

A romantic comedy from bestselling author

DG Rampton



**Earl
Tangled
with
Star**



EARL TANGLED WITH STAR

A ROMANTIC COMEDY

D. G. RAMPTON

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To Lily, my rock and my centre, with all my love.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

FOREWORD BY DG RAMPTON

CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 2

CHAPTER 3

CHAPTER 4

CHAPTER 5

CHAPTER 6

CHAPTER 7

CHAPTER 8

CHAPTER 9

CHAPTER 10

CHAPTER 11

CHAPTER 12

CHAPTER 13

CHAPTER 14

CHAPTER 15

CHAPTER 16

CHAPTER 17

CHAPTER 18

CHAPTER 19

CHAPTER 20

CHAPTER 21

CHAPTER 22

CHAPTER 23

CHAPTER 24

CHAPTER 25

CHAPTER 26

[CHAPTER 27](#)

[CHAPTER 28](#)

[CHAPTER 29](#)

[CHAPTER 30](#)

[CHAPTER 31](#)

[CHAPTER 32](#)

[CHAPTER 33](#)

[CHAPTER 34](#)

[CHAPTER 35](#)

[CHAPTER 36](#)

[CHAPTER 37](#)

[CHAPTER 38](#)

[CHAPTER 39](#)

[CHAPTER 40](#)

[CHAPTER 41](#)

[CHAPTER 42](#)

[CHAPTER 43](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[THE REGENCY GODDESSES SERIES](#)

[AN ADAPTATION OF NORTH AND SOUTH](#)

About This Book

Sometimes we need to slow down to allow destiny to catch up with us . . .

A new romantic comedy by bestselling author DG Rampton.

World-famous classical pianist Gabriela Baxtor-Huntington is exhausted after years of prioritising her career. All she wants is some time to herself, away from the limelight and her commitments. But when her PA persuades her to run off to London for a holiday – incognito – what ensues is more than she bargained for, and though rest is finally on the agenda, peace is another matter.

Notoriously private and crusty Scottish Earl Murdoch Barclay Buchanan is too busy to be saddled with baby-sitting his sister's friend. However, what starts off as a begrudging duty soon turns into something as unexpected as it is complicated.

With secrets on both sides, can two people from different worlds discover a love to overcome all obstacles?

Foreword by DG Rampton

There's a bit of a back story to **Earl Tangled with Star!** Twenty years ago I was flat-sharing with a film director and was inspired to write a film script about my adventures as a 20-something Australian living in London. This Rom-Com is NOT that story (not flamboyant enough, I'm sorry to say!) but it was inspired by that film-script and does contain some funny anecdotes that actually happened to me.

I've always wanted my writing to make my readers laugh and feel-good and I hope you find **Earl Tangled with Star** has all those elements and more. It's part romance, part comedy of manners, part comedy of errors and part love letter to London.

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Chapter 1

Once upon a time in the mid-2000s

The last piano string ceased to reverberate through the concert hall. There was a moment of silence, a heartbeat suspended in time . . .

And then the room erupted into applause.

Ela slowly rose from the piano and faced her audience. Despite her exhaustion, she couldn't stop a wide smile from forming. For almost a decade and a half, since the age of fourteen, she had performed on the greatest stages in the world, on almost every continent, but nothing could compare to the applause of a home crowd at the Sydney Opera House.

She gestured to the conductor and orchestra and clapped, thanking them for helping her create music that brought people joy. The audience followed her lead, but everyone knew the standing ovation was for her alone.

Love and adulation engulfed her.

She felt suddenly overwhelmed and tears stung her eyes.

She bowed her head, her signature long red-auburn hair falling forward like a curtain, surrounding her.

Euphoria carried her through the next few minutes of clapping, but the precious moments of communion that exist between artist and audience at the end of a performance are fleeting, and all too soon she was being escorted off stage.

Her exhaustion returned with a ferocity that took her breath away.

Susan Buchanan, her personal assistant, had been watching from the wings and as soon as Ela stepped out of view of the audience she positioned herself at her side.

Susan was a tall, sleek woman with a dark bob, a couple of years older than Ela, and at present she was sporting much the same look as a doberman guarding a bone. With her

customary mix of protectiveness and efficiency, she led Ela down the corridor towards her dressing room while fielding questions from the backstage crowd that grew around them.

Ela was grateful to be spared from having to do more than smile and sign autographs. She would have been hard-pressed to formulate any words; her brain was encased in fog and could only make out incoherent chatter.

Then the chatter coalesced into one annoyingly insistent voice.

‘Ela . . . *Ela!* Can you hear me?’ her manager demanded, piercing her abstraction.

‘Yes, Roger,’ she replied in a faraway voice.

‘They bloody *love* you! They’re still on their feet – listen to that applause!’

‘I didn’t play Rachmaninoff.’

‘Rachmaninoff? Who cares about Rachmaninoff! Your encore piece can be anything you choose.’

‘And I played it safe with Bach.’

‘Everyone loves Bach! Cheer up, squirt. It’s not as if anyone noticed.’

‘*I* noticed.’

He frowned at the despondency in her tone. ‘I don’t know why you’ve taken one bad review to heart. So your Rachmaninoff is not to everyone’s taste – so what? It doesn’t matter.’

Roger opened the door to her dressing room and ushered her and Susan inside, shutting the door on the well-wishers trailing behind them.

The room was full of yellow roses.

Ela suppressed a sigh.

Every Gabriela Baxtor-Huntington fan worth their salt knew that they were her favourite, ever since she had gushed

about them in an interview as a teenager. Her tastes had evolved years ago, of course, but that was another niggling trope about her that she didn't have the energy to tackle.

She eyed the flowers with distaste and vaguely wished she had the gall to de-head every single one.

'The only thing that should matter,' Roger continued, 'is that the audience loves you. And they do – they can't get enough of you! It's a bloody shame this is your last night. We could've easily sold out another performance . . .' He gave her a look she recognised with foreboding. '. . . actually, I have some great news on that score. The promoter told me he could pull some strings and secure a slot for us next week, if we wanted it.'

Ela regarded him with an appalled expression.

'Only for one night,' he added quickly.

'Roger, I thought we agreed? I need a break. We've been on a crazy touring schedule for *years*. I'm drained! You know I want to try my hand at composing, but every time I get a free moment to myself all I can think about is sleep. And then there's the tour of Asia in a couple of months. You've packed in the dates so tightly—'

'No one deserves time off more than you,' he interjected, 'but it's the Sydney Opera House! And it's only three more nights.'

'Three? You just said one!' She followed this exclamation with a sneeze.

'The promoter wanted three, but I told him it was impossible. You can only do one . . . two at most.'

Ela shook her head in exasperation. She feared the pull of Roger's personality would eventually prove impossible to withstand, as always.

'This is the career you always wanted, squirt,' he continued, pressing his advantage. 'This is what we've been working towards for the last thirteen years.'

Ela sneezed again, then walked over to the dressing table, sat down, and lay her head on the cluttered surface. She could feel a cold coming on.

‘You can finish this discussion later,’ Susan said in her clipped English private school accent. Ela had always thought she sounded like Tilda Swinton, apart from when her emotions were heightened, then tones of her Scottish upbringing filtered through.

Taking Roger’s arm, Susan propelled him towards the door. ‘Be a darling and give us some privacy. I have to get her ready for the cocktail party.’

‘Yes, of course,’ he agreed immediately. ‘We can’t be late for that! The Prime Minister has to be the last to arrive. I’ll see you both in the limo. And don’t worry about the press waiting outside; just give them the Gabriela smile they all love so much. No need to talk. They know if they want a comment they get it from me, okay, squirt?’

Ela nodded without lifting her head off the dressing table.

One of the perks of Roger’s domineering style of management was that he handled all her press. She hardly ever had to say a word for herself.

‘Oh, and you should know,’ Roger added, as if it was an afterthought, ‘I’ve invited the promoter to join us in the limo so we can continue talking about the new dates.’

Ela groaned and raised her head to watch his departure in the dressing-table mirror.

Her eyes found Susan’s in the reflection, and she smiled crookedly. ‘Thank you. Even if it’s only a reprieve.’

‘You need to be firm with him,’ said Susan, walking over to give her shoulder a squeeze.

‘I always mean to be. It just never turns out that way.’

‘You don’t need Roger’s permission to take a holiday. Lord knows the man could talk the Queen into thinking she’s a commoner! But try to remember that he works for *you* –

you're the boss. You've let him rule the roost for too long. You're no longer fourteen. It's time to put him in his sodding place! And you're going to start tonight.'

'How?' Ela sighed.

'You're going to take a break, whether he likes it or not.'

Ela smiled faintly.

When it came to mothering her, Susan's ruthless streak was as pronounced as Roger's. Between the two of them, they managed her career and her life. And, although she knew they had her best interests at heart – for which she was immensely grateful! – a few weeks away from the both of them would be a holiday in itself.

'What's the point?' she asked wearily. 'You and I both know he'll only follow me and talk me into coming back. Remember the trip to Zermatt last year? One day's skiing before I found myself on a plane to Berlin for a TV appearance.'

'He's not going to find you where I'm sending you,' Susan said forcefully.

'Is that meant to sound sinister? Because if it is, I'm too tired to care.'

'It's meant to pique your interest.'

'You're going to have to spell it out for me. My brain is fried.'

'I'll give you a clue. What's your favourite fantasy?'

