at the small of her back as I pull her closer to me. She angles her head slightly, slipping her hands around my neck and parting her lips even more. Her breath is sweet as it mingles with my own, and her tongue, tentative at first, finds mine and the taste of her is all-consuming.

I couldn’t say how long the kiss lasts but when we’re breathless with its intensity, it slows and our lips finally part and I rest my forehead against hers, my eyes closed as I revel in the wondrous feelings coursing through me. ‘Poppy...’

She pulls back, leaving her hands in place so I do the same, and we regard each other, though her expression is difficult to read. Her eyes narrow and she inhales deeply.

‘Are you going to say something?’ I ask, feeling a twinge of nerves. Is she regretting what we’ve done?

‘Just... we should call an Uber.’

I blink at her, stunned, then release her to retrieve my phone from my pocket.

‘You’re positive?’ I ask.

‘Absolutely,’ she says, nodding deliberately.

My fingers shake slightly as I navigate to the app, that current coursing through me, but moments later, a car is on its way.

‘Two minutes,’ I tell her and she responds by slipping her hand into mine, our fingers laced.

* * *

Poppy

I have never in my life been kissed like that. Malcolm was a decent lover and I’ve had other boyfriends, other kisses, but that? That kiss went to my core.

The car arrives and Tristan opens the door for me before going around to the other side. The driver is chatty, but we respond in monosyllables until he finally gets the hint. It can’t be more than a five-minute ride but the minutes tick over like aeons. And I had no idea that a man’s thumb running over the back of my hand could create such an erotically charged sensation.

At the hotel, we’re silent as we cross the lobby, nodding in unison at the desk clerk who wishes us a ‘good evening’. Inside the lift I’m so hyper-aware of him, his very presence, much like his scent, permeating the air and making it difficult to breathe. That kiss replays in my mind on a loop and the anticipation of kissing him again, of feeling his body against mine, is excruciating.

‘Yours or mine?’ he asks gruffly.

I mentally scan the state of my room, remembering how I’d flung my scant selection of clothes about, unsure what to wear on our not-really-a-date – uncharacteristic for me and embarrassing enough that I utter, ‘Yours.’

When the lift doors open, he tugs on my hand, leading me past my room to his door, where he fumbles slightly with the key card.

Nerves or excitement? I wonder.

Asking myself the same question, I admit to both, then an unsolicited thought intrudes. *This is wrong. This is so, so wrong.*

I hesitate, one second away from fleeing to my room, when Tristan turns and pins me with a look so charged, so *sexy* that I forget reason and follow him inside. His room is a mirror image of mine with the same chintzy décor, but I barely get a glimpse before he envelops me in his arms, his mouth landing on my neck where it meets my shoulder.

His lips move against my skin, softly, slowly, belying the urgency burning between us as I shrug off his coat, letting it fall to the floor along with my handbag. I grasp his back, pulling him closer, my fingers digging into his taut muscles through his shirt. His mouth finds its way to mine and he kisses me hungrily, his tongue tasting mine, tasting me. We hit the nearest wall with a thud and he stops, looking down at me, concerned, but I grab the back of his neck and pull him to me, resuming our hungry kiss. One of his hands splays across the small of my back, sending tremors straight between my legs, the other getting tangled in the hair at the nape of my neck. His lips leave mine and their absence is almost too much to bear until they land on my collarbone and I arch my neck, sighing sharply with the pleasure.

I have never wanted anyone so much in my life.

At first, I don’t realise what that intrusive sound is, but when the volume of my ringtone increases – a setting I immediately regret implementing – the spell is broken. I

roughly push Tristan away and we gawp at each other, breathless.

‘Oh my god,’ I say, clapping my hand over my mouth. What the fuck am I doing?!

I blink rapidly, willing the spots before my eyes to disappear, and shake my head at the incessant roaring between my ears. Gathering a sliver of sense, I stoop and collect my handbag from the carpeted floor, then reach for Tristan’s door, fling it open, and sprint the short distance to my room. Furious at the (stupid fucking) key card that’s lost itself in my handbag, I finally find it, swipe it, then crash into my room, fling my handbag on my bed, and cross straight to the window, the furthest I can get from the door.

Tristan is right behind me, knocking on the door and calling out, ‘Poppy. Poppy, please! Just talk to me.’

‘You stupid, *stupid* woman!’ I hiss at my blurry reflection in the window. ‘Go away, Tristan,’ I shout at the door.

The knocking stops, triggering both immense relief and gross disappointment at once. Tears fill my eyes – mostly from anger at myself.

I’ve overstepped every boundary of my profession. I’ve risked this case, the agency, my *career*. I’ve done exactly what I promised myself I wouldn’t do.

And why?

Because I’ve never had a man look at me like Tristan looked at me tonight. The compassion in his eyes when I told him about Malcolm, the *empathy*. To be seen like that, to be understood but not pitied... *And* realising that despite my profession, despite being a champion for others to find love – or, in some case, its facsimile – I’ve shut myself off to love for *years*.

But no matter how attractive Tristan is, no matter how well we get along (for the most part), coming that close to sleeping with my client was wrong on so many levels.

And it is completely my fault.

I allowed things to get too familiar between us, encouraging the exchange of personal information (way) beyond what was necessary to do my job, engaging in *banter*. I even played along with Shaz's teasing about schtooping my client. And I can't blame the haze of alcohol for what happened tonight – I only had prosecco, then a glass of wine with my meal.

No, this is all me – every rationalisation, every decision and action along the way culminating in *this*.

I swipe at the tears on my cheeks and run the back of my hand under my nose. Tomorrow, Tristan will meet Nerida and they will work out the parameters of their marriage and that will be that. I don't even have to be there – Tristan's a grown-arse man who brokers million-pound deals all the time. He can handle this himself. It's ridiculous that I even came to Edinburgh! How did I let him talk me into that?

I know exactly why, but more self-recrimination is fruitless at this point, so I cease, suddenly remembering the phone call. I go to the bed where I've tossed my handbag and check my phone. Mum. She rarely calls this time of night and I immediately call her back.

'Hello, Poppy love,' she says. Her tone turns my insides icy.

'Mum? What's going on?'

'Your father's had a fall, love. He was cleaning out the gutters and fell off the ladder.'

'What?' I ask, starting to pace. 'Is he okay?'

'We're at the hospital now and they've just taken him to get an X-ray on his arm.'

'Okay. Is it just his arm?'

'They think so. He bumped his head too, so they want to keep him in for observation overnight – even if there aren't any broken bones. They're worried about a concussion.'

'Should I come home? Do you need me t—'

'No, Pop, no love, that's not why I called.'

‘You sure? You sound really upset.’

‘I just... he gave me a fright is all. He called out and when I got outside, he was on the ground and I keep thinking, what if it had been worse? What if he’d...?’

‘Mum, don’t think like that. He’s going to be fine, okay?’

‘Okay, you’re right.’

‘I wish I could be there to give you a hug.’

‘Thanks, love. I feel better now that I’ve talked to you. But are *you* all right, Pop? You sound a little stuffed up.’

I forgot that I’d been crying only minutes ago. ‘Um, yeah. I’m in a really old hotel room – pretty dusty. It’s probably just allergies,’ I lie. God, the Balmoral would be appalled if they knew I’d said that about their pristine rooms. ‘So, keep me posted about Dad?’ I ask, inelegantly changing the subject.

‘Of course, love.’

‘And give him a big hug for me.’

‘I will. Bye, Pop. Love you.’

‘Love you too, Mum. Bye.’

I end the call and sink onto edge of the bed to take emotional stock. It’s been a *day*. Actually, it’s been a *night* – first Tristan, then my dad. Could the men in my life *please* stop causing me so much anguish?

‘But that’s just it, Poppy,’ I say softly to myself, ‘Tristan isn’t “a man in your life”. He’s a client and nothing more.’

Maybe saying it aloud will make it sink in.

A moment later, I’m certain. I cannot stay here and watch Tristan propose to Nerida. I unlock my phone again and navigate to the message thread with Tristan. There it is – the tell-tale ‘x’, a marker of my professional negligence. I growl at myself under my breath and type a new message.

Going back to London first thing.

I pause before typing the next line:

Good luck with Nerida.

I look at those four words for a long time, trying to ignore the impact they have on my churning stomach, then take a deep breath and press 'send'.

TRISTAN

Unsurprisingly, I have a fitful sleep, pervaded by bad dreams in which someone I loved – a nameless, faceless someone – was washed out to sea while I stood helpless on the shore screaming for help. No prizes for why I dreamt that, though if I were asked right now if I loved Poppy, I would have to say no. I do care for her and I wish I hadn't handled things so poorly last night but *love*?

It's just after sunrise, weak light seeping into the room through the gauzy curtains. I wonder if Poppy is still next door or if she's already left for London. I strain my ears to hear her moving about her room but there's only silence.

Good luck with Nerida.

How could Poppy *say* that after last night? What happened between us...

One word leaps to mind: incredible. I've *never* felt the way I did with Poppy last night – with anyone. And there was far more to it than just physical attraction, though there was that in abundance. Holding Poppy, kissing her, moments from making love to her...

How am I supposed to meet up with Nerida *now*?

I glance at my watch – plenty of time for a run to clear my head and figure out what to do.

Ten minutes later, I'm outside the Balmoral stretching my quads and looking in both directions. Decided, I set off towards the Scott Monument, breathing in great gulps of the

early morning air. As always, it takes a few minutes to find my cadence but before long, I hit my stride, my breath and legs working in sync, allowing my thoughts to tumble free.

It's two weeks today until my birthday. In two weeks, I will either be married and unspeakably wealthy, or I'll be single and will have let everyone down – myself included. Although, there will be some very happy bird lovers out there.

I still haven't confessed to Mother that things didn't work out with Alexandra. I figured I'd wait until I could present a new fiancée, brief her moments before, and rely on her good manners not to make a scene.

'Hah!' I bark out loud at the thought, startling a runner coming from the other direction. 'Sorry,' I call over my shoulder. But thinking of my mother handling a bait-and-switch daughter-in-law with any sort of decorum *is* amusing. That's if there *is* a daughter-in-law.

And then there are the cousins. Amid the frantic arrangements surrounding this trip to Edinburgh, they've contacted me three times – Olivia twice and Evie once – each in their own ways cheering me on. And I don't sense any maleficence on their part. Even without trusts from Grandad's inheritance, they still have bright futures. They've had excellent educations and once they launch into (real) adult life, rather than exploring the corners of the world, I have no doubt that they will succeed in their chosen endeavours. It is rather nice to have reconnected with them, though, and I plan to foster that relationship going forward.

Which leaves me. What do *I* want?

The money... I could put that to good use. Yes, there are the birds – they will get a sizeable sum, one that will cover running costs for years to come. And I've promised to help Alexandra, which, I just now realise, will have to come from my own pocket if I don't inherit. Still, it's the right thing to do.

As this occurs to me, I run past the gallery, looking up at the huge poster of 'The Monarch of the Glen'. It's a magnificent beast depicted in that painting, so sure of his place

in this world – that is, at the pinnacle. Very unlike myself, especially right now.

I consider the Tristan Fellows of a few weeks ago, right after Grandad died but before the will was read. Who was he? A grieving grandson. A successful investment banker. A good friend to Ravi and Jacinda (I think – I *hope*). A tolerant son. A man who hadn't travelled anywhere for pleasure in nearly a decade. A distant cousin. A *terrible* boyfriend and partner. A man who was largely unaware of what he wanted from life, his place in the world, or how he might help others, despite his assertions that he was content.

Alone.

The notion slams into my chest like a punch and I stop. I'm halfway up the hill where Poppy and I were walking last night. Just up there, that's where we kissed for the first time. Another blow and I tear my eyes from the spot where spectres of us kiss, wrapped in a passionate embrace, and scan the city from my vantage point, my pulse and my breath slowing.

It's two years of my life – two years married to a woman who I've yet to meet, who will live in my flat and be part of my life. How did I ever think this would work, that I could marry a *stranger*?

'Oh, Grandad,' I mutter, 'what would *you* have me do?'

I'm still undecided when I turn towards the top of the hill and resume my run. I hit my stride again, this time focusing on my rhythmic movements to free my mind from the cacophony of troubling thoughts. Sometime later, the hotel is in sight and I slow my pace.

Well, fuck! Poppy is standing outside with her case and she's seen me. I jog up to her, attempting to gauge her demeanour based on her appearance alone. She looks lovely, as always, but also tired, like she too had a sleepless night.

She smiles at me wanly. 'Didn't think I'd see you,' she says.

'No.'

We regard one another, and I wish I could conjure the perfect words to make her stay.

‘Your cab, miss,’ says the doorman as a car pulls up.