'I'd rather not say, thank you very much!'

'Not sexual, you wally! What are you always telling me you dream about?'

'Time to myself, no commitments?'

'Bingo!' Susan smiled and flung open the doors to the walk-in wardrobe with a flourish. 'Ta-da!'

Ela's eyes widened in surprise as they landed on a neatly stacked pyramid of her Louis Vuitton luggage.

'Good grief, Su, you've already packed for me?'

'I have indeed.'

'But I haven't said yes to anything!'

'You know you will.'

Ela exhaled, too tired to keep resisting. 'Dare I ask where I'm going?'

'I'll tell you in the taxi.' Susan picked up a tacky blonde wig that had been lying on top of the luggage and brought it over to Ela. 'But first, we have to get you out of the building without anyone noticing that distinctive red mane of yours!'

Chapter 2

Half an hour later, Ela found herself seated beside Susan in a taxi on the way to the airport. Her exhaustion was still there, but she was starting to feel more buoyant, as if a great weight was slowly being lifted off her.

‘You know Roger is going to freak out when we don’t show up in the limo,’ she told Susan.

‘One step ahead of you! I’ve already texted him to say you’re throwing up all over the place – probably from a stomach flu – and I’m going to sneak you back to your apartment before anyone can see the state you’re in. I quite cleverly pointed out we don’t want anyone drawing conclusions that their favourite wholesome star is actually a wild party girl.’

Ela laughed. ‘I wish! Actually, I don’t . . . but I wish that I did wish it. It would make me more fascinating, at least.’

‘You’re marvellously fascinating when you’re not exhausted!’ said Susan, giving her arm a pat. ‘You’ve lost a little of your cheeky sparkle recently, but it will come back.’

‘More than a little,’ said Ela, with a twisted smile. ‘I feel like one of those sparklers after it burns out – a withered husk with no energy left to ignite.’

‘What do you expect after the craziness of the last few years? I’d be a jabbering mess if I had to live under the stress of all your commitments.’

‘I *am* a jabbering mess. On the inside.’ Realising she was still wearing the ugly blonde wig, Ela took it off and tossed it on the seat. ‘Okay, Inspector Clouseau, it’s time to tell me why you’ve kidnapped me and what you plan to do with me.’

‘You’re flying to London,’ said Susan. ‘My brother is going to pick you up from the airport and put you up at his apartment. It will be a safe place for you to stay for a couple of months of R & R.’

Ela paused in the task of unpinning her hair from its tight coil about her head.

‘You never told me you had a brother!’ she exclaimed, taken aback.

‘Didn’t I? Well, I do,’ replied Susan offhandedly.

‘Won’t he mind me staying with him for such a long time?’

‘Not in the slightest! He’s got a divine penthouse in Kensington that he rattles about in all by himself. And he’s hardly ever there – he’s either working or up in Scotland.’

‘Su, please tell me you didn’t bamboozle the poor man into agreeing to host me?’

‘Of course not! He offered willingly.’

Ela wasn’t entirely convinced, but, as always, it was easier to allow herself to be swept up in Susan’s plans than to resist them. And she couldn’t deny that most of the time Susan’s instincts were spot on.

‘That’s very kind of him, considering we’ve never met. I’ll have to find some way to thank him . . . A dinner somewhere special? Nobu, or Gordon Ramsey’s, perhaps?’

‘Not his cup of tea. He doesn’t like going anywhere high-profile.’ Susan hesitated. ‘The thing is . . . he got burnt in the press years ago and, these days, prefers not to draw attention to himself.’

‘Press?’

‘I can’t go into details – he’s still terribly touchy about it – but he got mixed up in something. A twisted version of his life was front-page news and free for public consumption for months. It was a horrid time.’ Susan shuddered.

‘Can I know his name?’

‘Murdoch.’

‘Murdoch Buchanan – has a nice ring to it.’

‘Actually, he’s known as Murdoch Barclay in London.’

‘He’s your half-brother?’

‘No. Buchanan is our family name.’ At Ela’s expectant look, she sighed. ‘It’s a long story; I won’t bore you with it now.’

‘This is getting more and more intriguing!’ said Ela, with a wry smile. ‘I’m actually starting to look forward to meeting this mysterious brother you’ve been keeping under wraps.’

‘I think you’ll warm to him. He’s definitely one of the good guys, but . . .’

‘But what?’

‘Well, you should know he’s not exactly brimming with charm.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘Just managing your expectations . . . He’s not a chatterbox, especially around new people.’

‘That’s hardly a bad thing.’

‘It’s not *bad*, but sometimes he can come across as standoffish. And he’s been known to get a tad crotchety on occasion. People – women, mostly – go a bit bonkers around him, and he’s learnt to protect himself from unwanted attentions.’

‘How good-looking is he?’

Susan shrugged. ‘He’s not bad, but it’s his *other* charms that are the problem.’

‘You just said he doesn’t have any charm,’ Ela pointed out.

‘I meant don’t expect him to be charming to *you*.’

‘You’re being as clear as mud!’

‘Don’t worry. Like I said, you’ll hardly see him. He has work commitments in Scotland and spends most of the year up

there, so he might not even be around a lot of the time . . . Oh, and I should warn you he has no idea who you are.’

‘Doesn’t he know we work together?’

Susan smiled pointedly. ‘I work for you.’

‘It doesn’t feel like that most of the time,’ Ela returned with a teasing look.

‘Careful – just remember whose helping you break free! And no, I haven’t told him we work together, not that he has the slightest idea what I do. He’s still getting over the fact I didn’t do something with my MBA. He was a frightful bore lecturing me over it! So when I started working for you, I couldn’t help needling him by telling him I was pursuing a career as a personal assistant, and in his world, that meant a glorified secretary,’ laughed Susan.

‘You’re so much more than a PA these days! Business adviser, life coach, bodyguard, stylist. You cover so much ground I don’t even know what title to give you.’

‘You pay me a ridiculous amount of money to do something I love – I don’t care a fig about my title!’

Ela reached out and took hold of her hand, her exhaustion making her emotional and teary.

‘I don’t know what I would do without you, Su.’

‘Don’t get sappy on me.’ Susan squeezed her hand. ‘Us Brits like a stiff upper lip.’

‘I’ve noticed.’ Ela gave her a wobbly smile. ‘So . . . what have you told your brother about me?’

‘That you’re a good friend who needs a break from a stressful job. That’s it. You can have two whole months to yourself, completely incognito, and be as normal and lazy as you want.’

‘Sounds like heaven,’ sighed Ela, ‘but I really don’t see this playing out well. Roger is going to have an apoplexy.’

‘So?’

‘How are you going to stop him from coming after me?’

‘He’s a world-class PR whore, bless him, but he’s not omnipotent. I’ll tell him you’ve gone off by yourself for a few weeks and you refused to tell me where.’

‘And what about all the organising we still need to do for the PETA charity gala and auction?’

‘Leave it to me! It’s not until October, and I’ll be in London myself in a few weeks to finalise everything with the PETA committee. If you have any last-minute instructions, we can discuss them then.’

‘But . . . I haven’t even got my passport,’ Ela protested weakly.

Susan smiled and pointed to the carry-on on the seat between them.

‘Passport, tickets and laptop are in the outside pocket. Inside, I’ve packed your cashmere tracksuit for the plane, an outfit change for when you arrive, a couple of novels, snacks, and your iPod. I’ve also packed a UK mobile phone and SIM. I’m the only one who knows the number, and I’ve no intention of calling you unless it’s urgent. I suggest you switch off your other phone. Knowing Roger, he’s got a tracker on it.’

‘How long have you been planning this?’ asked Ela, incredulous.

‘Since the night Roger pulled you out of your parents’ anniversary dinner.’

‘For the phone interview with *Classical Music Magazine*?’

‘The conniving ass scheduled it behind my back. It was the straw that broke the camel’s back . . . and I’m talking about a ravishing, svelte camel, not one of those lumpy, smelly ones.’

‘I hate to break it to you, but they’re all lumpy and smelly,’ chuckled Ela. ‘But, Su, my parents’ anniversary dinner was two weeks ago. You never breathed a word!’

‘What can I say? I’m a devious woman.’

‘You should have told me.’

‘And have you second-guessing everything and talking yourself out of it? Trust me, you didn’t have the headspace to deal with it. This way, everything is taken care of. All you have to do is get on the plane . . . oh, and watch the DVD I put in your laptop.’

Ela threw her an amused look tinged with apprehension. ‘Please tell me it’s not porn.’

‘Do you want it to be porn?’ Susan asked archly.

‘No!’

‘Then you’re in luck – it’s not porn. It’s *Roman Holiday*.’

‘Audrey Hepburn?’

‘The one and only. Perfect inspiration for you! Take a leaf out of Princess Ann’s book and enjoy your freedom while it lasts. I’ve seen the schedule Roger has lined up for the Asia tour. It’s brutal.’

Ela exhaled loudly and rested her head back against the seat.

The idea of some R & R was more than tempting. And since Susan had taken the decision out of her hands, there was nothing to do but go with it.

Chapter 3

Murdoch Barclay was pissed off.

He should have been in Soho this morning, going through some last-minute changes with the architect before the grand opening of Scott's, his private members' club. Instead, he was driving to the airport in the rain on an errand for his sister, who seemed to have nil appreciation of the demands on his time.