‘This is me,’ she says unnecessarily.

I watch Poppy slide into the back seat, close the door, and put on her seatbelt while the cab driver collects her case and puts it in the boot. Before I know it, they’re pulling away, Poppy staring straight ahead.

She’s gone.

And in an hour, I’m meeting Nerida for breakfast. The realisation makes me ill. I make it back to my room just in time to retch into the toilet.

* * *

Poppy

Sweaty from his run and sporting a day’s worth of stubble, Tristan has never been more handsome than when he was standing in front of the hotel, those whisky-coloured eyes boring into me. *Why* did he have to arrive just as I was leaving? Ironically, if I’d taken a train, I would have missed him, but no! I made the (not so) brilliant decision to fly!

Were the fates conspiring? If they were, then screw the bloody fates. I’m doing the right thing – for Tristan as much as for me.

It’s only when the plane pulls away from the terminal that I feel like I can breathe again. And after take-off, I watch out the window as the city recedes, morphing into epic scenery. This is such a beautiful part of the UK. Out here, it’s hard to conceive that more than sixty-seven million people live on this tiny island – though a good portion probably live in flat shares in Canary Wharf. When we rise into the clouds, I breathe deeply, the tufts of white outside my window mesmerising.

It's too early to call Shaz – she'd murder me for intruding on her Sunday sleep-in – but some quick maths tells me that it's likely a good time to talk to Mum. She messaged overnight to say that Dad was okay and had come home from the hospital, but she was so rattled when we spoke last night, I want to see how she's holding up.

I pay the exorbitant price for Wi-Fi, then put my earbuds in and make the call. 'Hello, Poppy love.'

'Hi, Mum,' I say quietly, not wanting to disturb the other passengers in the cabin. 'How's Dad?'

'He's okay, love. Just a bump and a graze on his forehead and a sprained wrist. Could have been much worse. Did you want to talk to him?'

An unforeseen surge of anger swells inside me. What was Dad doing up a ladder at his age? Didn't he know how dangerous that was? What if he'd *died*? What then?

'That's okay, Mum. Let him rest,' I say, not wanting to vent at my dad *or* acknowledge that part of my anger is at myself. I wasn't there. My parents are close to seventy and I wasn't there to help when they needed me.

Mum responds, obviously disappointed that I don't want to talk to Dad, but my mind is elsewhere.

Do all adult children who live across the world feel this way about their parents? I know that Shaz does – we talk about it sometimes, the guilt, wondering if the pull of 'moving back home to help out' will ever outweigh the desire to live our lives elsewhere.

'How are *you* doing, Mum?' I ask, hoping to steer this conversation in a different direction.

'I'm fine love. You sound a bit better this morning.'

'Sorry?'

'You were stuffed up last night.'

Oh, that's right, the lie I told. 'Yes, all better. On my way back to London now.'

‘That was short trip.’

You have no idea, I think but don’t say.

‘Yep, just overnight.’ I omit that I was supposed to stay a second night and that my case has imploded *and* that I have fallen for my client. More lies – this time by omission. *I am a terrible daughter.*

‘Um, Mum, I should probably go. I’ve got a ton of notes to write up. About my case.’

Liar, liar, liar.

‘Okay, love, thanks for the call.’ I’ve given Mum crumbs – the bare minimum of daughterly duty – and she’s thanking me. Guilt mixes with the anger, both making me queasy.

‘No worries. Love you,’ I say brightly.

‘Love you too.’

I wonder if there will come a day when I tell Mum what I actually do for a living. I suppose if it comes out how badly I’ve screwed up, I won’t have anything to confess to her. Then again, there’s still the leak at the agency. No news on that in the past few days, but maybe all this angst about losing my job is misplaced. I can’t lose something that no longer exists.

I check the time. Thirty minutes until Tristan meets Nerida. Equal measures of hope and dread converge with the tumult inside me, and I rest my head against the seat and close my eyes. It’s out of my hands now.

* * *

Tristan

Sweat pricks my palms, and I rub them on my trousers for the third time, then take a sip of water, attempting to steady my breath. I can’t remember the last time I was this nervous. I cast my eyes about the restaurant where tables are filled with couples of all ages, single people, and a handful of families.

Typically, I'd be scouring the menu, hungry after my run, but my stomach is still sour and I'm not sure I'll even manage a coffee.

'Tristan?'

I look up and there she is, more beautiful than her photographs and taller than I'd expected.

I stand and plaster on a smile. 'Hello, Nerida.'

'So, do we shake hands or...?' she asks with an inviting smile, her Scottish accent soft at the edges.

'Oh, er... ' I lean over and give her cheek a kiss, and she pats me on the shoulder. 'And allow me,' I say, ducking around the table to pull out her chair.

'Oh, you needn't worry about me,' she says as she sits and pulls in her chair. 'I grew up with four brothers. The closest we ever got to manners at the dining table was when they'd have burping competitions and Mum would shout, "Excuse you!". ' She laughs and I can't help but chuckle, soothing the rough edges of my nerves a little.

'What about you?' she asks, 'Do you have siblings?'

She must have seen my biography but perhaps she's simply asking to kickstart the conversation.

'Er, just me. I have a close friend, though. Our friendship is what I imagine having a brother must be like.'

She's about to reply when the waiter approaches.

'Oh,' she says, noticing the menu in front of her. 'I'm sorry, I haven't had a chance to look,' she says to him. 'Could I just have scrambled eggs on toast?'

'Of course, madam.'

'And a pot of tea, please.'

She's a tea drinker – like Poppy. With my mind wandering where it shouldn't, both Nerida and the waiter are now looking at me expectantly.

‘Er, sorry,’ I splutter, ‘coffee – black – and just an egg white omelette.’ I doubt I’ll be able to choke even that down, but I need to order something.

The waiter leaves and now Nerida and I are left smiling awkwardly across the table.

‘So,’ she says, ‘you have a significant birthday coming up.’

‘Oh, yes, I suppose I do.’

‘Look, the women at the agency explained your circumstances, and I’ve seen your bio – presumably, you’ve seen mine?’ Her pale blue eyes are inquisitive and warm – *friendly*.

‘Yes.’

‘So, we can probably skip the small talk, don’t you think?’ she asks with cheeky smile.

For the first time this morning, I feel a modicum of ease and I prop my elbows on the table, interlacing my fingers. ‘I completely concur.’

‘How about I tell you why I’d be willing to marry a stranger and move to London?’

‘That would be good.’

She laughs. ‘Are you always the king of understatement?’

Damn it, another reminder of Poppy. ‘I suppose so,’ I reply, forcing a smile.

She nods, regarding me closely. Our tea and coffee arrive, and she holds my gaze a moment longer before busying herself with her tea. I sip my coffee, taking the opportunity to observe her. She has long, slim fingers and her movements are elegant, belying her description of her uncouth upbringing. Her hair is a standout feature – long red curls – and no doubt garners her a great deal of attention.

But could I be *married* to her? I line her up next to Vittoria and Alexandra and there is no competition – mostly because of her friendliness and how she’s attempted to set me at ease. Her

directness is appreciated too, especially after what Alexandra concealed from me until it was almost too late.

When Nerida has doctored her tea with a splash of milk and enough sugar to incite diabetes, she takes a sip, looking at me over the rim, then sets down her cup.

‘All right, let’s talk about me. As you know, I’m the director of a not-for-profit here in Edinburgh.’ I nod. ‘Well, there’s an organisation in London who have been at me for months now to move down there to take up a directorship.’

‘Oh, congratulations.’

‘Thank you,’ she says with a tip of her head. ‘I’ve been hesitant – mostly fear – aren’t we often our own worst enemies, being terrified of getting what we want?’

Although Nerida’s question relates to our professional lives, no truer words could have been spoken in this precise moment.

‘Anyway, marrying you would be the perfect impetus to face my fear of succeeding and take the leap. And that way, we both get what we need, right?’

‘Right,’ I say, realising with a jolt that what I need and what I want are two very different things.

POPPY

I arrive back in London just after lunchtime and go straight home where I make myself four pieces of Vegemite toast and wallow on the sofa watching my favourite scenes from *Miss Congeniality*.

That film is comic genius, but not enough to pull me from my funk. Pouring lemon juice on my (emotional) papercut, I turn on *The Proposal* and scrutinise every scene for clues that Margaret and Andrew are falling in love, despite their professional relationship, their (many) differences, and their constant bickering – or is that just banter? Massive surprise (not), the fricking signs are everywhere! Total opposites, yet perfect for each other.

Argh!

I turn off the TV, pressing the button extra hard to show my disgust at the fictional versions of me and Tristan. Andrew: hard-working, family oriented, and good-natured like me (not *too* immodest of me to say so, I hope) and Margaret: victim of circumstance, prickly, aloof, and driven, just like Tristan.

Until she's not. Until we see below the surface – just like when Tristan miraculously morphed into a decent, considerate, often funny man who is currently making marriage plans with another woman.

I leap off the sofa and start pacing. I can't stay put; I'll go bananas. I pick up my phone and call Shaz.

'Hey. How's Edinburgh?'

‘I’m not there. I’m here. And I’m coming over.’

‘Oh, um... Right now?’

‘Yes.’

‘Okay. Um, give me an hour?’

‘Why, what’s going on?’

She whispers into the phone. ‘I’ve got someone here.’

‘Oh, sorry. So who are they?’

‘Hang on.’ I can tell she’s on the move and the next time she speaks, her voice echoes – she’s in her bathroom. ‘You don’t know them. A hook-up from Friday.’

‘You hooked up on Friday and they’re still there?’ I ask.

‘Yeah.’

‘What does Alfie have to say about that?’

‘He’s at his boyfriend’s.’

‘Ah, yes, the flat share shuffle,’ I say. ‘All over London, people are shooing their flatmates away so they can hook up. I wonder where Alfie’s boyfriend’s flatmate spent the weekend.’

‘Are you done?’ she asks.

‘Sorry. So does this person have a name?’

‘Lauren.’

‘Lovely.’

‘Yeah, it is – *she* is.’

‘You like her.’

‘I do. And I don’t want to jinx it but...’

‘No! Don’t. You *will* jinx it.’ I’m not superstitious but Shaz is and if she tells me how much she likes Lauren, she’ll unconsciously derail it before it even begins. ‘Look, I don’t have to come over.’

‘You’re coming over. Just give me an hour.’

‘Okay, see you then,’ I say, but she’s already gone.

Now I have an hour to kill. I could walk it, but from here to Shaz's takes at least ninety minutes. I know this, as I (naïvely) walked it on an especially hot day last summer, arriving sweaty, slightly sunburnt, and swearing. I suppose I could take the train to Strawberry Hill and walk from there along the Thames – perfect. I lace up my sneakers and head out.

* * *

When I finish telling Shaz about the trip to Edinburgh, including the rest of the train ride, she stares at me, eyes wide and seemingly unable to speak. I'd hoped for a breezy wave of her hand and something along the lines of, 'Ah, don't stress. It'll all work out.' This reaction is the opposite.

'Wow,' she says eventually, sending my stomach into spasms. *Oh god.* 'How did you...? I mean, this is a massive fuck-up, Poppy.'

'Hey!'

Shaz holds out her hands. 'What? Am I wrong?'

'No. I know it's bad, but it's not like this is the first time you're hearing any of this – how things are between me and Tristan. Couldn't you have... I don't know... *said* something?'

'I told you not to schtoop your client.'

'And then you told me to go ahead.'

'I was kidding and you know that! Poppy, this is a code of ethics violation.'

'He's not my patient, Sharon. He's my client!'

'You're right. I'm sorry. Just take a breath and I'll get you some water.' I flop onto her sofa and count my breaths in, then out, my eyes fixed on her latest stack of romcoms. The top one boasts a 'laugh-out-loud enemies-to-lovers tale' and I want to toss it across the room.

'Here.' She thrusts a glass of water into my hand and I gulp it down in one go, then hand it back to her. She rolls her

eyes and goes back to the kitchen to refill it. When she returns, she sets it on the coffee table and takes the seat opposite me. Shaz the therapist.

‘Tell me what you need here – voice of reason, sympathetic ear, tough love?’ she asks.

‘Airfare to Tassie,’ I mumble.

‘You’re not running away,’ she says as though she’s talking to a six-year-old. ‘Besides, you can pay for your own flight home. Let’s start with the sympathetic ear: You are a professional through and through, but this time – this *one* time – your friendly, outgoing personality nudged ahead of Poppy the Pro and you and Tristan got a little too close.’

‘That started in Greece,’ I say. ‘I let my guard down. It became me and Tristan versus Vittoria and I was trying to make him feel comfortable and after that...’ I flutter my hand in the air to demonstrate things getting away from me.

‘From what you’ve told me, I agree.’

‘And then when he was shitty with me that it didn’t work out in Greece, I took it personally, as *Poppy* not an agent.’

‘Again, I agree. Now, voice of reason?’ I nod, girding my proverbial loins in anticipation of what’s to come. Shaz leans forward, locking her eyes onto mine. *Oh god*. ‘You’ve had ample opportunity to course correct. At each twist and turn of this case, you could have made different and better decisions, more professional decisions. And I’m pulling the “I told you so” card. The other night at yours, I could see what was going on between you and when he left, I told you “no” and to get your head in the game. And you went to Scotland and did the opposite.’

I gulp. ‘That was supposed to be “voice of reason” not “tough love”,’ I say feebly.

‘I haven’t even got to “tough love” yet.’ I drop my gaze and stare at that romcom cover again, dreading what’s coming next. ‘You have to come clean to Saskia.’

‘What?’ I look her in the eye, panicked, and she angles her head, her lips pursed, silently telling me that I know she’s

right. And she is.

‘But hang on,’ I say, something occurring to me. ‘Tristan met Nerida this morning and there’s every chance he’s engaged to her – I mean, he hasn’t said otherwise – and if he is, then the case is closed. I don’t have to tell Saskia anything.’

‘Geez, woman, will you listen to yourself?’ she shouts.

‘Ouch.’ She comes around my side of the table and sits beside me, capturing me in a side hug.

‘I’m sorry. I just love you and I hate seeing you all... I don’t know...’

‘Discombobulated,’ I offer.

‘Yes, that.’ She rubs my shoulder. ‘Talk to Saskia. If it comes out what’s happened and you haven’t been the one to tell her, that could destroy her faith in you.’

‘I know.’

‘One more thing and you’re not going to like it.’

‘Oh god.’ I leap off the sofa and cross to the window. Consciously steadying my breathing again, I stare out at Teddington, so pretty at dusk with the pink sky overhead and warm yellow lights spilling from people’s homes. ‘Just say it.’

‘Is there any chance that you’re actually in love with him?’ she asks, her voice soft, *kind*.

It’s my undoing – not just the question but Shaz’s gentle tone, which means she’s back in bestie mode – and all the moments and questions and frustrations and joys from the past few weeks rise to the surface in a surge of uncertainty and fear and...

... and very possibly, *love*.

* * *

Tristan

‘You *what?*’ Ravi asks through gritted teeth.

I hang my head sheepishly. I deserve Ravi’s wrath – he’s done nothing but support me at every turn since Grandad’s death and I have very likely painted myself into a corner, dragging him with me.

‘Tristan? Did you really tell Nerida you couldn’t marry her?’

I glance in Jacinda’s direction and, in stark contrast to her husband’s reaction, she’s nodding at me encouragingly. ‘Go on,’ she mouths.

‘Yes, I did,’ I say.

Not usually one for dramatics, Ravi throws his hands in the air and bellows, ‘*But why?*’

‘Because. It didn’t feel right.’

‘What have *feelings* got to do with any of this?’

‘I—’

‘And more to the point,’ he says, cutting me off, ‘when you have ever given a flying fuck about someone else’s feelings?’

‘*Ravi,*’ says Jacinda, ‘that’s uncalled for.’

He heaves out an angry sigh and glares at me. ‘Sorry.’ But I can tell that he isn’t.

‘Does Poppy know?’ Jacinda asks me.

‘Not y—’

‘What the hell has Poppy got to do with this?’ Ravi demands, interrupting me again. Then he suddenly gets it. ‘Oh no, no, no, no, no.’ He wanders over to the lounge room window, shaking his head so wildly, it’s cartoonish.

Jacinda approaches me and rubs my arm. ‘He’ll calm down in a minute.’

‘No, I bloody won’t,’ he shouts from the other side of the room.

‘So, Poppy doesn’t know yet?’ Jacinda asks, lowering the volume of her voice.

‘No. I was going to call her after I talked to you two.’

‘Uh-uh. This isn’t a phone call or a text message or an email. You need to tell her in person.’ I chew on my lower lip, not wanting to admit that I know she’s right. ‘You came back from Edinburgh a day early – why?’

‘What do you mean? I didn’t want to stay after...’

‘After Poppy left?’

‘Well, yes, but also after I said goodbye to Nerida. The original plan was to meet her and if all went well, spend the day together, get to know each other. Once I decided that I couldn’t go through with it... What was the point of staying? Sightseeing?’

‘Right. So, you didn’t come back for Poppy?’

‘Well, *no*.’ She blinks at me disbelievingly, her eyebrows hitched high on her brow. ‘I *didn’t*. It’s not like that between me and Poppy.’

She clearly disbelieves that even more.

‘So, what’s the plan now, Tris?’ Ravi asks from his perch on the windowsill. His arms are crossed firmly over his chest, his hands in fists, and I just *know* he would love nothing more than to send one in my direction – a sharp blow to the chin to knock some sense into me.

‘You escape the clutches of the sexual predator in Greece *and* the woman in search of a baby daddy – both understandable – but when you meet the *perfect* candidate to play Mrs Fellows for the next two years, you set her loose. So now what?’

‘Now he goes to Poppy and he tells her,’ says Jacinda, trying to be helpful. Only she isn’t (apparently), and Ravi kicks off again.

‘What, so she can line up another trio of potential wives? How are they going to be any better than the first three, considering we only have *two weeks* to get you married off or

all of this was for nothing?’ He runs a hand over his chin, huffing so loudly, any little pigs in the vicinity should make a run for it.

‘You are so dim, husband,’ Jacinda says, crossing to Ravi and encircling his waist with her arms. It has the desired calming effect – most likely the hug rather than the gentle ribbing – and Ravi’s shoulders drop a full inch.

‘How? How am I dim?’ he asks her, the fight having left him.

‘Because Tristan is in love with Poppy.’

‘I—no, that’s not—’ I protest.

‘Oh, Tristan,’ she says, ‘you’re being even more of an idiot than Ravi.’

‘Hey,’ says Ravi, indignant.

But I think, in this instance, she may be right – about all of it.

POPPY

As I amble to work, taking the (extremely) long way through the Royal Botanic Gardens and along the Thames, I'm reminded of Shakespeare's seven stages of man. Today I am the whining schoolboy (schoolgirl, sans satchel) and creeping like a snail. There is every chance this is my last day at the agency. 'Mondayitis' has nothing on this feeling.

I try to focus on the packed earth beneath my feet, the sound of the river flowing, the lushness of the greenery that borders the path, still damp from the morning's dew – even the milky-blue sky peppered with clouds. All very nice if I wanted to pen a poem or post to Instagram, but with so much going on in my life, I'm finding it difficult to have a #gratefulheart or #gratitudeattitude.

At least Dad is okay. Mum messaged overnight to say that he was back out on the tractor yesterday – against doctor's orders but my dad has never followed those, so it's a sign that he's already back to his old self. The news is also a relief for an only daughter plagued with guilt at not being close by when her parents needed her.

Thoughts of home, fraught as they may be, *are* a good distraction from the day ahead. If Saskia does fire me for conduct unbecoming an agent, I should book a flight on the next plane home where I can wallow in a hefty dose of parental love, (literally) get my hands dirty, and bask in Tassie's springtime weather. Maybe I'll move home – hang out *my* own shingle. I could try to convince Shaz to come with me and we could open a practice together.

‘Hah!’ I’m deep in the realm of fantasy now.

I arrive at our building just before nine and take the lift. Our office is only three floors up, but I don’t want to arrive huffing and puffing from the stairs. On the (too) short ride up, I take soothing breaths, tricking my body into calming (the hell) down while cortisol and adrenalin course through my veins. ‘You’ve got this, Poppy,’ I murmur to myself.

Only, when I leave the lift and push open the agency’s door, something’s amiss.

I’ve walked into some sort of standoff – literally everyone in the office standing stock still, all eyes locked onto a wild-eyed woman of about thirty who’s brandishing a sheaf of papers. I know the pen is supposed to be mightier than the sword, but enough to hold an office full of people hostage?

Oh, this might be the infamous leak – in the flesh!

I sidle up to Anita, who’s around this side of the reception desk, and whisper, ‘What’s going on?’

‘She’s demanding to see Ursula.’

‘Where’s Ursula?’

‘Not here yet.’

‘And who is she?’

‘Unclear.’

‘Okay.’ So, Anita knows only slightly more than I do.

Just then, Ursula enters in a cloud of Chanel N°5, cheerily calling, ‘Good morning!’ She stops by my side. ‘Oh. What’s all this then?’ she asks the room, casting her eyes about.

‘Are you Ursula Frayne?’ demands the woman.

‘Er, yes. Can I help you?’

‘I think you’ll find you’ve done enough!’ shouts the woman, and she flings the sheaf of unbound papers towards us. Only they miss their mark – that whole ‘unbound’ thing – and dozens of pages rain down on me, Ursula, and Anita as though we’ve just won *Britain’s Got Talent*.

‘I’m sorry, I don’t understand. Who *are* you?’ Ursula inquires, seemingly unfazed.

I must say, her manners are on point. I’m not sure *I* could be as calm in this situation. Actually, I’m positive I wouldn’t be, because my heart is racing and that cocktail of stress hormones has kicked into high gear. Anita stoops beside me and starts collecting paper off the floor.

The woman, totally fixated on Ursula, crosses the office as if some unseen director has activated slow-motion mode. She stops about a foot away from us, towering over Ursula in her extremely high heels. If this woman resorts to violence, I’m prepared to throw myself in front of Ursula. I may not know her exact age – none of us do – but she’s older and frailer than me and I will willingly take one for the team.

The woman leans in close and now it’s duelling fragrances as her spicy perfume clashes with Chanel. ‘You don’t recognise me?’ she asks Ursula, getting right up in her face.

‘I... You seem familiar, yes, but I—’

‘*I*,’ the woman says dramatically, ‘am the wife of Frederick Carruthers and *you* ruined my life.’

Wow. Bravo. Great line. Great delivery. If this were a show on the West End, the curtain would drop now and the audience would be buzzing all the way through interval.

‘I’m sorry? How have I ruined your life?’

This question seems to baffle the woman and the atmosphere is charged with anticipation, the entire agency hanging on her every word. But before she can respond, Saskia steps forward.

‘Ursula, Mrs Carruthers, how about we discuss this matter in my office?’

A sensible question and it appears to break the spell, the tense mood in the office dissipating in an instant. Suddenly there’s a flurry of activity as everyone reanimates and returns to what they were doing.

Even Mrs Carruthers appears to see sense in the request. ‘Yes, all right,’ she says, lifting her gaze and looking around.

‘This way.’ Saskia flicks an indecipherable glance at Ursula and nods slightly at Paloma, and all four head into her office. She closes the door behind them, then goes to the window where she shuts the blinds. I exhale loudly.

‘Exciting way to start a Monday, eh?’ asks Anita who is still scooping up papers. I help her, catching sight of the agency’s letterhead. Perusing the pages in my hand, I realise it’s one of our contracts. Anita holds out her hand. ‘I’ll take those, put them back in order.’ I hand her what I’ve collected then leave her to it.

Huddled next to Freya’s desk with George and Freya, Nasrin frantically waves me over.

‘Is she the leak?’ I ask her.

‘That’s what we’re trying to figure out,’ she says, nose in her tablet.

‘*Very* dramatic,’ says George dramatically, clearly unaware of the irony.

‘What do you suppose happened?’ asks Freya. ‘She says Ursula ruined her life.’

‘Got it!’ Nasrin declares. ‘Look.’

She spins the tablet around so we can see. It’s a photograph of Mrs Carruthers from at least five years ago.

‘She was one of our potentials – Lila Brown.’ Nasrin turns the tablet back around and taps the screen vigorously. ‘Says here that she was matched with Frederick Carruthers, born 1967, six years ago. They married within two months. Hmm.’

‘So, what’s she got her knickers in a twist about then?’ asks George.

‘Good question,’ I say, because as usual I have nothing more insightful to add. Why is it that every time we discuss the threat to the agency, I’m about as useful as a chocolate teapot? Maybe because it’s too terrifying to bear, thinking of the agency imploding and all of us losing our jobs. On that...

Freya shoos us away so she can start work, and the others disperse, Nasrin promising to keep us posted if she figures out anything else. I go to my desk where I plunk onto my office chair. Mrs Carruthers isn't the only threat to my position at the agency. I was supposed to come clean to Saskia this morning. I had a(nother) sleepless night, thinking through dozens of permutations about how the conversation would – and could – go. And I've been gearing myself up all morning, doing my best to mentally and emotionally prepare for the worst.