As if she could hear his thoughts, his mobile phone on the passenger seat buzzed, and Susan's name lit up the screen.

He answered the phone bad-temperedly. 'Damn it, Susan! I'm on my way!'

'You're late!' she snapped back.

'I'm not!'

'Ela's plane landed forty minutes ago!'

'And it will take her another forty minutes to get out of the damned terminal. But if you don't think I can do a good enough job playing chauffeur and baby-sitter to your friend, then by all means, feel free to fire me.'

'Don't be beastly. I wouldn't entrust Ela to anyone but you.'

'I'm honoured,' he said dryly, 'but we both know this kind of thing is more up Lesley's street – why didn't you ask her instead of me?'

Susan's sigh came down the line. 'She hates me at the moment.'

'Rubbish. She couldn't hate anyone, let alone her own sister.'

'Half-sister. And right now she's probably celebrating the fact that it's only half.'

'What happened? You're usually thick as thieves.'

There was a short silence. 'Has she said anything to you?'

‘No. If I didn’t know you were avoiding her, I wouldn’t have known you’d fallen out. What did you do?’

‘Why must it be my fault?’

‘Isn’t it?’

‘Not entirely,’ huffed Susan. ‘If you must know, it had to do with *you*. So actually, it’s *your* fault. If you hadn’t sworn me to secrecy about what happened twelve years ago, I wouldn’t have had to be horrid and lie to her.’

‘Why in god’s name were you talking about *that*?’ he asked irritably.

‘You’ve clearly forgotten, but it was the anniversary of Father’s death the other week. Actually, if I’m being honest, I’d forgotten too. But you know Lesley! She has a memory like an elephant when it comes to dates, and she called to check on me.’

There was a pause.

‘And . . .?’ he prompted.

‘And . . . one thing led to another, and the subject of the scandal came up. She could tell I was lying when I said I didn’t know anything about it.’

‘How exactly did one thing lead to another?’

There was another pause.

‘Susan!’

‘Oh, alright! It may have been a *little* bit my fault. She caught me at a bad moment, and I didn’t have it in me to pretend to care about the old bugger. I told her I found it difficult to mourn a man who threw his own son under the bus. That’s all I said! Unfortunately, she was like a shark sensing blood. She kept asking me if it had anything to do with the scandal. I told her no, but she didn’t believe me . . . Don’t be angry.’

‘I’m not angry,’ he said in a resigned voice. ‘I’m actually surprised you’ve kept it to yourself this long.’

‘Thanks for the vote of confidence! It’s a stupid secret, in any case. Father’s been dead for years – what’s the point in keeping up the pretence?’

‘You know Mother still reveres his memory. I won’t take that away from her.’

Susan made a noise to show she was unimpressed with his reasoning.

‘And I gave him my word,’ he added doggedly.

‘He should never have asked it of you!’

‘You shouldn’t have been eavesdropping.’

‘Trust me, I wish I’d never overheard a dratted word! But that’s beside the point. What should I do about Lesley?’

‘I’ll try to smooth things over.’

A car skidded on the wet road and swerved dangerously into Murdoch’s lane, causing him to hit the brakes.

He swore.

‘Do try not to have an accident,’ remarked Susan. ‘I need you to get to Ela in one piece.’

‘Your wish is my command,’ he ground out.

Susan laughed. ‘Don’t be grumpy.’

He grunted. ‘What have you told your friend about me? I hope you didn’t go into detail. If I have to share my apartment with this girl—’

‘Of course I didn’t go into detail! Strange as it may seem, I don’t go around telling everyone my brother is an earl with a whopping big castle in Scotland. I learnt my lesson in boarding school, thank you very much! I don’t think I made a single friend who didn’t want to use me to get to you for one reason or another.’

‘I know,’ he said gruffly. ‘I’m sorry you had a hard time of it on my account.’

‘Don’t be daft! I’ve no regrets. But that’s not my life anymore. I’m not Lady Susan in Australia, I’m just Susan. And my friends here don’t even know you exist.’

‘Much obliged to you.’

She chuckled. ‘There’s no winning with you, is there? At least Ela now knows about you. Please take good care of her for me. And hurry up and get to the airport! She’s never flown anywhere alone before, and I don’t want her to feel anxious.’

‘Christ, who have you saddled me with? She sounds like a bloody twelve-year-old!’

‘Don’t bark at me! And for god’s sake, don’t bark at Ela. She’s led a sheltered existence. If you scare her off, I’ll never forgive you. She’s a sweetheart – not at all used to dealing with bad-tempered Scotsmen.’

‘You’re a colossal pain in the backside, you know that? I thought I was safe when you moved to the other side of the planet. You can’t imagine how thrilled I am to discover you’re as outrageously demanding as ever.’

‘But you love me regardless?’

‘I don’t love you.’ He broke into an unwilling smile. ‘At most, I have a niggling affection for you.’

‘I love you too.’

‘Pest! I’m hanging up now.’

He ended the call and threw the phone back onto the seat, shaking his head. His sisters were the bane of his existence, topped only by his mother.

Outside Heathrow airport, Ela stood to one side of the taxi queue, only partially protected from the driving rain and wind.

She rubbed her hands together to keep them warm as she surveyed the cars driving past.

She had been waiting for almost half an hour for Susan's brother to arrive, and in that time had earned herself more than her fair share of looks. She assumed it was the pile of Louis Vuitton luggage – which a helpful gentleman had stacked onto a trolley for her – and she wished she owned something less conspicuous.

It never occurred to her that a heart-shaped face, high cheek bones, and luminous dark brown eyes might hold their own attractions, not to mention red-auburn hair that fell halfway down her back in waves.

Before her plane had landed, she had changed into the outfit Susan had packed in her carry-on in preparation for the summer weather: a floral dress that reached her knees and a pair of wedge Stella McCartney sandals. Unfortunately, the thick cloud cover overhead didn't allow the August sun to cast any warming effect on the inhabitants below, and if Susan's brother didn't arrive soon, she would have to go digging around in her luggage for more layers.

She pulled out a serviette she had filched from Caffè Nero (as she had run out of tissues hours ago) and blew her nose. The dismal weather wasn't helping her cold, and she suspected she currently bore a striking resemblance to Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.

She rubbed her right wrist absentmindedly as she watched another car approach. It was going too fast to be Susan's brother.

Just as that thought was passing through her head, the car sped through a deep puddle nearby and sent up a spray of water.

Ela froze.

She was drenched from head to toe.

Tendrils of wet hair were plastered to her head, and the front of her dress clung coldly to her body.

She took out her serviette again and dabbed at her face, muttering to herself about the appalling lack of manners of people who drive through puddles close to pedestrians.

A young man in a suit and carrying a briefcase, who had witnessed her dousing, detached himself from the taxi queue and came over to offer her his handkerchief.

Ela thanked him in her friendly fashion – oblivious to male admiration, as always – and accepted the handkerchief. They stood chatting for a few minutes while she dried herself off as best she could; then, as he was offering her a ride to her destination, a black Range Rover with tinted windows pulled up alongside them.

A man in his mid-thirties, built like a rugby player, got out of the car and walked over to them.

‘Ela?’ he asked in a deep, gravelly voice.

Had she been in a more receptive state, she might have noticed that not even a flourishing beard could hide his rugged good looks.

But she wasn’t, and she didn’t.

She was simply grateful he hadn’t stood her up. He could have been Quasimodo, and she still would have greeted him with delight.

She was, however, vaguely aware that he reminded her of a prowling lion – probably because his beard and tousled shoulder-length hair were a dark tawny colour.

‘Yes! That’s me!’ she said eagerly, her voice nasally from her cold and the air-conditioning on the plane. ‘You must be Susan’s brother. Thank you so much for picking me up!’ She put out her hand, beaming at him.

Murdoch was momentarily taken aback by her exuberance.

He mechanically took her hand and shook it. It felt small in his. And very cold. He was struck by the surprising urge to

take hold of the other one as well and warm them both up for her.

She had the look of a bedraggled, shivering puppy in need of a home, and he supposed most people would have found her endearing.

He, of course, wasn't one of them.

A slight frown entered his gaze when he noticed the way her wet dress clung to her every curve. He wasn't at all surprised she had attracted a wannabe knight in shining armour . . . or pervert, more likely.

He turned a hard gaze on her companion.

And kept it there. In silence.

The man stammered out an explanation for his presence. Murdoch continued to glare at him, and he hurriedly returned to the taxi queue, barely glancing at Ela in goodbye.

Ela watched his sudden departure with surprise.

'Is all this yours?' Murdoch asked curtly, with a nod at her luggage.

Ela looked back at him and smiled.

'Yes, I'm afraid so. It's rather a lot, isn't it? Susan's idea of packing involves a mountain of options, and by the time I realised it was impractical to bring it all with me, I was at the airport, and . . . uh . . . it was too late . . .'

She petered out under the weight of his disapproving scrutiny.

Murdoch grunted, and loaded himself up with several bags and suitcases.

'They're fake!' Ela called after him as he carried them to the boot.

Why had she felt the need to say that?

It was a lie, of course. The whole Louis Vuitton set was custom-made especially for her in an environmentally friendly faux leather. She'd spent so much of her life living out of a

suitcase that she had wanted to treat herself to luggage that was as beautiful as it was functional.

What did it matter if Susan's brother thought she could afford to spend her money on luxury items?

But it did matter. Something about his expression had made her think he was judging her, and for once, all she wanted was to blend in and be normal.

She opened the car door and sat down in the passenger seat, sighing with relief to be finally out of the cold wind.

She closed her eyes.

After a few moments, she opened them again . . . and recoiled.

Murdoch was glaring at her through the open car door.

Realising her mistake, she quickly got out and went to help him with the luggage.

'I-I'm so sorry! Autopilot,' she explained, blushing. It seemed people catering to your every need for a decade wasn't conducive to fostering 'normal'.

After almost an hour of navigating London congestion, Murdoch parked the car in front of an imposing Victorian mansion block in Kensington. It was the kind of stone and red-brick building whose impeccable design and unobtrusive elegance comes with a hefty price tag.

They had barely spoken since leaving the airport.

Ela had dozed in the car for most of the trip, and when she had been awake, Murdoch had seemed to prefer not to talk. At one point, she had woken to find his jacket draped around her, and they had exchanged a few words when she had thanked

him. But, for the most part, her tentative overtures to begin a conversation were unsuccessful.

She had actually enjoyed the silence. Sitting beside her taciturn companion felt oddly comfortable and safe . . . like being in a sheltered harbour after turbulent seas.

Wow, she must be more exhausted than she realised to be waxing poetic.

It took two trips (in a surprisingly small lift for such a grand building) before they at last managed to move all her luggage into Murdoch's apartment, which turned out to be a stunning penthouse that took up the entire top floor of the building.

Even Ela's tired brain could appreciate that the space was special. Light-filled rooms with floor-to-ceiling sash windows, moulded high ceilings, oak parquet floors with inlaid marble detailing, and comfortable-looking modernist furniture in muted shades and natural materials. The whole place looked like it had been styled for a photoshoot for *Architectural Digest*.

Standing amongst all the finery, she felt mousy and grubby. She could have murdered for a bar of soap and a hot shower.

'Thank you for picking me up,' she said, dabbing at her nose with the now limp serviette. 'And for having me stay with you.'

'You don't have to keep thanking me,' Murdoch said sharply, sounding harassed.

Ela tried to conceal her crestfallen expression by searching for something inside her handbag, but it was impossible to miss, and Murdoch felt like a first-class brute tearing wings off butterflies.

'I'm happy to help out a friend of Susan's,' he said in a gentler tone. 'London isn't a place to face alone after a 24-hour flight.'

She looked up at him shyly and would have thanked him again, but he was already heading down the corridor with a suitcase in each hand.

He showed her to her room, pointed out her en suite bathroom, then brought in the remainder of her luggage.

As he put down the last of the bags, her worn-out, hesitant smile prodded something in him, and he asked: ‘Would you like a tea? It will warm you up.’

‘That would be lovely, thank you.’

‘I’ll add sugar. You look like you need it.’

He walked out without waiting for a response, and Ela was left alone to study her minimalist room.

She wasn’t surprised to see that the grey tones of the interior mirrored those of the world outside. She had always found that Londoners embraced the shades of grey of their environment with enthusiastic stoicism.

There was nothing personal in the room to hold her attention, and she gravitated towards the large sash windows that took over one whole wall of the room.

Her immediate view was of the carved stone parapet of the mansion block a metre away, reaching halfway up the windows. Beyond, she could see over the rooftops of the adjacent buildings, all the way to the City.

A Mary Poppins view.

For the first time in a long while, she felt anonymous and free of the anxiety that often stalked her waking hours.

She looked down at her right wrist and began to rub it. Well, perhaps she wasn’t free of *all* anxiety.

Sighing, she walked over to the bed and sat down.

When Murdoch returned with her tea a few minutes later, he found Ela fast asleep, curled up on her side and snoring softly.

He put down the mug on the bedside table and studied her.

It was odd having such a delicate, feminine creature in his apartment. She looked out of place amongst all the dark, masculine tones.

Like sunshine breaking through storm clouds.

Disgusted with himself, he shook his head to dislodge such a frivolous thought.

He turned to leave, but his gaze snagged on her damp hair. And dress.

He had to do something or she'd catch pneumonia. Susan would never forgive him.

He picked up the thick braid that lay over her shoulder and started to undo it, watching her face to see if she would waken, but her rhythmic snoring continued unabated.

She had plaited her hair in the car to keep it from getting tangled while it was wet. He knew this inconsequential detail because she had shared it with him; just as she had shared a dozen other thoughts that had come into her head during the times she had been awake.

How the drizzly London weather always made her feel cosy.

How she could never eat on aeroplanes.

How she couldn't wait to spend a day at the National Art Gallery.

How she was obsessed with 'Mr Brightside' by the Killers.

The list went on.

He'd never before met someone who seemed so incapable of keeping a thought to themselves. He should have found it irritating, and the fact that he didn't baffled him.

He unplaited her hair briskly, forcing his mind to concentrate on all he needed to accomplish that day. When he

was finished, he laid out the strands across the pillows so they fanned out behind her and would dry more quickly.

Fiery, beautiful shades of dark red glowed against the white of the linen.

He looked away and scowled.

There was no way in hell he was going anywhere near her dress, no matter how damp it was.

He tucked the duvet around her as tightly as possible so she wouldn't be able to kick it off. Then he walked over to the heating control panel on the wall, put the temperature up to 30°C, and shut the door behind him.

Chapter 4

A loud ringing woke Ela with a start.

She had no idea where she was. Had she fallen asleep in a sauna?

No. She remembered now.

It wasn't a sauna. She was in a bedroom in Murdoch's apartment. But why was it so hot?

She blinked at the clock on the bedside table until she could bring it into focus.

1.38 a.m.

Had she really slept through the whole day?

It dawned on her that her phone was ringing.

She tried to get up to find it, but for some unexplainable reason, the duvet was tucked around her so tightly that she had to thrash about before she could escape its clutches.

Stumbling to her feet at last, she went in search of her handbag.

'Hello? . . . Mum? How did you get this number? . . . Yes, Su is lovely . . . I'm not sick, just a little blocked up . . . Yes, I'm eating properly . . . Okay, I'll buy some vitamins . . . I'd rather not say. If Roger calls, you can tell him truthfully you don't know where I am . . . Of course I trust you! . . . I *do* . . . Mum, okay! I'm in London. I'm taking a break . . . Yes, finally . . . No, please don't send me underwear, I'm sure they have Bonds here . . . Mum, it's the middle of the night, can I call you tomorrow? . . . I know, I should've put the phone on silent . . . Love you too. Kiss dad for me . . . bye . . . bye.'

Ela threw the phone into her handbag and collapsed back onto the bed with a groan, desperate for sleep to claim her again. But after years of flying around the world, she knew she wouldn't get back to sleep without first eating something. She

reluctantly got back onto her feet and made her way out of the room and down the corridor to the kitchen.

The space was large and open-plan, connecting with the living area. She put on the lights and was confronted with a mix of tall cupboards and drawers in a matte navy finish, which presented a uniform front and, dauntingly, gave no indication of where the fridge might be.

She began opening all the cupboard doors until, at last, she found an inbuilt fridge. The first thing that caught her eye as she peered inside was a partially eaten roast chicken.

She grimaced.

Scanning the shelves, she couldn't see anything she fancied. Murdoch didn't appear to rate vegetables.

Eventually, she found two ramekins, side by side, with handwritten labels, one reading 'Pâté' and the other 'Black Pudding'. Giving the pâté a wide berth, she picked up the black pudding. She would have preferred something green and salad-y, but she supposed a sugar hit was better than nothing.

She found a spoon in one of the drawers, and then, leaning against a concrete kitchen island with eyes half-closed, ate her way through the black pudding. It was probably lovely, but her head cold wasn't allowing her to taste anything.

She returned to her room and, not bothering to close the door, crawled into bed. She was asleep the instant her head hit the pillow and so didn't see a ginger cat follow her into the room and settle down beside her.

The next morning, after a long shower and a change of clothes, Ela felt almost human as she emerged from her room. She had washed and blow-dried her hair, after first spending an hour undoing knots (how had her braid come undone in the

night?), and had put on a pair of jeans and a white high-necked top.

She made her way towards the living area, where she could hear Murdoch talking. He sounded annoyed. She hadn't noticed yesterday, but amongst his posh tones she could now detect the hint of a Scottish burr on the occasional word.

He was on his phone, his back to her, as she walked into the kitchen.

' . . . I've got too much on at the moment to be saddled with baby-sitting as well . . . I rang her last night. She said there was plenty of room at your place, so I was thinking . . . '

Catching sight of his guest, he broke off. 'Katherine, I have to go. Talk later.' Hanging up, he faced Ela. 'How's the cold?'

'Better, thank you,' she replied, with a tentative smile.

There was an awkward pause.

Murdoch remembered why he hated small talk. 'Sure you're okay? You were out for two days.'

'*Two?*' she exclaimed.

He nodded. 'I checked on you a couple of times; left you some water.'

Ela vaguely remembered drinking from a glass she'd found on the bedside table before sleep had dragged her back into unconsciousness.

'I can't believe I slept for two days.'

'You must have needed it.'

'Yes, I suppose so.' She laughed lightly. 'It was the best sleep I've had in a long time . . . only I kept having the strangest dream. I was being smothered by a furry orange pillow.'

Something rubbed against her shin and she jerked in alarm. 'Oh!'

A large ginger cat stared up at her.