Now I'm on hold.

I stow my handbag in my bottom drawer and go to the kitchen, where I flick on the kettle. Maybe tea will help take the edge off. I'm staring into space, half-listening to the kettle revving up, when a familiar voice cuts through my fugue.

'Good morning, I'm here to see Poppy Dean.'

Tristan?

* * *

Tristan

'Good morning, Mr Fellows,' the receptionist replies. 'Is Poppy expecting you?'

'Er, no.'

She purses her lips slightly, then checks her computer. It only takes seconds, but my nerves intensify.

'I can come back later,' I say, hoping I don't have to.

'She hasn't anything scheduled, other than the morning staff meeting at nine thirty.'

'Oh good. Look, would you mind terribly keeping these at your desk – just for now?' From behind my back, I produce an enormous bouquet of sunflowers – so large that when I hand them over, they're nearly as tall as she is.

She takes the flowers and places them on a bench behind her, giving nothing away with her professional demeanor – perhaps nervous men with large bouquets show up here all the time. Turning to me, she gives the kind of smile receptionists reserve for clients, skirts the edges of the high-fronted reception desk, and calls over her shoulder, ‘This way please, Mr Fellows.’ She appears to be leading me towards the meeting room that overlooks the Thames.

But before we get there, however, I’m stopped in my tracks. There she is. Poppy.

‘Tristan?’ she says, half-inquiry, half-greeting. She’s wearing her usual work ‘uniform’ of a linen dress, this one in dark green, and her hair is pulled back in her signature low ponytail. She does look somewhat tired, like she’s had a trying time of late and deserves a holiday, but to me, she is absolutely beautiful.

‘Hello, Poppy.’

‘Poppy,’ says the receptionist, ‘I was showing Mr Fellows to meeting room one.’

‘No need, Anita. I’ll take it from here,’ says Poppy.

Anita side-eyes me curiously as she returns to reception.

‘What can I do for you, Tristan?’ Poppy asks.

I become aware that we have an audience: Poppy’s colleagues pretending to work but clearly listening in. One, the man, looks like he’s about to break out the popcorn, which compounds my nerves. I fix my eyes on Poppy, who watches me expectantly. But the words I’ve rehearsed all night, and on the way here, fly from my head. I stare at her blankly.

‘We’ll forward the final invoice,’ she says. ‘There was no need to come in.’

‘Final? Oh, er...’

Of *course*. She has no idea that I shut things down with Nerida – she’s not a clairvoyant.

‘Tristan?’ She steps closer. ‘You met with Nerida, right?’

I know exactly where's she's going with this and now would be the time to tell her in a forthright manner that I am not engaged to Nerida. But the words... Where are my damned words?

'Er, yes. I met her for breakfast.'

'Yes, that was the plan,' she says, as though I'm a moron. She may not be far off the mark – this is certainly not going how I'd hoped. 'So?'

'So?'

'How did you leave things with Nerida?' she asks, her neutral expression belying the edge of frustration in her voice.

The man, her colleague, pops out of his seat, abandoning any pretence that he wasn't listening in.

Focus on Poppy, I tell myself.

I inhale deeply then say, 'It didn't work out with Nerida. We're not getting married.'

'What?!' It's difficult to divine whether Poppy is more angry, frustrated, or surprised – perhaps it's equal measures of all three.

I raise my hands, palms towards her, and she scowls at them – rightly, as I am not placating a barking dog. I drop my hands, wishing for all the world I had Ravi's eloquence. This is going appallingly.

'Tristan...' Now Poppy appears to have lost her words, and her chin drops to her chest while she exhales heavily. I watch and wait, fearful that if I make the wrong move here, it will all be over.

Eventually, she lifts her chin and looks me square in the eye. 'So, you didn't like Nerida?' she asks calmly.

'No, I did. She's a lovely woman.'

Confusion flashes across Poppy's face, then she visibly settles on a realisation. 'Oh, so, Nerida didn't like *you* then?'

'No, she did. I think she did. We seemed to get along just fine.'

‘Okay.’ The crease between her eyebrows deepens. ‘So, she didn’t want to move to London?’

‘Actually, funny story, she’s recently been offered a job down here.’

Poppy’s mouth drops open. Oh, why can’t I just say it? Why am I torturing us both?

‘Then what?’ she demands. ‘What *happened*?’

‘It’s just—’

‘Tristan, this is the most baffling – no, *infuriating* – conversation, and this morning already sucks dogs’ balls with everything else that’s going on, and now you’re here *days* before your deadline, having met a “lovely woman” – she puts the words in air quotes – ‘who apparently wasn’t completely put off by you, even though you are *impossible* – and you ARE NOT ENGAGED!’

My heart hammers in my chest, chiding me for fucking this up so terribly. ‘No.’

She throws up her hands. ‘I don’t get it. I just don’t get it. Do you want to get married or not?’

‘Yes, I do! Just not to *her*.’

It’s like when a pin pricks a balloon, how quickly my words end Poppy’s rant. She stills immediately, and the only movements in her whole body are her eyes blinking at me in confusion and her mouth working with unsaid words.

Finally, after the most pregnant pause in the history of humanity, she says, ‘What?’

POPPY

Tristan steps closer, watching me with such intensity, it causes a sharp inhale of breath – or that may have been Nasrin.

The last time I saw Tristan, he was sweaty and unkempt – sexy as hell, yes – but *today*... He's taken so much care with his appearance, he's photoshoot ready: freshly shaven, hair in that casually styled-but-not-styled way that makes me want to muss it for a laugh, and wearing such a finely cut suit that Saville Row may just have its new poster boy.

What's that game? Shag, shoot, or marry? Right now, I'd gladly shag the man – *rawr* – then shoot him for derailing his own case! Why isn't he marrying Nerida?! He comes even closer, bringing with him the scent of his woody cologne, which makes the 'shag' part of the game even *more* appealing. Argh!

'I don't want to marry Vittoria,' he says softly, 'or Alexandra, or Nerida – even though she is a lovely person and I wish her every happiness.' He frowns, looking away. 'And Alexandra... well, she's not a *terrible* person and I hope she has her baby and... Vittoria... well, she is not the *worst* person in the world...'

Tristan must realise he sounds like a quintessential Hugh Grant character mid-ramble because he stops and looks at me again.

'Sorry, I wandered a bit off-track there. But you see, I don't want to waste two years of my life married to any of them. Not when I've met someone who I have genuine

feelings for, who I can envision a *real* future with. The simple truth is, I want to marry *you*. And not just because of the inheritance but because I believe we've got a real shot at happiness together.'

How did I not see where he was going with all this? But I didn't. I truly didn't. And even though he's said the words, they don't make any sense.

'Sorry?' I say, my mind still not reaching the obvious conclusion. I'm vaguely aware that my colleagues have crowded around us, forming an audience. George is literally breathing down my neck.

Then the most surreal thing I've ever witnessed happens. Tristan drops to one knee and says, 'Poppy Elizabeth Dean, will you marry me?'

'You what?' says George.

'Oh,' sighs Freya.

'Fuck me!' says Nasrin. I don't blame her – I almost say the same thing.

Open-mouthed, I glance at them, even turning around to see George's reaction and their eyes meet mine in succession, various emotions playing out across their faces. Nasrin is actually grinning – maybe she had a sweepstake going or something. I turn back to Tristan.

'You should get up,' I say.

His face – his hope-filled, smiling face – falls, confusion and disappointment marring his gorgeous features.

He stands. 'Right. So, that's a—'

'It's a no! I can't marry you, Tristan. *This*,' I cast my arms out wide, 'is a matchmaking *agency* and I am an *agent*, and my job is to find you a wife, not *become* your wife. How can you not understand that?'

'Poppy?' Saskia's voice cuts through the air like a lightsabre and I tear my eyes from Tristan and meet hers.

‘Um, yes?’ I ask, the tone of my voice having ‘chucked a uey’, and now very much in the ‘embarrassed and contrite’ zone.

‘Can I see you, please?’

Can she see me? Well, she’s my boss and I’ve just caused an awful scene in her agency. Not to mention that it’s now obvious to everyone that I’ve failed in my one objective: marry Tristan off to someone who *isn’t* me.

Sure, Saskia, I’d be happy to let you fire me in private.

I catch Nasrin’s eye and gesture towards Tristan – I’d hate for him to leave in this state, and it feels like we have more to say to each other, but I can’t keep Saskia waiting. Nasrin gives me an understanding nod and leads Tristan towards her desk.

With him being looked after, I skulk across the vast room, aware that every pair of eyes is watching me. Saskia holds open the door to Paloma’s office, and I slink past her, folding into one of the chairs next to the desk. The door closes. *Oh god, oh god, oh god.* This is the most unprofessional, most humiliating moment of my entire career – no! *My life!*

‘How about we sit on the sofa?’ she suggests, surprising me. Are comfy sofas *really* best for firing someone? Doesn’t sitting opposite each other, a formidable desk between us, offer a more appropriate setting for a professional slaughtering?

I join her on the sofa, perching so close to the edge, a sneeze will send me over it.

‘Mind telling me exactly what is going on?’ she asks gently.

I’ve worked for Saskia for four years and she’s only raised her voice once that I know of – and *that* was when a giant vase was about to tumble off the reception desk. Having been summoned, I was expecting her to shout at me – or at least a loud telling off – but her voice is as even-toned as always, which makes it extremely difficult to know which angle to take.

And then I realise – there is no ‘angle’ to downplay my massive fuck-up. It’s massive and it’s a fuck-up. And it’s far more fucked up in the wake of Tristan’s proposal than it was ten minutes ago when I was waiting, like the others, for the outcome of the Mrs Carruthers matter.

I swallow the bile that threatens to make an appearance. Only when I’m certain that Paloma’s expensive rug is safe, I (bravely) look at Saskia, trying to read what’s behind her eyes.

‘Tristan, my client...’

Stupid, Poppy, she knows who Tristan is. Just keep going.

‘Well, it turns out that Tristan doesn’t want to marry any of the potentials we selected for him, even though the third – Nerida—’ I stop myself again. Saskia helped plan the Edinburgh leg of this case – she already knows who Nerida is. I take a steadying breath. ‘He wants to marry me,’ I say, my voice sounding very much like a little girl’s.

‘I’d guessed as much when I came to see what all the shouting was about and he was down on one knee.’

‘Oh, of course. I’m sorry about that – the shouting. That was really unprofessional.’

That’s the unprofessional part, Poppy?

I drop my head in my hands, my elbows propped on my knees.

‘I’m so sorry, Saskia. This case... I’ve completely screwed it up – first with Vittoria, then Alexandra. And I really thought Nerida would be perfect for Tristan – as a fake wife, I mean.’

As I say the words, ‘Nerida would be perfect for Tristan,’ something twists inside me – something painful, almost cruel.

Saskia scoots closer to me and lays a hand on my shoulder, making me look up. ‘From a professional perspective, as a *case*, yes, there have been several missteps – from Ursula, as much as you. We spoke about that on Saturday.’

God, was it only two days ago that Saskia, Ursula and I were here regrouping? It feels like forever ago, but that’s been the underpinning nature of this case – timeslips.

‘Have I ever told you why I started the agency?’ Saskia asks.

This conversation has certainly taken a surprising turn. I’d been expecting a bollocking and to be sent on my way, and now I’m about to get a history lesson. ‘Um, no, I don’t think so.’

‘So, just over ten years ago, my grandfather passed away,’ she says.

‘Oh, I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be. He was a cruel man – utter bastard – and poor Grandma had endured fifty-eight years of marriage to that man. It was a relief – for all of us.’ I don’t know what to say to that, so I remain silent. ‘Anyway, I got it in my head that I wanted to find someone for Grandma, someone kind and lovely, someone who would treat her the way she deserved to be treated.’

‘And when I raised it with Mum, she told me about a boy Grandma had loved before she met my grandfather – Harry. Now the chances that Harry was still alive, and that he wasn’t married to someone else... it was a longshot, to say the least. Not to mention, all Mum knew about him was his name – Harold “Harry” Carter – that he was the same age as Grandma and, of course, the village where they grew up. Undeterred, I got to work, even hiring a private investigator.’

‘And, Poppy,’ she says, her eyes alive with excitement, ‘I found him!’

‘You did?’

‘Yes. He’d recently been widowed and was delighted to hear from me. We surprised Grandma with a reunion, and they’ve been together ever since – in their late-eighties and madly in love. It’s so sweet. Anyway, it was my first match, and’ – she shrugs – ‘I caught the bug. I was already feeling dejected with the legal profession and when I talked to Andrew about it, he encouraged me to leave the law and start the agency. And the rest, as they say...’