‘The furry orange pillow would be Madge,’ Murdoch said, his eyes crinkling faintly. ‘She’s used to sleeping on your bed. Keep the door closed if you don’t want her in your room.’

‘So, you’re the culprit,’ said Ela, crouching down to scratch behind the cat’s ears. ‘You’re lucky you’re cute or we’d be having strong words about personal space and hygiene.’

‘Are you hungry?’ asked Murdoch.

‘No, thanks. I raided your fridge in the night and had some chocolate mousse thingy – hope that was okay?’

Puzzled, he opened the fridge and looked inside. ‘Chocolate mousse?’

‘It was next to the pâté’. Black pudding, or something like that.’

For the first time since she had met him, a smile broke across his face.

He really was remarkably attractive, she realised . . . in that strong-featured, muscular kind of way that fired up all the archaic centres in a woman’s brain and took her back to caveman times. And, if she wasn’t mistaken, there were dimples hiding under his beard.

She decided she liked his smile. He looked less like a feral lion and more like a teddy bear . . . A blue-eyed, grisly teddy bear with a six-pack, judging by that cycling jersey.

She looked away.

She didn’t want *any* complications over the next two months. And from what Susan had told her, the poor man didn’t need yet another woman lusting after him.

Not that she was lusting!

It was simply a shock to discover that she found him attractive. Since puberty, she could count on one hand the number of men she’d found appealing, and that included her Michael J. Fox phase in the 80s.

‘The club’s chef must have been having a bad day,’ said Murdoch, interrupting her thoughts. ‘Black pudding is meant to be savoury.’

‘Is it? I couldn’t really taste much because of my cold. Why is it called pudding if it’s savoury?’

‘Tradition.’ He picked up a Bialetti coffeepot off the stove and held it up. ‘Just made coffee – want some?’

‘Oh god, yes!’ she groaned. ‘Black, no sugar would be lovely.’

She sat down on one of the polished-steel stools around the kitchen island and accepted the cup Murdoch handed her.

She breathed in the aroma and, after taking a sip, sighed with pleasure.

Catching Murdoch’s gaze on her, she said self-consciously: ‘Nothing tastes as good as first coffee of the day.’

He grunted, possibly in agreement, and then his phone rang, and he turned away to answer it.

‘Did the whisky shipment arrive? Good . . . Yes, I saw the article. The press was bound to get wind of it. Nothing remains confidential in this damned town . . . As long as we offer our members privacy inside the club, that’s all I care about. I’ll see you shortly.’

He hung up and looked back at Ela.

She was drinking her coffee, eyes closed. Feeling his gaze on her again, she opened them.

‘Work?’ she asked.

‘Yes. Sorry. Phone never stops ringing these days.’

‘Please don’t apologise. Susan warned me you were very busy. I’ll make sure to keep out of your way. You won’t even know I’m here!’

He doubted that but didn’t contradict her.

‘I understand you split your time between London and Scotland,’ she went on. ‘What is it that you do?’

‘What did Susan tell you?’

His sudden tension put her on her guard.

‘Oh . . . um . . . nothing really.’ When he kept staring at her, she became flustered and found herself saying: ‘I-I mean, nothing about your work . . . She may have mentioned something about you not being a chatterbox . . . And that you were a little crotchety and not to expect you to be charming to me.’ Mortified by all that had come out of her mouth, she pressed her lips together to stop more words from escaping.

Murdoch didn’t appear to have taken offence. If anything, his features relaxed, and she could have sworn there was a smile in his eyes.

‘After such a glowing introduction, I’m surprised you didn’t refuse to have anything to do with me.’

‘Su didn’t give me much choice,’ she admitted before she could stop herself. ‘Sorry! I shouldn’t have said that.’

‘I know my sister too well to be surprised that she bulldozed the both of us.’

Ela’s eyes widened. ‘She forced you to take me in?’

‘No,’ he lied. ‘I was speaking generally.’

‘Oh . . .’

He could see her shrinking into herself and could have kicked himself for his slip up.

‘Did she tell you I’m opening a club?’ he offered, wanting to banish the uncertainty in her eyes. ‘Scott’s – named after Sir Walter Scott.’

‘No, she didn’t. Is it a literary club?’

‘A private members’ club focusing on the creative industries – art, film, publishing, music.’

‘To encourage collaboration?’ she asked with interest.

‘Yes. And to provide a sanctuary for people who value their privacy.’

‘That sounds wonderful! I often wish I had a place to go and unwind when I’m out on . . . when I travel.’

He waited for her to say more.

When she didn’t, he changed the subject. ‘I’ll pick up some groceries today. Do you have any preferences? Lamb, veal—’

‘Oh, no meat for me!’ she said hurriedly. ‘And definitely no babies. I’m vegetarian.’

‘You’re kidding.’

‘No . . . why?’

He gave her a bemused smile. ‘You might want to reconsider your classification of black pudding.’

She blanched. ‘Oh no . . . please tell me it’s not meat?’

‘It’s not meat. It’s gorier than that.’

Ela gagged.

Putting a hand over her mouth, she ran out of kitchen.

‘Careful!’ Murdoch yelled after her. ‘I’ve put my . . .’

Crash.

‘. . . bike out.’

By the time Ela returned to the kitchen after her ignoble retreat, there was no sign of Murdoch. A note and a set of keys were waiting for her on the kitchen island.

Cleaner coming soon.

Starts in bedrooms but can

skip yours if you're not ready.

She'll take care of laundry.

Written at an angle across the note, as if it was an afterthought, was a more expansive paragraph:

Her name is Marika. She's from Poland and has only been learning English for a few months, so go easy on her.

If you need to ask her anything, write it down.

It will help her to work it out.

Ela put down the note, surprised by Murdoch's thoughtfulness towards his cleaner. It was rather touching.

She was finding it difficult to read him. When it came to the male species, she was the first to acknowledge that she was no expert. She had always had some sort of a mental block when it came to romantic cues (the cause of many, *many* problems in the past). And yet she suspected that Murdoch was a tough nut to crack by anyone's standard.

He was a strange jumble of contradictions. Standoffish yet welcoming. Gruff but considerate.

It was disconcerting.

The sound of the doorbell echoed through the apartment. Assuming it was the cleaner, she went off to answer it.

Madge joined her in the corridor, miaowing expectantly.

Ela picked her up so she wouldn't run out, and opened the door.

A young woman dressed in a pink Juicy Couture tracksuit and holding a pile of mail stood on the other side.

She appeared startled.

Ela gave her a friendly smile in welcome. ‘Hi. I’m Ela.’

Madge preferred to ominously hiss her greeting.

‘Please, don’t mind her!’ said Ela. ‘Come in! Murdoch said to expect you.’ Ela waited for the woman to enter, then closed the door behind her. ‘Can you please go to his room first? I still need to sort myself out.’

This earned her a peculiar look.

Remembering that Marika’s English wasn’t very good, Ela gestured down the corridor and enunciated slowly: ‘Murdoch’s bedroom.’

‘Are you his girlfriend?’ asked the woman, frowning.

‘Me? Oh no! I’m just visiting.’

‘Is . . . is he waiting for us in his bedroom?’

Before Ela could do more than register that the woman’s English was excellent, the sound of a key turning made her look towards the door.

A moment later, a thickset woman in her fifties entered the apartment, carrying a feather duster and a bucket filled with cleaning products.

Realisation dawned.

‘Marika?’ Ela asked tentatively.

‘Marika, yes. I clean now,’ came the reply in a heavy Polish accent.

The cleaner gave both younger women the once-over with an indifferent expression, then strutted off down the corridor.

‘I’m so sorry!’ cried Ela, turning to her visitor. ‘I thought you were the cleaner.’

‘Oh, thank god!’ the woman said with a giggle. ‘I was starting to wonder what exactly I’d got myself into! I’m not much into threesomes these days.’

Ela’s eyebrows went up.

Threesomes?

‘I’m here to drop off Murdoch’s mail. I live on the floor below. Sometimes it ends up in my mailbox by mistake.’ She giggled again.

‘Oh, I see. Murdoch’s not here at the moment.’

‘Do you expect him back any time soon?’ The hopeful way this was asked finally made her intentions clear to Ela.

Murdoch had a stalker.

That wasn’t fair! She probably had no need to stalk him. She was pretty . . . if you liked that over-the-top Barbie-doll prettiness.

Miaow.

What was wrong with her? She was being as catty as Madge, who still hadn’t stopped hissing in her arms.

Ela assured the woman that Murdoch was going to be out all day, and after promising to tell him to *give Jenny a call*, she managed to get her out of the apartment before Madge could launch herself at her.

‘What’s the matter with us?’ she asked the cat when they were alone. ‘You were downright impolite! And, let’s face it, I wasn’t exactly charitable either.’

Madge purred, unrepentant.

Ela gave her a final stroke and put her down, then hurried off to get her room ready for cleaning.

Afterwards, she had a rather one-sided conversation with Marika (who may or may not have understood that Ela was going out and that her dirty washing was in the laundry), and within half an hour was walking down Kensington High Street, enjoying her first day of freedom.

She spent a delightful few hours wiling away the afternoon – browsing through shops, sitting down with a *Grazia* magazine over coffee and reading it from cover to cover, and stocking up on essentials: old cheese, slow bread,

natural wine, organic fruit and vegetables, and wildflowers. She even came across an upmarket gift store that sold her favourite Cire Trudon candles.

By the time she returned to Murdoch's apartment, she felt more relaxed than she had in years.

In the kitchen, she found a bowl for the fruit and a vase for the wildflowers, and, together with the candle, arranged them in the centre of the island. She lit the candle and stepped back to admire the results. They were only small things, but already, they made her feel more settled. When you lived your life going from one hotel to the next, it was the small things that made you feel at home in new surroundings.

There was no sign of Murdoch. Nevertheless, she knocked on his open bedroom door just in case. When no one answered, she walked into the room and placed a wad of cash on his bedside table for groceries. Then, feeling uncomfortable for having breeched this male bastion, she hurried out again.

The effects of jetlag had well and truly set in by now, but she was determined to stay up as long as she could and set about making herself dinner.

She poured out a glass of red wine, arranged the bread and cheese on a plate, and emptied a tub of tomato soup into a pot. She put the pot on the stove and turned on the gas knob.

Nothing happened.

She fiddled with the knob, and then tried the others.

Still nothing.

Leaning closer to read the labels on the stovetop, she discovered the spark button and pressed it.

The burner burst into flame . . . she yelped and jumped backwards.

She quickly ran her hands over her face and, thankfully, couldn't feel any burns. Although there was a faint, disturbing smell of burnt hair wafting about. She must have singed her face fluff.

Madge entered the kitchen and gave her what looked like a judgemental stare.

‘What? I was only heating some soup.’

Madge miaowed.

‘I know, I should stay in my lane. But I can’t order takeaway every night! And not being able to turn on a stove is a low bar, even for me.’

Madge miaowed again, sounding consoling.

‘Thank you. I appreciate you saying so.’ Ela smiled. ‘It looks like it’s just you and me tonight. How about we have dinner together?’

Madge didn’t seem to find anything to disparage in this proposal.

Murdoch came home around eleven to a blissfully quiet house. It had been a long and stressful day full of people wanting decisions from him. He was looking forward to a hot shower and some brain-dead time on the couch in front of the football highlights.

He had all but forgotten he had a guest staying with him, until he walked into the kitchen and saw a vase of flowers and a fruit bowl in the middle of his island. They looked incongruous against the concrete surface.

There was also a strange smell in the air. It reminded him of being inside a church.

He sniffed suspiciously and followed his nose to the living area, where he spotted a lit candle on the coffee table. Frowning, he walked over and blew it out. He’d have to have a word with Ela about the fire hazard of leaving candles unattended.

There was a movement in his peripheral vision, and he turned and saw the offender herself less than a metre away, asleep on the couch. Madge was curled up beside her, sending him a warning look not to disturb them.

There went his evening of football.

His frown deepened as he scanned Ela's face. There was something peculiar about it . . .

. . . Why were her eyebrows missing?

Chapter 5

Ela stumbled into the kitchen the next morning suffering from the exquisite effects of jetlag. She had woken up on the couch around one in the morning and made her way to her bed, but then hadn't been able to get back to sleep for hours.

She had set an alarm for seven a.m. to get herself used to the correct time zone; however, though her body was up and about, her brain was resisting wakefulness. And, as if to punish her for disrupting its sleep, it offered no protest when she left her room in what would ordinarily constitute a for-her-eyes-only outfit: flannel pyjamas in a red devil-horns print (a present from Susan, who had assured her it was meant satirically), oversized granddad slippers, and her hair in a scrunchy.

Consequently, when she entered the kitchen, Murdoch was confronted with a vision few had ever witnessed.

On seeing him, Ela stopped in her tracks.

He was sitting at the island, drinking his coffee and reading the newspaper.

'Oh . . . it's you,' she muttered.

'And a good morning to you too,' he replied, a sardonic gleam in his eyes.

'Jetlag . . . Never expect perkiness before caffeine hit.'

'Lucky for me, I have some on hand.'

He stood and prepared a coffee for her. Placing the mug on the island, he pulled out a stool.

'Sit before you fall over.'

She grunted in thanks and, after a few tries, managed to climb onto the stool. Picking up her coffee, she closed her eyes and took a gulp.

'Rough night?' he asked, sounding annoyingly cheerful to her ears.

She offered up another grunt.

‘I feel I’m in a scene from *Gorillas in the Mist*.’

She ignored him.

He almost smiled as he watched her. She looked rather adorable in that ridiculous outfit, with her hair falling out of a bun that could double as a squirrel’s nest.

After a while, when she’d begun to show signs of life, he said: ‘I don’t know what’s more insulting – finding money on my bedside table or finding out it’s only a hundred quid.’

Ela opened one eye, her humour roused despite her low brain function.

‘I thought I was being generous.’

He did smile then. ‘Are you usually this pleasant in the morning?’

She opened the other eye. ‘Actually, I’m *always* pleasant,’ she said gloomily. ‘I’m renowned for my unending supply of pleasantness. Every. Single. Day. It’s exhausting.’

‘Christ, it sounds unbearable! You have my permission to be as disagreeable as you want around me.’

‘Thank you!’ she said with real feeling.

‘You’re welcome. Can I ask you a personal question?’

She tensed with suspicion. ‘What?’

‘Why do you no longer have eyebrows?’

A hand flew to her face, and she groaned. ‘I only discovered I’d lost them when I went to the bathroom in the middle of the night. Your stove attacked me!’ she said indignantly.

‘It’s always been bad-tempered like that. Who won?’

‘I would have thought that was obvious.’

A smile tugged at a corner of his mouth at her disgruntled tone.

Madge chose this moment to interrupt their tête-à-tête by jumping onto the island and making her way over to Ela.

‘She seems to have adopted you,’ said Murdoch. ‘She usually acts like a jealous hussy around women.’

‘She knows her man is perfectly safe from me. Don’t you, gorgeous girl?’ Realising this may have sounded uncomplimentary, she looked back at Murdoch. ‘I mean . . . that’s not to say you’re not attractive.’

‘No need to clarify. I don’t usually go around thinking every woman I meet fancies me.’

‘Of course not . . . I just don’t think of you as a man . . .’

‘Thank you.’

‘No! I mean, you’re clearly a man, just not *my* man. As in someone I’m interested in . . . Oh, good grief! Just shoot me now,’ she muttered, agitatedly rubbing her wrist.

He was torn between amusement and . . . something else.

‘What’s wrong with your wrist?’ he asked, moving the conversation along.

Ela looked down, unaware she had been massaging it.

‘Oh, I had a bit of tendinitis a while back . . .’

He waited for her to continue, patiently and without expectations, and she found herself admitting: ‘At one point I became obsessed with practising Rachmaninoff. Have you heard of him?’

‘The name sounds familiar.’

‘He was a Russian composer and virtuoso pianist. He had these massive hands. He could play compositions that are fiendishly difficult for the rest of us mere mortals. So, I kept practising.’

‘How long have you been playing?’

‘Twenty-two years. But you never really stop learning and improving.’ She paused, before adding: ‘Someone recently

said my Rachmaninoff interpretation “languishes around the mediocre and resolutely refuses to soar”. So, clearly, I still need the practice.’

‘Harsh.’

She bit her bottom lip and shrugged. ‘Apparently, I haven’t experienced enough torment and darkness in my life.’

‘Any fool with an opinion can criticise. Criticising is easy; *doing* is hard.’

‘But he’s right.’

‘So what? Do you still enjoy playing?’

‘I live for it,’ she replied with simple fervour.

‘Then why give someone the power to taint your enjoyment of something you love doing?’

Others had tried to tell her the same thing, but his blunt, uncompromising delivery made her feel the truth of his words.

‘You haven’t been put on this earth to please everyone, Ela,’ he said in a gruff voice. ‘If you focus on pleasing yourself, the few people who do matter will be happy for you.’

She smiled. ‘That simple, huh?’

‘Yes.’

A tension she hadn’t known she was holding inside her eased a little. She felt an overpowering urge to confide in him, to explain about her crazy, extraordinary life – a life that she had once loved but now only left her feeling drained and exhausted.

But the words wouldn’t come.

‘What are your plans for today?’ he asked.

‘I was hoping to walk into Central London and do some sightseeing.’

They looked towards the window. A steady rain was beating against the pane.

‘Meeting anyone?’

‘Oh, no . . . I don’t really know anyone in London.’

Murdoch watched her drink her coffee as he considered something.

‘I’m meeting some friends for breakfast,’ he said. ‘Want to come?’

‘A-are you sure?’

She regarded him with what he was starting to think of as her ‘puppy’ look – hopeful, trusting, and too damned innocent. One harsh word could destroy her feelings.

Too much work. Too much everything.

Warning bells went off inside his head, and he wondered if it was too late to withdraw the invitation.

‘I’m not a puppy man,’ he mumbled to himself.

‘Pardon?’

‘I can’t wait around,’ he said in a louder, brusque tone. ‘I’m leaving soon.’

‘Of course!’ replied Ela, jumping off the stool and heading towards the doorway. ‘Don’t worry, I’ll be ready. I’m a ten-minute girl!’

Murdoch’s imagination slipped his control and bolted in a direction he was determined to avoid.

Hell.

Chapter 6

The rain had stopped by the time Murdoch parked his Range Rover off Notting Hill's popular high street, Portobello Road. Refusing to take the money Ela offered him, he went to pay the meter.

While she waited, a busker up the street caught her attention. The woman was entertaining a small group around her with a valiant rendition of Mendelssohn's violin concerto. Feeling the pull of the music, Ela gravitated towards them.