She smiles, which – along with the agency’s incredible origin story – does wonders to lift my flagging spirits, but why is she telling me this? And more to the point, what is happening out there, out in the office? I can only imagine, my mind landing on Nasrin pouring Tristan a glass of whisky and telling him to ‘buck up’.

‘So, back to you,’ says Saskia. ‘It’s my experience that the heart wants what the heart wants. I know you pride yourself on your professionalism – and you should, you’re an excellent agent with an outstanding record – but, Poppy, you can’t ignore that the man *proposed* to you.

‘Now, I realise that the contessa and the museum curator weren’t viable options, but Nerida most certainly was. And even though his deadline is looming, he risked that option – and the inheritance – to return to London and lay his heart on the line. He chose *you*, Poppy.’

‘But...’ I sigh heavily.

‘But? Oh, I see. You don’t feel the same way.’

‘No, I—’ I sigh again. Really, Poppy, more sighing? I’m like a one-woman episode of *Bridgerton*.

‘So, you *do* feel the same way?’ she asks.

‘Sort of, but it’s probably just *attraction*. I mean, he’s so fucking gorgeous! Sorry – for the “fucking”, I mean. And the shouting. Just now and before. Oh my god. What am I doing?’

‘Poppy, look at me.’ I do. ‘Do you have romantic feelings for Tristan? Beyond lust, I mean, because you’re right – the man *is* fucking gorgeous.’

She laughs at my wide eyes and open mouth – I’ve never heard her say so much as ‘damn’ before – but when her laughter dies, she watches me intently, waiting for an answer.

And I already know the answer. But dare I say it out loud?

Just one word will trigger a series of events so epic, so *life-changing* it’s terrifying.

Sure, Tristan said he has feelings for me, but does he mean ‘I’m in love with you’ or ‘under any other circumstance, I

would ask you out on a date'? Because those are two vastly different things. What if we *do* marry and it *is* only lust between us and we're not compatible after all? What if I'm locked into a marriage with a man who ends up making my life miserable and vice versa?

It's *two years*.

And even if it does work out between us and we fall madly in love, what about the money? It's a life-changing amount for me, a quarter of a million pounds. I could look after Mum and Dad, pay off the mortgage on the farm. But then what if taking the money feels transactional and causes a rift between me and Tristan? What if I end up losing him anyway?

There are so many things to consider – not the least of which is telling my parents I'm marrying a man they've never met. *And* there's my job. Will I be allowed to keep it if I marry a *client*?

But beneath the noise inside my head, there amongst the onslaught of questions and worries, is one pervading 'what if?' – one that overshadows all the others. What if Tristan marries someone else?

The bile rises again and tears flood my eyes, the emotional dam breaking. Because the thought of him marrying someone else... it's unbearable.

There's only one answer to Saskia's question. There may be a lot to work out, both emotionally and logistically, but I need to be brave, because the truth is, I love Tristan.

'Yes, I do.' I say, wiping away the fat tears that have fallen onto my cheeks. 'I have romantic feelings for Tristan.'

'So, I suppose the only remaining question is: are you prepared to marry him?'

'Could I still keep my job?' I ask, voicing one of my biggest concerns.

'Poppy, of course!'

'Really?'

Her head tilt tells me everything I need to know. This woman, who created the agency out of one act of kindness, just wants me to be happy. She *did* call it the Ever After Agency, after all.

She stands and crosses to Paloma's bookshelves, where she picks up a box of tissues. 'Now, wipe those tears and let's get you back out there so the poor man can propose to you again.'

I do as I'm told, then stand and join Saskia at the door.

'Ready?' she asks.

I nod, a wide smile breaking across my face. This is it.

POPPY

Saskia opens the office door to what I'd describe as 'moderate mayhem'.

Tristan is seated at Nasrin's desk and that is, indeed, a glass of whisky in front of him – although, untouched by the look of it. I guess it *is* only 9.15 *a.m.* Nasrin is talking to him, but he doesn't appear to be registering what she's saying. Freya and George look on, talking animatedly amongst themselves – George seems delighted, but then he's always loved a bit of drama. Mia has just come in from the kitchen with a cup of tea for Tristan – a much more appropriate elixir – and he accepts it with a weak smile. Paloma and Ursula have stuck their heads out of Saskia's office to ask what's going on and Saskia holds up a finger to ask them to wait. And Anita, in her capacity as our unofficial office manager, is attempting to corral the others back to work while simultaneously greeting a woman who has just arrived at reception.

'Holy crap,' I mutter.

'Eye on the prize,' says Saskia, not-so-gently ushering me through the door.

I take a moment to compose myself, then call out, 'Tristan?'

The moderate mayhem ceases and all eyes swing my way. Honestly, with this synchronised crowd work, we could be cast as the chorus of a Christmas pantomime. Any moment now, someone will shout, 'Look behind you!'

Nasrin nudges Tristan, who's now staring dejectedly at either the tea or the whisky, and he looks up. I lift my hand in a wave and say, 'Hi.' Not what I would have scripted for myself if I'd had more time to prepare, but a start. I make my way over to him, the going snail-paced because of my suddenly leaden feet.

'Hello,' he replies, his brow creased in confusion.

I move closer, licking my arid lips.

'Tristan,' I begin, lingering on his name to bolster my confidence, 'when I met you several weeks ago as my client, it wasn't long before I saw beneath your gruff, almost rude, façade.' He frowns more intensely at that, so I pivot – and quickly. '*And* I came to know you as someone who cares deeply about other people and just wants to do the right thing – for everyone. You're also quite funny – sometimes on purpose.' The corner of his mouth twitches.

Move on, Poppy!

'Anyway, even though it was unprofessional and self-serving and just plain wrong, I did the one thing I was forbidden from doing.' I pause, not for effect but because here come the words I have yet to say aloud, and they are fucking terrifying. 'I fell for you.'

His eyes widen slightly, which encourages me further.

'And then I lied about it. To myself, my colleagues, my best friend. To *you*. And I'm sorry.'

He stands, his eyes searching mine, hopeful.

'Ask me again?' I whisper, the words catching in my throat.

It takes a moment for him to realise what I mean, but when he does, his (gorgeous) face lights up. He drops again to one knee, his eyes locked on mine, and my heart flutters with excitement.

'Poppy Elizabeth Dean – brave, bold, and intrepid Poppy. Woman who has equal passion for her job, for life, *and* Greek biscuits.' I grin and we share the in-joke. He then takes my

hands in his, his eyes falling away for a heartbeat. When they meet mine again, they're slick with tears. Mine fill too and we smile at each other as I give his hands an encouraging squeeze. 'Poppy,' he says, his voice tender, 'you are warm and kind and clever, and so beautiful – inside and out. You make me laugh – mostly at myself...' We laugh again, this time through tears. '...And you can take my breath away with just a look.'

'Aww,' says Freya, eliciting gentle laughter from all of us.

'But most of all,' he says, 'being with you makes me braver and better than I've ever been in my life.' I sniffle as tears stream down my face. 'Will you do me the honour of becoming my wife?'

I'm about to answer with a resounding yes, when he continues, just as earnestly.

'And I don't want to pressure you about the timing, but if you do say yes, what do you think of marrying me sometime in the next thirteen days? We can take things slowly, of course. We wouldn't have to move in together right away, but if we are going to make a go of this, if we're going to *be* together – because I *truly* believe we will be happy with one another – then why not inherit a large sum of money as well? I mean—'

I reach down and grab his face with both hands. 'Tristan, yes.'

'Really?'

'Yes.'

'To which part?'

'To all of it.'

He stands, scooping me up and lifting me off the floor, his mouth finding mine in a firm and loving kiss. When he eventually sets me down and we break the kiss, he rests his forehead against mine.

'Oh, Poppy, you've made me so happy,' he whispers.

He pulls back slightly, and I peer up at him. A hand bearing a tissue appears between us and I take it gratefully and

wipe my tears, but when I turn to thank whoever it was, they're gone.

'I'm sorry I didn't propose with a ring,' says Tristan, pulling my attention back to him.

'Oh, no don't worry about that.' He could have proposed with a packet of Hula Hoops, and I still would have said yes – well, the second time, that is.

'I just didn't have a chance to arrange anything. This was all so last-minute.'

'Tristan, I promise, it's okay.'

'How about we go together – choose something that's as lovely as you are?'

I don't think I've truly understood what it feels like to swoon until now. 'Perfect,' I reply, not trusting my voice to say more. He grins and stoops for another kiss.

'Hello,' says a voice.

I (reluctantly) break the kiss and glance over, ready to shoo away whichever colleague is interrupting our moment, but it's the woman I saw at reception earlier.

'Um, hello?'

'I'm Jacinda, Ravi's wife.'

'Oh, hi!' I say, right as Tristan says, 'Jacinda, *what* are you doing here?'

'I hope you don't mind me crashing your proposal,' she says to me, ignoring him. 'It's just' – she looks at Tristan adoringly – 'when Tris finally admitted that he loved you—'

'Oh no,' Tristan groans and it only just occurs to me that we haven't exchanged 'I love you's yet.

'You *do*,' she says to him and he shakes his head, then flicks an apologetic glance my way. 'Anyway,' she says, coming back to me, 'I just really wanted to be here. That's not too strange, is it?'

'No,' I reply. 'Yes,' Tristan says at the same time.

Jacinda and I share a laugh.

‘Seriously, though,’ she says to me, ‘from everything Tris has said about you – *and* Ravi – I just know that this is...’ She points a finger between us. ‘This is really...’ She seems at a loss for words, finally landing on, ‘Good.’

‘Good?’ asks Tristan, amused.

Jacinda fans her face, her eyes filling with tears. ‘Leave me alone, I’m overcome. It’s not every day one of my closest friends proposes, you know.’

I reach out and pull her into a hug which she returns. ‘Thank you. That’s really sweet,’ I say. We hug a moment longer.

‘Mind if I have my fiancée back?’

Jacinda and I step away from each other, exchanging smiles, and Tristan fills the space she’s vacated. He snakes an arm around my waist, his hand resting on my hip and giving it a squeeze, then kisses the top of my head. All of it, every sensation, is wonderful and surreal at the same time.

‘Time to open these yet?’ asks Nasrin, holding up two bottles of bubbly. My tiny circle of attention widens and I realise that the entire agency is watching us, making me more than a little self-conscious. Nasrin doesn’t wait for a response and begins the business of opening the bubbly while Mia and Freya ferry champagne flutes from the kitchen. Nasrin pours and they dole them out.

‘I think these are for you,’ says Anita, handing me an enormous bouquet of sunflowers. She winks at Tristan, eliciting a broad smile, then returns to reception, scooping up a glass of bubbly as she goes.

‘Thank you, Anita,’ I call after her. She waves over her head with her free hand. ‘Are these from you?’ I ask my (gasp) fiancé.

‘Yes. I remembered they’re your favourite and if you’d said no, they would be a parting gift.’

‘I did say no,’ I say quietly as the others mill about us excitedly.

‘I know. I didn’t care for it.’

‘I’m sorry.’

He dips his head to kiss me, swiftly and softly. ‘You’re forgiven.’

* * *

Tristan

I think I’d forgive Poppy anything now that she’s agreed to become my wife. My *wife*! For weeks now that word has weighed heavily on me and now it represents a bright future with this incredible woman – something I couldn’t imagine when I first walked through the agency’s door. Yes, there is much to discuss and decide – logistics mostly – but as I said to Poppy, we don’t have to rush the relationship side of things. It’s that part – how we are together and who I am when I’m with her – that makes me happiest.

Poppy shifts the bouquet from one arm to the other.

‘Here, allow me,’ I say, taking the sunflowers from her and placing them on her desk.

‘Thank you. They’re lovely, just...’

‘Heavy?’

She nods.

‘Hi everyone!’ says Jacinda, tapping on her champagne flute to get everyone’s attention. ‘I’m Jacinda, Tristan’s friend, and I’d like to propose a toast.’

I steel myself, hoping she’s not going to embarrass me. It’s already been a turbulent morning and I’m not sure how much more I can bear. One of Poppy’s colleagues hastily shoves a flute into my hand, nearly sloshing champagne over the rim, then hands one to Poppy.

‘To Tristan, who I love like a brother...’

Well, that’s lovely and echoes exactly how I feel about Jacinda.

‘Actually,’ she continues, ‘I love him *way* more than two of my brothers – the younger ones are *really* annoying’ – everyone laughs – ‘and to lovely Poppy,’ she says, regarding Poppy thoughtfully, ‘we’re going to be like sisters, you and me. I just know it.’

When I look down at Poppy, she places her free hand on her heart. ‘I’m already madly in love with her, you know,’ she says to me quietly.