The busker was surprisingly good, and when the piece was finished, Ela joined in the clapping and threw a ten-pound note into the violin case. The woman smiled her thanks and continued speaking with another benefactor.

Suddenly, she swung her gaze back to Ela and stared open-mouthed.

'Miss Baxtor-Huntington? Oh my god!' she cried excitedly. 'It *is* you! I-I'm such a fan. Your concert in Vienna last year was ridiculously amazing.'

Ela cringed, conscious of the looks they were attracting. She considered lying, but there was no point. She shouldn't have worn her hair down – it was too distinctive.

'Thank you,' she replied, smiling. 'You were wonderful yourself.'

'Would you please sign my case? I would be so honoured!' The woman scrambled around her bag for a pen and, finding one, held it out to Ela. 'If it's not too much trouble?'

It was impossible to refuse. Ela quickly signed the case, making certain to keep her back to Murdoch, who was making his way over to them.

The busker gushed her thanks.

'I'm so sorry, I have to run,' Ela said, cutting her off.

She was usually conscientious about making time for her fans, but Murdoch was approaching, and she didn't want him to overhear their conversation.

She headed back towards the car, pretending not to see him, and rummaged around her handbag for her oversized Chloé sunglasses. At least with them on she would feel less visible.

Instead of sunglasses, she came across the DVD of *Roman Holiday* that she had watched on the plane. Susan had been right; it had given her much-needed inspiration.

Gabriela Baxtor-Huntington might not be someone who could afford to act on the spur of the moment, but plain Ela McIntosh (her mother's maiden name was as inventive an alias as she could manage) could act however she wanted without fear of repercussions.

If only plain Ela McIntosh wasn't so recognisable!

Her gaze landed on the gamin image of Audrey Hepburn on the DVD case, and an idea popped into her head.

She rejected it immediately.

She *couldn't*. Roger would kill her.

Her image and career were intrinsically linked, and all and sundry seemed to love her hair. Every article ever written about her waxed lyrical about it at some point or other, as if it was its own entity.

She frowned. Why did she care so much what people thought about something as inconsequential as her hair?

Murdoch was right; she shouldn't be always trying to please everyone. She had to focus on pleasing herself.

She thrust the DVD back into her bag, found her sunglasses, and put them on.

'You must have given that busker one hell of a donation,' Murdoch observed, catching up to her. 'She's staring at you as if you're the Messiah incarnate.'

Ela mumbled something unintelligible.

He studied her. She was hiding behind a large pair of sunglasses and that gorgeous hair of hers, and he sensed she was wound tighter than a clock spring.

He placed a hand on the small of her back to steer her across the street, and kept it there while he directed her towards a bustling café. It was for her own safety – she didn't seem able to raise her head to check for cars or pedestrians.

A hubbub of voices and a wall of warm air hit them as they walked through the front door. The place had a cosy vibe to it and was decorated with cheap mismatched antiques and shelves stacked full of second-hand books.

Murdoch led Ela towards a table at the back, where a couple were kissing on the bench seating against the wall.

'You're putting everyone off their breakfast,' Murdoch told them severely. 'You've been married for bloody years; leave the snogging for private.'

'Don't be jealous, mate,' replied the man, standing up. He had dark, boyish good looks, an Australian accent mellowed from years of living overseas, and was dressed in the uniform of all Aussie males: shorts, a T-shirt, and a tan. 'There's enough of me to go around. Come on over here and give Richie a hug!'

'Dream on, Saunders,' Murdoch replied, batting his arms away. 'This is Ela – my sister's friend from your part of the world.'

'Always a pleasure to meet a fellow antipodean! I'm Richard. Richie to my friends . . . or Saunders to the native toffs,' he added, with a toss of his head at Murdoch.

'Lovely to meet you,' said Ela, smiling.

Richard's wife hugged Murdoch in greeting, which Ela was surprised to see he accepted without complaint (she hadn't taken him for a hugger) and then he introduced her to Ela.

‘This is Meredith. We met during our first week in Cambridge. Then Saunders stumbled into her life a few years later and somehow convinced her to marry him. I suspect there were drugs involved . . .’

‘Hey!’ cried Richard in mock outrage.

Meredith laughed.

She was a pretty woman with a warm smile, long blonde hair, and a naturally slim figure that seemed to owe more to good genes than gym time.

‘Please take no notice of him, Ela,’ she said, shaking hands with her. ‘I was wooed the old-fashioned way – with alcohol.’

‘Murdoch’s jealous I got her to the alter before he did,’ Richard piped in. ‘They used to date.’

Meredith rolled her eyes. ‘We didn’t date, as you well know! On a few occasions, Murdoch used me as a fake girlfriend to deter other women. And it didn’t even work! The predators had no problem ignoring the fact that he was “taken”.’

‘I’m starving,’ Murdoch announced, uncomfortable with where the conversation had headed.

Taking this as their cue to sit down, Meredith and Richard returned to their bench seat, while Ela and Murdoch sat in the chairs facing them.

Realising she was still wearing her sunglasses, Ela quickly took them off. Surprise registered on Meredith’s face for an instant before she politely looked away.

‘It looks terrible, doesn’t it?’ Ela grimaced, gesturing to her eyebrows. She had had to partially pencil them in. ‘I don’t usually embrace the Marilyn Manson aesthetic, but I had a run-in with Murdoch’s stove.’

‘It’s hardly noticeable,’ Meredith assured her, ‘and at least you have the excuse of it being an accident. My over-plucking

phase in the 90s was self-inflicted. Photographic evidence has survived to this day to haunt me!’

An attractive dark-skinned waiter of North African descent arrived at their table and started taking their drinks order.

‘A long black for me, please!’ said Ela.

Startled, the waiter met her gaze and saw that she was smiling at him.

In Ela’s mind, her smile translated as *friendly*, but the adult male brain seemed programmed to mistake any attractive female’s smile as *encouraging*.

He grinned and winked at her.

Richard jumped in to translate. ‘She means an Americano. Cheers, mate.’

The waiter’s gaze lingered on Ela before he sauntered off, still grinning.

‘He’s friendly!’ she observed.

‘He has reason to be,’ muttered Murdoch.

‘Does he? What reason?’

He kept his eyes on his menu. ‘Choose your breakfast so we can order.’

‘Are you always this bossy?’ she asked, amused and a little riled by his tone.

‘Yes.’

‘Perhaps you should consider restraining yourself.’

‘Why?’

‘So people won’t want to strangle you!’

‘I’d like to see them try.’ He looked across at her and cracked a smile.

‘You might get your wish sooner than you think,’ she mumbled from behind her menu.

Murdoch's smile widened. 'Was that an attempt at being disagreeable? If it was, you need serious practice.'

'Not all of us emerged from the womb glowering at the world.'

'You've just proven my point. You need more bite to your insults. It feels like I'm being swatted by a kitten. Try some good old-fashioned swearing – fucking bastard, bad-tempered wanker. Get creative.'

She positioned her menu so she could give him a disapproving look without the others seeing.

'I never wanted to be disagreeable to you *in public*,' she whispered. 'And I never swear! It's an ugly, overused linguistic technique that limits our ability to communicate in a constructive manner.'

Murdoch burst out laughing.

Ela couldn't believe it. *This* was what the inscrutable man found funny?

But the tug of his humour proved impossible to resist, particularly since his eyes invited her to share his amusement, and her laughter bubbled to the surface, even as she shook her head in exasperation.

Meredith watched them over the top of her menu, intrigued. She couldn't remember the last time she had seen Murdoch laugh with a woman.

'So, birthday boy,' Richard said, insensible to all undercurrents, 'don't think you're getting away with ignoring your big day! I even got permission from the finance minister to buy you a present.' He threw his wife a cheeky look.

'And now tell him what you did with that present,' she prompted in a long-suffering tone.

'I left it at home,' he admitted sheepishly.

She sighed. 'You have a memory like a sieve. I'm surprised you don't forget to turn up to court.'

‘Hey, you’ve got no idea of the volume of information we lawyers have to store up here!’ He tapped his temple. ‘I can’t be expected to defend criminals *and* remember birthdays. Sorry about the present, mate.’

Murdoch waved off his apology.

‘You never mentioned it was your birthday,’ said Ela.

‘It’s no big deal.’

‘Are you old enough not to want me to ask how old you are?’

‘Ah, the damned if he does, damned if he doesn’t approach,’ said Richard. ‘I like it!’

‘I’m old enough not to care,’ replied Murdoch, smiling faintly.

‘The party’s tonight, by the way,’ said Meredith. ‘I hope you’ll come, Ela? Murdoch, as always, didn’t want a fuss, but I managed to convince him to agree to a small gathering at our local.’

‘I didn’t agree,’ he grumbled. ‘I was forced into it. But, since it’s happening, you may as well join us,’ he told Ela.

‘And there’s that famous Murdoch charm we all know and love,’ Richard quipped. ‘It’s a wonder you manage to attract any women at all, let alone the bevy of beauties who usually hang around you.’

Murdoch threw him an irritated look before turning back at Ela. ‘You should come,’ he told her, then amended: ‘I’d like you to come.’

‘I’d love to!’ she replied.

Their coffees arrived, and the waiter took their breakfast order. When he was finished, he passed by Ela and, winking at her again, dropped a folded note into her lap before he moved on to another table.