I look between her and Jacinda and smile, my heart brimming. Many times over the years, I’ve felt like an interloper around Jacinda and Ravi, and now with Poppy by my side, we’ll be a firm foursome – something else I’ve never imagined before.

‘To Tristan and Poppy,’ Jacinda calls out.

‘To Tristan and Poppy,’ rings out over the office and I clink the rim of my flute against Poppy’s. We sip, watching each other closely, the moment not feeling quite real.

‘Well, that’s just perfect, that is!’ I turn towards the voice and a livid-looking woman surveys the scene from an office doorway. ‘A bloody proposal? How very rich! If you people don’t start taking me seriously—’

Another of Poppy’s colleagues deftly bundles the woman back inside the office and closes the door.

‘What was that all about?’ I ask.

‘I’m not a hundred per cent across the details, but—’

‘Poppy, dear.’ Ursula appears, smiling benevolently, and leans in to kiss Poppy on the cheek. ‘Wonderful news. Congratulations.’

‘Thank you,’ she says.

‘And to you, Tristan,’ Ursula says. ‘She’s a good egg, this one.’

‘I couldn’t agree more,’ I reply and Poppy grins up at me. ‘And Ursula, can I just ask – only out of curiosity – that woman...’ I nod towards the closed door.

‘Yes,’ Poppy says, ‘did you figure out what happened?’

‘As a matter of fact, we did,’ Ursula replies, obviously exasperated. ‘It turns out that Mrs Carruthers believed that Mr Carruthers married her because he was in love with her.’

‘And he wasn’t? Isn’t?’ Poppy asks.

‘Isn’t and never was apparently. He married her because his bachelor status had become something of an obstacle, at least to the higher-ups at his place of employment. As he approached fifty, he was informed that he would not make partner unless he married.’

‘What misogynistic twaddle,’ says Poppy, her face puckered with distaste.

‘Even at my firm, that sort of archaic strong-arming no longer exists,’ I say.

‘You’d be surprised how prevalent it still is,’ Ursula says to me. ‘That practice should have disappeared with the three-martini lunch but alas,’ she adds, one eyebrow twitching almost imperceptibly. ‘Anyway, Mr Carruthers was under pressure and engaged the agency to help him find a wife, omitting that pertinent detail. Shortly after, we matched him with Mrs Carruthers.’

‘Who believed it was a love match,’ Poppy concludes.

‘Exactly. Only it all came out in a recent argument about her wanting children. And, as is evidenced, she’s furious – with him and with us. That’s why she’s threatening to expose us.’

‘So, what do we do?’ asks Poppy.

‘We – that is, Saskia and I – have offered to help her navigate a divorce as quickly as possible, then find her a true love match – our fees waived, of course.’

‘Sounds reasonable,’ I say.

‘Yes. Now, all we have to do is convince her. And on that, if you’ll excuse me.’

Ursula departs and I turn to Poppy. ‘Is that what you were referring to earlier? You said something about everything else that was going on.’

‘Yes, that was part of it. And there’s my dad’s accident and I thought I was going to lose my job and—’

‘Hold on, your dad’s accident? What happened? Why didn’t you say?’

‘Oh, that’s right, you don’t know about that. He had a fall—’

‘Oh no, is he—’

‘Yeah, no, he’s okay – just bumps and bruises. But on top of everything else...’ She shrugs. ‘It’s been a hectic few days.’

‘Only days? I feel like my life has been topsy-turvy ever since the day we read Grandad’s will.’

‘I can’t even imagine. I wish I’d had the chance to meet him,’ she says regretfully.

I give her a squeeze. ‘He would have adored you.’

‘Oh my god, I have to meet your mum,’ she says suddenly, making me laugh. ‘What? She sounds terrifying.’

‘She’s an old bat,’ says Jacinda, butting in.

‘Jass!’ I chide.

‘What? Forewarned is forearmed, I say. Anyway, now that I’ve drunk half a glass of fizz, I’d better get to work.’ She stands on tiptoes to kiss my cheek, then plants one on Poppy’s. ‘You two, dinner at ours tonight.’

Poppy and I start speaking at once – perhaps, like me, she was hoping that tonight we’d be picking up where we left off in Edinburgh – but Jacinda cuts us off.

‘Nope, not having it. You have the rest of your lives for shagging. You can at least wait till after dinner.’

‘*Jesus, Jacinda,*’ I say, my chin dropping to my chest. Poppy’s properly laughing now, most likely at me.

‘Bye, loves,’ Jacinda says undeterred. ‘Seven thirty – and bring wine,’ she says, pointing at me.

‘Don’t I always?’ I ask. Jacinda leaves without answering and I turn to Poppy. ‘I *always* take wine to theirs.’

‘I believe you,’ she says, reaching up for a kiss, only right as our lips are about to touch, we’re interrupted again.

* * *

Poppy

‘You must be the infamous Mr Fellows,’ says Saskia. Tristan and I spring apart like kids caught snogging at a school social. ‘Saskia Featherstone.’ She extends her hand and he shakes it.

‘Lovely to meet you. I believe you know my closest friends, Ravi and Jacinda Sharma. And don’t they have you to thank for *their* match?’

Saskia smiles proudly, one shoulder shrugging in false modesty. ‘I do and they do. I adore them – gorgeous couple.’

‘You’ve just missed Jacinda, actually. She came to spectate my proposal.’

‘I caught her on her way out. Anyway, I wanted to say hello and to offer my congratulations – to both of you.’

‘Thank you, Saskia,’ I say, hoping I’m conveying my full appreciation, not just for the congratulations, but if it weren’t for her, we wouldn’t have anything to celebrate. In a way, she’s responsible for this match as well.

‘Yes, thank you,’ says Tristan. ‘And I know this case didn’t exactly go as planned...’

‘Well, no,’ she agrees with a knowing smile.

‘But I hope you will accept my apology for the disruption – for today, of course, but also throughout my engagement with your agency.’

‘Not to worry,’ she says good-naturedly – Saskia The Swan making an appearance. ‘I’m sure you’re familiar with the saying, “the course of true love never did run smooth”?’

‘Shakespeare,’ Tristan replies.

‘Exactly. He was so astute about matters of the heart,’ she says. ‘Anyway, I’m a firm believer that a love hard won is all the sweeter.’ They exchange smiles. ‘And Poppy? I suggest that as you have closed your latest case, you take the rest of the day off.’

‘Oh, I—’

Is my boss sending me off to spend the rest of the day shagging?

‘Actually, I’ll insist on that,’ she continues. ‘No doubt you have family and friends to contact and arrangements to make.’

Oh, so not permission to shag, then. And she’s right – I need to call Mum and Dad and Shaz.

‘That’s very thoughtful and we will take you up on that,’ says Tristan, clasping my hand.

‘Oh, one more thing before I head back to sort the other matter,’ says Saskia, gesturing towards her office. ‘If it’s not too much to ask, I’d love an invitation.’

‘An invitation?’ I ask.

‘To the wedding!’ She looks at me as if I’m being daft – which, of course, I am.

‘Oh, right, yes, of course,’ I say, even though it only *now* occurs to me – in less than a fortnight, I will be *married*.

Married!

TRISTAN'S 35TH BIRTHDAY

Poppy

‘Oh, Pop, you look stunning. STUN-NING.’

‘Thanks, Shaz.’

It’s just us now that the hair stylist and makeup artist have left and she’s standing behind me, regarding me in the full-length mirror. She tilts her head, then reaches up and tugs gently on the strap of my dress, moving it further off my shoulder and evening it up with the other side. ‘There, perfect.’

‘I agree,’ I say, making her laugh. ‘What? The dress – I meant the dress.’

‘You, the dress, you in the dress. It’s all perfect, Pop.’ Shaz heads to the bed where she props herself carefully on the edge, and I look at myself from top to toe. For a change, I’m wearing my hair down, parted on the side and sitting in carefully constructed ‘beachy waves’. My makeup is not overdone – I didn’t want to look like a Kardashian, I wanted to look like *me* – and I do. Me with flawless skin, a hint of blush, rose pink lips, and lashes for days.

And the dress! I fell in love with it as soon as I clapped eyes on it. Saskia hooked me up with a friend of hers who has a design house in Soho. It was the first and only dress I tried on. It’s cream silk, cut on the bias, sleeveless with a cowl neck, and it skims my body, kicking out in a fishtail at the

bottom. Seriously, I love it so much, I may have to wear it once a week until the fabric wears thin. Tristan will come home from work and I'll be reclined on the sofa reading, wearing the dress! And why not? What is it they say? Use the good china every day because every day is a gift – or something like that. This dress will be my good china.

And I'm not really a 'shoe gal', a Carrie Bradshaw-type like Freya with more shoes than pairs of knickers, but these are *so* pretty – strappy low-heeled sandals in cream silk to match my dress.

I turn to Shaz, who's wearing a similar dress, only tea length and in teal to make her blonde hair and green eyes really pop.

'How long till the car gets here?' I ask.

She checks her phone. 'Fifteen minutes.'

'Phoo.' I expel a long breath, the nerves suddenly kicking in. I use my hands to fan myself.

'You okay?' she asks, leaping up.

'Yep.'

'Cause you look like you're about to freak out.'

'Yep.'

She approaches me, her hands resting gently on my shoulders, and looks down at me – like, properly *down* because she's already several inches taller than me and she's opted for four-inch heels.

'In-two-three-four, out-two-three-four.' She repeats the sequence several times until my breathing returns to normal. 'Good?' she asks, dropping her hands.

I nod. 'Thanks'

'I mean, what's the big deal, right? You only met the guy a month ago, he was your client, you guys ran the full gamut of romance tropes – enemies-to-lovers, forbidden love, grumpy-sunshine – and when he proposed, you not only turned him down, you shouted at him! See? No big deal. Just a run-of-the-

mill love story and today you happen to be getting married – that’s all.’

I snigger, smiling up at her. ‘Do you use this tactic with your patients?’

‘What?’ she says, returning to the bed to collect her clutch. ‘Sarcasm? All the time.’

‘I was going to say “irony” – it’s a little more elevated.’

She shrugs. ‘I’m way too basic for “elevated”.’

I’d disagree, but she’d only argue with me. Shaz (too) often puts herself down with little barbs, but now is not the time to be her therapist.

‘Okay, so,’ she says, holding up the clutch, ‘I’ve got your lippie for touch-ups, plus tissues, eyedrops, and breath strips. Am I missing anything?’

‘You’ve got my phone?’

She peeks inside the clutch. ‘Yes. All set for live streaming to Mum and Dad in Tassie.’

‘Okay, I think that’s everything. Should we wait downstairs?’ I start huffing out loud breaths.

‘Hey, stop that immediately. You’re working yourself up again.’ I nod at her and get my breathing under control.

‘I can’t believe that the next time I’m in this room, I’ll be married.’

‘I can’t believe you’ve moved in with Tristan but have your own room!’

‘Is that weird? It’s weird, isn’t it?’ She shrugs, indicating that she does think it’s weird. ‘It’s just that we’re still getting to know each other and he wants me to be comfortable here, have my own space. I imagine someday, probably soon, I’ll move into his room. I haven’t even properly left my flat yet.’ Most of my stuff is still there while we work out how to combine two households – the only furniture I’ve brought so far is my beloved secretary desk, which now inhabits the study nook.

‘But how do you choose, you know... *whose room?*’ Shaz asks.

‘What do you mean?’

She looks at me like I’m an idiot. ‘Hello? Where do you have sex?’

‘We’re not having sex yet.’

‘What? How do I not know this?’ she asks, incredulous.

‘I don’t tell you everything,’ I say, walking out of the room.

‘I’m your best friend. You are supposed to tell me everything. And how in the hell are you not having sex with that man? Are you *blind?*’

I make my way to the kitchen where our bouquets are packaged up in large boxes with cellophane windows in the lids. I open the one with Shaz’s bouquet and hand it to her.

‘I’m not blind,’ I say, my chin lifted to rebuff her silly accusation. ‘He’s the hottest man I’ve ever laid eyes on. But we wanted to wait – till after we’re married.’ She accepts the bouquet, and I open the box with mine.

‘That’s actually sort of sweet,’ she says.

‘Yes, it is. It’s also very romantic. We’re a very romantic couple.’ She smirks at me and, any other day, any other occasion, I’d pretend to be ticked off at her a little longer.

Instead, I take out my bouquet and deeply inhale the sweet scent of the lilies. ‘What do you think?’ I ask, holding the bouquet in front of me.

‘Exactly what I said before. You’re perfect.’

‘Shaz, I’m marrying Tristan today.’ I bounce on the spot excitedly and now the nerves have diminished, I can’t stop grinning.

‘I *know*, you dork. Now, come on, let’s get you married.’

* * *

Tristan

When I met Poppy at the agency just over a month ago, I could never have imagined this moment. At that stage, I hadn't even agreed to go through with *any* marriage, let alone to a woman I love. And yet, here she is, sitting beside me and looking more beautiful than ever. And now she's my *wife*.

It's a small gathering, an intimate (lunchtime) wedding breakfast with Ravi and Jacinda, Mother, the cousins (Aunt Lucinda declined my invitation, as I'd hoped), Poppy's best friend, Shaz, and her colleagues from the agency, Ursula (with her husband, Richard), Nasrin, George, and Freya. I think I've got all those names right. Poppy's boss, Saskia Featherstone, and her husband are here as well, and are chatting with Ravi and Jacinda across the table.

The ceremony was brief, a civil service, as neither of us are terribly religious. Initially, Mother worked herself in a lather about us not marrying in the 'family church'. That is, until I pressed her on which church that might be (knowing there isn't one) and she had to confess that the Fellows family hasn't frequented the same church since before I was born. And that was the end of that. Besides, thanks to Ursula's lengthy career in matchmaking and her vast network, we had our pick of *three* celebrants.

And, as it was too short notice for them to leave their orchard in Tasmania, Poppy's parents 'attended' the ceremony via video conference. I've 'met' them several times now, Noelene and Gary. And once they got over their initial shock at their only child marrying a veritable stranger, I've come to know them as lovely people, very down to earth. It's clear where Poppy gets her caring nature and good humour from. We're planning to fly there over Christmastime – my first hot Christmas! We're not sure when – or if – they will ever meet Mother. She had a difficult enough time accepting that I was

marrying an Antipodean who didn't attend either Oxford *or* Cambridge.

There's a pinging sound, Ravi tapping a spoon against a glass, and he rises. I told him he needn't give a speech – as in, 'Please do not give a speech, Ravi!' but he's clearly ignored my plea.

Poppy squeezes my thigh in solidarity and leans close. 'At least it's not Shaz,' she whispers and I smile at her, amused.

'Hello, everyone. I won't take up much time, as I'm told we have an incredible lunch coming. I just wanted to say a few words about my dearest friend, Tristan.' I groan involuntarily and a ripple of laughter encircles the table. 'Don't worry, Tris, I promise not to mention the time we went skinny dipping and the girls stole our clothes and we were locked out of the dormitory, and *your* solution was to shimmy up the drainpipe – naked.'

'Oh god,' I murmur, resting my chin on my clenched fist.

Poppy chuckles softly beside me. 'We're coming back to that story,' she says in my ear.

'And I definitely won't mention when you got so drunk during freshers' week, you sang "My Humps" in the quad at the top of your lungs – with all the *actions*, mind you – and was called to the Head of House's office to explain yourself.'

'Ravi, I'm going to murder you later.' Catching sight of Mother's sour face, her lips pursed in judgement, I may have to join the queue. Actually, it's more likely that her ire is aimed at me. This is probably the first time she's learning any of this.

'Carry on, Ravi, this is really entertaining,' says my wife.

'Traitor,' I tease, narrowing my eyes at her. She blows a kiss in my direction.

'Poppy, I promise at some point to regale you with all the Tristan Fellows stories you like.'

'You will do no such thing,' I tell him firmly.

‘But for now,’ he continues, ignoring me, ‘a toast. Tristan, you are a fine man and you have found yourself an even finer woman. Poppy, welcome to our little misfit family. We already adore you and offer you both our sincerest congratulations.’

‘Hear, hear,’ Jacinda calls out.

‘To the happy couple,’ concludes Ravi.

The toast echoes around the table and Poppy clinks her champagne flute against mine. ‘To us,’ she says quietly.

I angle towards her. ‘To us, my beautiful, beautiful bride.’

‘Aww, that’s sweet. But I thought you didn’t want a bride.’

‘I had no idea what I wanted.’ I capture her hand and bring it to my lips. ‘I do love you, Poppy,’ I say quietly. Her eyes widen in surprise, which is understandable because, until now, we’ve yet to say that to each other. ‘You don’t need to s—’

‘No, I want to. I love you too.’ I swallow the lump in my throat, and we lean in for a kiss.

‘Okay, you two, enough of that,’ says Shaz, obliterating our moment. ‘Besides, it’s my turn,’ she adds, standing.

‘Sharon Marie, we spoke about this,’ Poppy says in her non-sense voice.

‘But I—’

‘Sit. Down.’

‘I was only going to talk about that weekend we spent in —’

‘Nope, sit.’

Shaz makes a show of it, feigning a huff, but by the time the starters arrive, she’s laughing again – strangely, *with* my mother. Who would have thought those two would get along? If I liked Shaz before today – and I did – I like her even more now.

‘Do you think we can leave straight after lunch?’ Poppy asks.

‘I don’t see why not. We’re not doing any of that awful, silly wedding business, are we?’ I ask rhetorically – no garter, no tossing the bouquet, no squashing cake into each other’s faces. Something occurs to me. ‘Oh, you’re not disappointed about that, are you? You don’t feel like you’re missing out?’

We talked about it, of course – we had precisely eleven days to plan a wedding, so it was a joint effort – but perhaps Poppy was just going along with what *I* wanted.

‘No, not at all – I hate all that cringey stuff.’

‘We could have at least chosen a song and had a first dance.’

‘Tristan?’

‘Yes.’

‘Eat your lobster ravioli.’

Accepting that my new wife is genuinely fine without all the wedding brouhaha, I take a bite of my starter. It’s delicious. ‘Besides,’ she whispers in my ear, ‘the sooner we get out of here, the sooner I can show you my new lingerie.’

I cough and splutter so violently, Ravi leaps out of his seat to slap me on the back.

* * *

Poppy

Waiting to sleep together may just have been the stupidest idea ever.

Regardless of what I said to Shaz about it being romantic, it has been *extremely* difficult not to tear Tristan’s clothes off at every turn. Tristan dressed for work – sexy. Tristan coming home from work and pouring some wine and asking me about my day – sexy. Tristan cooking dinner – sexy as *hell*. Tristan doing the washing up – sexier than everything else put

together. The man could make doing *taxes* sexy. They should bottle his Tristan-ness and sell it. ‘Sexy’ by Tristan.

Or waiting to sleep together is a stroke of genius, because by the time we finish our wedding breakfast and say our goodbyes to our loved ones, I’m so hungry for him, the drive back to his – sorry, *ours* – seems to take an epoch. We’re quiet the whole way and I wonder if, like me, Tristan is imaging what’s to come (so to speak). It’s like we’re back in Edinburgh, heat zinging between us, the air so charged, the poor driver may have to get his car fumigated after this.

Finally, we arrive and in less than a minute, we’re out of the car, inside the building, up the lift, and at our front door.

He puts the key in the lock, then pauses. ‘Shall I carry you over the threshold?’ he asks.

‘Tristan, you can do anything you want with me.’

The look he gives me could set my knickers alight. He opens the door and pushes it open, then scoops me up as though I weigh nothing, carries me over the threshold, and kicks the door shut behind us. He walks me straight into his room where he sets me down and looks intently into my eyes.

‘Turn around,’ he commands, his voice gravelly with lust.

I do and he begins unbuttoning my dress. As he undoes each tiny button, his fingers brush my skin, sending jolts of electricity down my spine. With my back exposed, Tristan’s lips caress my neck, and his hands slide inside my dress, resting firm against my stomach, then rising to cup my breasts.

I flick the straps of my dress over my shoulders and let it fall to the floor, then spin around to face him. He steps back, his eyes travelling the length of me, taking me in, lingering on my legs, my silk knickers, my midriff, my bra, my décolletage. He meets my eye. ‘You’re beautiful,’ he says, coming in for a hungry kiss. ‘But you’re wearing too much.’

‘I am? You’re still fully dressed.’

He raises his eyebrows, then shrugs out of his suit jacket, tugging at his tie which falls to the floor. My fingers make fast

work of his shirt buttons and, impatient, I push the shirt off his shoulders, drinking in the sight of his naked torso. *Oh my god.*

I place my hands on his chest, trailing them down to his stomach and he squirms.

‘Ticklish?’

He nods, smiling, then bites his bottom lip. Oh, I want him. So. Much.

As if a switch is flicked, we tug and pull at each other’s garments until we’re both naked – save our shoes, which amuses us, but only for a moment. We slip them off, tossing them carelessly on the floor, and Tristan eases me onto the bed, quickly doing the gentlemanly thing to ensure we don’t start a family until we’re ready. When his attention is back on me, he moves up the length of my body, kissing me everywhere as he works his way up. I love and hate it at once, nearly bursting with want of him.

Then he’s inside me, and it’s *everything*. His eyes locked on mine, his scent, his beautiful mouth kissing me, the sounds of his throaty moans, the feel of him.

Everything else falls away.

* * *

Later, lying in his arms, I lift my hand and stare at the platinum band encircling my ring finger and next to it, a simple solitaire diamond in a bezel setting, a ring we chose together last week.

I’m *married*. To *Tristan*.

A surge of joy rushes through me and I twist within his embrace, angling my face so I can see him.

‘Hello, wife,’ he says, his fingertips trailing lazily along my shoulder.

‘Hello, husband.’

‘Oh, I like the sound of that.’

‘Me too.’ I regard him closely, taking in the contours of his handsome face, and the warmth and love in his eyes. I cannot *believe* he’s my husband. ‘It’s surreal, isn’t it?’ I ask.

He strokes my cheek. ‘It is a little. We can still take things reasonably slow, if you like.’

I laugh. ‘It’s a bit late for that, don’t you think?’

‘Well, yes but I meant other things, like keeping separate bedrooms for a while.’

I shake my head. ‘No need. I’m exactly where I want to be.’

‘I like the sound of that even more.’ He lands a soft kiss on my lips, and I snuggle into the crook of his arm.

‘So, when should we start trying for children?’ he asks.

‘You dork,’ I say, slapping him lightly on the chest.

The sound of his deep, wicked laugh reverberates through me as he pulls me closer. Yes, I am *exactly* where I want to be.

MORE FROM SANDY BARKER

We hope you enjoyed reading *Match Me If You Can*. If you did, **please leave a review**. If you'd like to gift a copy, this book is available to purchase in paperback, hardback, large print and audio.

Read on for a sneak peek at the next book in the Ever After Agency series!

Chapter One

Elle

I burst through the front door of our flat, fling my clutch onto the hallstand, and head straight to the sofa. I fall onto it backwards, stretching out, covering my face with my forearm. 'Gah!' I shout into the crook of my elbow.

My sister, Cassie, chuckles at me. 'More than two hours. That's a new record.'

I lift my arm and glare at her across the pouffe that moonlights as our coffee table. 'Were you timing me?'

'Always do,' she says, darting a glance my way, then returning to her laptop.

I toe off my (extremely uncomfortable) heels, then rub my feet against each other. Why do we torture ourselves with these bloody things? I eye the abandoned heels where they lie skewwhiff on the rug. *Oh, that's right*, I think, *because they're bloody gorgeous*.

'So, what was up with this one?' Cass murmurs, distracted.

I sit up. 'Are you working?' I ask, ignoring her question.

Her eyes flick my way again. 'Aren't I always?'

'It's Saturday night.' She shrugs. 'If you put that away, I'll give you all the juicy details.'

She snaps the laptop shut. 'Go. Actually, no, wait. I want wine for this.' She leaps up and goes to the kitchen and I flop back onto the sofa and stare at our incredibly high ceiling, a feature of living in a converted fabric factory. The fridge door opens. 'Rosé or Chardonnay?'

'Have we got any fizz?' I ask, too lazy to get up and look for myself.

'Consolation prize?'

'Exactly.' A yawn surprises me and I succumb to it, stretching my arms in one direction and my legs in the other. Cass reappears with a bottle of cheap fizz. We bought a dozen of from Aldi and two mismatched glasses. 'We need new—'

'Glasses,' she finishes. 'I know. You say that every time.'

'I only think of it when we're about to pour.'

'Me too.' Rip-twist-pop and she pours. I swear she could crack a bottle of fizz with her eyes closed. Cass is the master of celebrating even the smallest of wins, one of the things I love most about her.

'Here you are.' She holds out a glass and I sit up and squint at it. 'They're even pours, I promise.' This is an age-old argument, dating back to when I was four and Cass was seven and she'd always give me the smallest 'half' of the Mars Bar. I take the glass, holding it up to give a toast.

'To Marcus, a boring prat who ordered the banquet before I arrived so I couldn't ditch him before dessert.'

Cass chokes on her fizz, spluttering as she says, 'Wowser, that's an advanced dating manoeuvre.' She bangs on her chest and coughs some more.

'I know. Part of me was impressed – a *teeny* part.'

'Where did you meet this one?'

'On Flutter.'

'Flutter? You're making that up.'

'No.' I cross my heart with two fingers. 'Latest dating app for under-thirty-fives.'

'That leaves me out then,' she says, which makes me laugh – even if she were under thirty-five, Cass is not much of a dater. 'What? I *date*,' she says, her voice edged with defensiveness.

'The last time you went on a date, Harry Styles was still in One Direction,' I retort.

She shrugs, which for Cass, is an acknowledgement that I'm right.

I sip more fizz. It's not *terrible* but it's not good. Cass has us economising – just until we find the perfect partner for Bliss Designs and expand. Cass is all about 'expanding', as long as it's our design house, not our household budget.

She's the brains (i.e., the smart one). I'm the creative (i.e., the talented one).

According to many people in the world of fashion, I am everything from a 'wunderkind' (at the ripe age of thirty-two – hah!) to a 'fashion savant' to the 'next big thing'. One fashion journalist even described me as 'Westwood meets Chanel', which I've taken as a compliment, even if they intended it to mean 'derivative'.

Overall, flattering characterisations, but monikers touting my (supposed) brilliance have yet to translate into proper monetary success. To date, our achievements include making enough to hire a team and rent a space for our atelier, maintaining a steady (albeit small) clientele, and the odd celebrity endorsement. But our long-term goals are much loftier. This is where Cass' wizardry with money, marketing, and distribution channels comes in. We are 'building the brand' and 'solidifying our place in the market' and other businessy jargon.

Cass is also great at handling the imposter syndrome that pops up intermittently – mine, not hers. I doubt Cass has ever doubted herself in her entire life. She was bossing about our Sindy dolls before she could read.

I still can't believe she abandoned a thriving career as a marketing exec to 'take Bliss Designs to the next level'. Whatever that looks like. It's all rather nebulous in my mind, other than the twin goals of showing at Fashion Week (any of the big four would do – Milan, Paris, New York, London) and having my collection sold exclusively in a top-tier department store. Cassie says both are achievable but to me they remain waiflike, just out of reach.

And while Cassie loves spreadsheets and sale projections (truly – she'd tell you the same), I love front row seats at fashion shows and goodie bags. And clothes. I love, love, *love* clothes. I love designing them. I love styling them. I love wearing them. Clothes can make or break a day, a week, or a lifetime. Since I started playing dress-up from Mum's wardrobe (around the same time I was wrestling my big sister for the bigger 'half' of a chocolate bar), I've known I would be a fashion designer. My career is the fulfilling aspect of my life, making my love life pale even more in comparison.

I'm staring into space and when I 'come to', Cass is back on her laptop. 'Hey, you said you'd put that away.'

'I did and then you disappeared on me.'

‘I’m back now.’

She closes her laptop again, gently this time, and sets it on the pouffe. ‘I’m all ears. So, on a scale of one to ten – one being a politician and ten a potato – how boring was Marcus?’

I shake with laughter, barely managing, ‘At least a six. And the cheek of ordering the banquet, holding me hostage like that.’

‘So, what did he talk about?’

‘I’ll give you three guesses and the first two don’t count,’ I quip.

‘Ahh, so himself.’

‘Yup.’ I start listing off his traits on the fingers of my free hand. ‘Public school... King’s College—’

‘Say no more!’ Cass interjects.

‘But there *is* more. SO. MUCH. MORE.’

‘Skip ahead. I don’t need the life story of a man I’ll never meet—oh, unless...?’

‘Oh, no! I am *definitely* not seeing him again.’

‘So unattractive as well?’ she asks with a knowing smile.

I shrug. ‘Not unattractive, just not my type. He’s one of those blokes who spends half his time in the gym and then talks about it incessantly to his date. Rather, *at* his date.’

‘I think you underrated him before,’ she says.

‘*Underrated* or over?’

‘Whichever means he’s closer to a potato than a six.’

I gulp the rest of my fizz and hold out my empty glass. ‘More please.’ Cass tuts at me before obliging – her not-so-subtle way of telling me to ‘sip and savour’, another cost-cutting measure. Ignoring her, I take a large pull then cradle the glass in my lap. ‘I just wish...’

‘I know. You want someone like Leo,’ she says, completing my sentence by rote. This *may* not be the first time we’ve talked about this.

Leo. My first and only love. Bright, talented, hilarious, kind, loving, generous, and (oh so) sexy Leo. The benchmark against which every man since has been measured, each one falling woefully short. I just wish I knew where he was or how to get in touch with him.

We met on our first day at Kingston School of Art. He appeared to be lost and I stopped to offer directions. I told myself at the time it was because I was a good person and had attended Orientation Day, so I knew my way around. But really it was because he was heart-stoppingly gorgeous. The words, ‘Are you lost?’ were out of my mouth before I could second guess approaching someone that good-looking.

He smiled gratefully and my heart thudded inside my chest so loudly, I was sure he could hear it. We then discovered we were both studying fashion design and were heading to the same lecture hall. We were inseparable from that day on, our relationship making the leap from friendship to romance by the end of week two when he kissed me mid-laugh – he’d said something hilarious that I can’t for the life of me remember – and that was that. We were a couple and, together with Siena from Cape Town and Rufus from Shrewsbury, we formed a tight little gang.

But after four years together, Leo moved back to America, breaking the news the night before he flew out and obliterating my heart into a zillion pieces. After that, we lost touch – or rather, he ignored all my attempts to contact him and I eventually gave up. We didn't have a word for it back then, but now I'd call it 'ghosting'.

A few years ago, after a particularly dire first date, I started looking for him in earnest, but despite extensive online searches, I cannot, for the life of me, find him.

I've wandered off again – my mind does that – and I 'return' to the flat. Not surprisingly, Cass is back on her laptop. I don't blame her. She's heard more about Leo than about all the men I've dated since put together. 'So, what are you working on?' I ask, returning my focus to her.

'Oh, just a little side project,' she says cryptically. 'I'm not sure if anything will come if it yet, but I'll let you know if it does.' She sends me a dimpled smile. Cass got the dimples and the height and the chestnut waves. I got Mum's petite (short), boyish (flat-chested) frame, mousy hair that I dye blonde, and no dimples. Other than that, we look enough alike in the face that people can tell we're sisters.

Another yawn takes hold. 'Right,' I say standing and draining my glass. 'Bed.'

'Really? Because you're such sparkling company.'

'Says the woman with her nose in her laptop.' I take the empty glasses and the half-full bottle to the kitchen, then swing past Cass on the way to the bathroom. I wrap an arm around her shoulders and squeeze, smacking a kiss onto her cheek. 'Night.'

'Goodnight, Bean,' she says, calling me the childhood nickname I either loathe or love, depending how and why she says it.

* * *

Chapter 2

Poppy

'Good morning, Anita,' I say cheerfully as I sail past reception into our open-plan office.

'Welcome back,' she says with a smile and a wave.

'Thank you,' I sing-song.

'Good morning, the Ever After Agency. How may I direct your call?' she says, answering the phone.

'Hi, everyone,' I call out. Several heads lift at once and my fellow agents rush to greet me.

'Poppy! We missed you,' says Freya, throwing her arms around my neck. I return the hug one-armed.

'Welcome back, Poppy,' says George, leaning in for a cheek kiss. 'There's an invite in your inbox. Drinks after work.'

'I—'

'Nope, not taking no for an answer. You've been away two weeks—'

'Ten days,' I interject.

'And we have loads of gossip to catch up on,' he says, disregarding my correction.

‘What George really means is he wants all the honeymoon gossip,’ says Freya.

George swats at her. ‘I do not. That’s private business between Poppy and her smoking hot husband. Besides, they’ve been married for months now. Surely, that side of things has died down by now?’ He eyes me curiously.

‘I am not answering that,’ I tell him firmly.

He blinks at me with reluctant concession.

‘Anyway,’ says Nasrin, ‘welcome back to real life. You look...’ She scrutinises me and I half expect her to blurt out something like, ‘thoroughly shagged’ – George isn’t the only member of my work family who oversteps – but instead she says, ‘hot.’

‘Oh, thank you,’ I reply basking in the compliment.

‘No, I meant you look overheated. Are you sunburnt?’ She peers at me even more closely and I step around her.

‘Just a little pink,’ I say, miffed. ‘It was overcast on our last day, and I didn’t realise I’d been in the sun too long.’ At my desk, I relieve myself of my handbag, and retrieve my laptop from the locked bottom drawer. Thankfully, someone had the presence of mind to water my peace lily and its waxy leaves greet me cheerily.

‘Poppy?’

‘Yes, George?’

‘Drinks at five.’ He punctuates this mandate with a wagging finger, then wanders towards the kitchen.

‘Yes, George, got it. Five o’clock. And put the kettle on?’ I call after him. He throws a ‘thumbs up’ into the air. I start every workday with a pot of perfectly brewed tea.

Freya squeezes my arm. ‘So good to have you back,’ she says before heading to her desk.

Nasrin perches on the edge of my desk. ‘What can I do for you?’ I ask, giving her at least half of my attention as I boot up my laptop for the first time in nearly a fortnight. I can’t believe that only two days ago, I was in the Maldives. On honeymoon! With Tristan!

It was our first proper holiday together, as I’m not counting our quick visit to Tasmania to spend Christmas with Mum and Dad. That was a whirlwind trip so Tristan could meet my parents and I spent half of it enduring the cringey stories Mum told about my childhood – *with* photographic evidence – and the other half rescuing Tristan from Dad’s deep dive into the minutiae of farming apples. It was fun and lovely but very much not a holiday – especially as any time Tristan attempted to seduce me, I shooed him off. I was not having sex with my parents in the next room!

‘You’re lost in thought,’ says Nasrin, bang on. ‘I’ll come back in five.’

She’s right – my mind often wanders, especially when it comes to Tristan. Even now, months later, it still feels surreal when I consider the magnitude of marrying the client I was supposed match with a fake wife.

But even with three potential wives – one man-eating disaster, one desperate-to-be-a-mother near-miss, and one Goldilocks-style just-right match – it turned out that Tristan had fallen in love with me! And despite striving for professional distance (and failing) and with every nerve in my body telling me to steer clear (while simultaneously yearning for him), I fell in love right back.

And why wouldn't I? Tristan is caring, brilliant, funny, and so, so sexy. Just picturing him walking about our waterfront bungalow naked, which he did at least once a day while we were on honeymoon, elicits a sigh.

'Are you finished faffing yet?' Nasrin asks, returning to her perch on my desk.

I abandon the not-suitable-for-work thoughts of my husband, lean back in my office chair, and smile benevolently. 'Go for it.' Nas may be impatient (and at times, mildly irritating), but I am still riding a post-honeymoon high, and nothing can faze me today.

'I have something for you – a case,' says Nasrin.

Oh. I had hoped to take a day or two to get back into the rhythm of work, but there's something in her tone that captures my interest.

'What is it?'

'Long-lost love – can't forget him, can't get over him, can't find him.'

'Ooh, that sounds interesting,' I say, leaning forward, 'Go on.'

'Client's coming in tomorrow morning afternoon and—'

'Wait, are you asking for a second or...'

She huffs out a frustrated sigh. 'No, I wish. But I'm knee-deep in my parent-trap case and I need you to take the lead on this one. She's a referral from a friend, so I don't want to turn her down.'

'Ahh.'

'Please,' she adds as an afterthought.

'I'll happily consider taking the case.'

She nods. 'Brill. Thanks, Poppy.'

I think Nasrin may be ignoring the 'consider' part of my offer, as she's acting like I've said already yes. I choose my next words carefully. 'And if I do take the case, how about you're *my* second.'

'Oh! You sure? Our styles are a little... uh...'

'Different,' I finish. 'I know, but you *love* these,' I say, alluding to her fondness for 'lost love' cases. I sense that Nasrin has her own lurking in the past.

'I do but...'. She pauses, internal conflict blaring from her face. Nasrin is either on the precipice of a gigantic moan about the unfairness of the universe or... well, not. She reins it in. 'That would be fab, Poppy. I'll send through the invite.' She gets up from my desk and immediately turns back around. 'Oh, and our client, the one who's coming in, is actually our real client's sister.'

'Oh. So, we're keeping our efforts secret from the sister?'

'Exactly,' she says with a lift of her brows.

Ooh, this case already has me intrigued.

* * *

We hope you enjoyed this sneak peek at the next book in the Ever After Agency series!

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Sandy Barker is a bestselling author of destination romance. She's lived in the UK, the US and Australia, and has travelled extensively across six continents, with many of her travel adventures finding homes in her books.

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