She stared after him with surprise for a moment, then, opening the note, saw a name and number scrawled across it,

and a heavily underlined 'call me'.

She had no idea what she had done to make him think she was interested. Men were such a mystery.

The ring of a phone brought her attention back to the table.

'It's Louise,' said Murdoch. 'I need to take this.' He turned away in his chair so as not to disturb them.

'Speaking of being saved,' Meredith said under her breath.

'Girlfriend?' Ela asked quietly.

Richard made a face and shook his head.

'Not for want of trying on her part,' replied Meredith. 'They're family friends. Grew up together.'

A bright voice suddenly interrupted their conversation. 'I'm here! Did you miss me?'

A petite curvy woman with frizzy brown hair and beautiful green eyes walked up to the table. She was wearing cut off denim shorts, a tie-dyed top that showed off substantial cleavage, and an unusual mix of bright blue and pink eyeshadow.

'Sienna!' Meredith exclaimed happily. 'You made it.'

'Don't sound so surprised.'

'You growled at me earlier when I tried to wake you up. You looked like you were going to be superglued to your bed for the day.'

'I had a big night with the girls from work, but you know I'd never miss an opportunity to scoff down food! Hello, Richie love. You look fetching as always.'

She kissed them both on the cheek.

Meredith introduced her to Ela, adding: 'I've known Sienna since primary school. She shares a house with us.'

‘Can’t believe they haven’t thrown me out yet so they can wallow in connubial bliss.’

Meredith chuckled. ‘Three words: London rental prices.’

‘Don’t worry, I know my place . . . Ooh, I love your hair, Ela!’ Sienna reached out and ran her hands through it. ‘Remember Susan Chalmers from school, Meri-Berry? Same hair. I would die for hair that colour – is it real?’

‘Ah . . . yes,’ replied Ela, a little taken aback by her forthright manner and total disregard for personal space.

‘I’m thoroughly envious! But I thought you’d be sporting a tan? Isn’t that a prerequisite for Australian citizenship?’

‘I’m a burner, not a tanner,’ replied Ela, smiling.

‘Well, at you least you’re not as white as I am – I look like a plucked uncooked chicken!’ Sitting herself on the other side of Murdoch, she asked: ‘Who’s he talking to?’

Richard mouthed *Louise*.

Sienna grimaced.

Leaning closer to Murdoch, she said seductively: ‘Hey, Murdochy, you hunk of a man. Ready for that night of passion you keep promising me?’

She chuckled as he pushed her away.

A moment later, he put down the phone and scowled at her. ‘Louise just hung up on me. If she gets another migraine like she did the last time you two locked horns, I’ll never hear the end of it.’

‘Oh, that woman needs to loosen up! For the benefit of humankind, I’ll personally shout her a night with a well-endowed gigolo . . . What? No need to look daggers at me. Just trying to help.’ She leaned forward so she could look across him at Ela. ‘So, are you here for work or holiday, lovely?’

‘Um . . . holiday,’ replied Ela.

‘What do you do? Can I ask, or is that politically incorrect these days? I can’t keep up with all the bloody rules! Seems like everyone is ready and waiting to take offence over something or other. I’m a naturopath, by the way, in case you were wondering.’

Ela smiled. ‘I’m a musician . . . I travel around playing music,’ she added cautiously.

‘A busker? What a fabulous way to earn a living! Does it bring in enough money to survive on?’

Before Ela was forced to answer, Murdoch cut in. ‘Enough of the third degree. We’ve ordered, so if you want to eat, catch the waiter’s eye.’

‘Don’t mind if I do if it’s that gorgeous Black guy I saw on the way in.’

‘He’s spoken for,’ laughed Richard, looking meaningfully at Ela.

‘Already?’ exclaimed Sienna. ‘You work quick, lovely. I can respect a girl who knows what she wants and goes after it.’

‘For chrissake,’ snapped Murdoch, thrusting a menu into Sienna’s hands. ‘Stop talking and choose something!’

Ela was too grateful to him to point out he was being bossy again.

Chapter 7

That afternoon, while Murdoch went to the gym, Ela spent an hour debating with herself on whether or not she should do what she was thinking of doing.

When she finally talked herself into it, she left the apartment and set out to find a hairdresser who would see her without an appointment on a Saturday.

This, of course, proved to be impossible.

However, she did find a barber who also catered to women and, within a surprisingly short time, walked out with a dismembered plait of hair (which she planned to donate to charity) and a choppy bob à la Rene Russo in *The Thomas Crown Affair* (her bravery had not extended to an Audrey crop).

She returned to the apartment to rest in her room for a couple of hours before Murdoch's birthday party, and ended up falling asleep over a book.

She woke with a start when Murdoch knocked on her door and called: 'Leaving in fifteen minutes.'

Scrambling to her feet, she rushed around trying to find the right dress and shoes, and since it was a special occasion, she even put on a little makeup.

She emerged from her room twenty minutes later and went in search of Murdoch. She found him in the living room, pacing and checking his watch.

'Sorry! Am I late?' she asked.

He turned to look at her, and for a moment, she thought she saw surprise in his eyes, but his gaze quickly became inscrutable.

'It's not you,' he said curtly. 'Louise is late.'

Relieved to know she wasn't responsible for the scowl on his face, she relaxed.

She noticed that he looked different tonight. Gone was the casual jeans and T-shirt look. Instead, he had put on black pants and a midnight-blue shirt, both tailored to fit him to perfection. And though his dark tawny hair still had a shaggy look to it, it had been swept back off his face and subdued into some sort of order.

He looked fierce and sexy. (There was no other word for it, even if he was Susan's brother and firmly in the 'too complicated' category.)

'You look nice,' she blurted out.

He lifted an eyebrow. 'You sound shocked.'

'No . . . I just wasn't expecting you to look so . . . I'll stop talking now before I dig myself in any deeper.'

'You don't look too shabby yourself,' he observed, a smile in his eyes.

She looked down at her dress. 'Is it too much for where we're going?'

She'd put on a Miu Miu white Grecian dress that, like most of her fancier outfits, had sat untouched in her wardrobe for a while. Despite being demure, it was more glamorous than she was used to wearing, and she'd had to pair it with red ankle boots to tone it down.

Susan must have thought she would find herself at a party or two, as she'd packed several high-octane dresses. The Miu Miu was the least extravagant option.

'It's fine,' he replied. 'But . . .'

She looked back at him and noticed a faint crease between his eyebrows as he studied her.

' . . . what happened to your hair?'

Ela fingered her new style. It felt strange not to feel movement across her back.

'I chopped it off. It was time. I've had the same hairstyle since I was twelve! Does it look ok? The hairdresser kept

going on about how it needed to be *sassy*, whatever that means. And he insisted on a fringe,' she said uncertainly, blowing the said fringe out of one eye.

Thankfully, it was long enough to tuck into her layered bob if she wanted it off her face.

'It looks good.'

She smiled, relieved. 'Thank you.'

'You'd look good whatever' His unfinished words hung in the air.

She blinked in surprise.

Had he just given her an extravagant compliment? Or a dismissive one?

The kettle whistled in the background.

'I'm making tea, want one?' he asked as he walked off.

'Sure.'

She followed him into the kitchen. Taking the soya milk she'd bought herself out of the fridge, she put it down on the benchtop beside him.

Murdoch looked suspiciously at the carton.

'You put that in tea?' he asked, disgust evident in his tone.

'I'm not puritan with my tea,' she replied, amused by his reaction. 'I like to live on the edge and mix things up.'

He snorted and handed her a mug of black tea so she could pour her own milk. 'That sort of thing breeds dissent. Next, you'll be telling me you're against the monarchy.'

'My reverence for historical leftovers knows no bounds,' she deadpanned.

'Sarcasm is a British invention. It's not for presumptuous colonials.'

'You British may like to colonise, but you can't lay exclusive claim to a sense of humour!'

He gave her a droll look. ‘My sister purposefully misled me when she told me you were shy and unobtrusive.’

A surprised laugh escaped her. ‘Did she say that? I’m not sure about unobtrusive, but I am naturally shy. I just rarely get the chance to indulge in it.’

Murdoch drank his tea as he studied her. ‘Interesting. I wonder what you mean by that.’

She looked down at her mug and drank her tea.

When it became clear that she wasn’t going to respond, Murdoch glanced at his watch again.

‘Bloody hell! I’m getting my coat. If Louise isn’t here in five, we’re leaving without her.’

He was gone barely a minute when the doorbell rang, dragging Ela out of her thoughts.

It rang a second time before she had a chance to put down her mug, and a third as she walked down the hallway.

Geez, someone was impatient!

Ela opened the door just as the beautiful blonde on the other side was about to press the bell a fourth time.

Ela greeted her with a smile. ‘Hi! You must be Louise.’

‘And you are?’ Louise asked coolly, running her eyes over Ela with a thoroughness that was rather insulting.

Ela had the impression Louise already knew her name.

‘I’m Ela. Please come in.’

‘Where’s Murdoch?’

‘He’s just getting his coat.’

Louise walked past her and went to the hall mirror to check her reflection, her figure-hugging Hervé Léger dress and Louboutins giving her movements a sensual shimmy that made Ela feel she was dressed like a thirteen-year-old by comparison.

‘You’re Australian,’ observed Louise, managing to imbue the statement with derision. ‘I once considered visiting.’

‘It sounds like you never made it,’ said Ela, holding onto her smile with determination.

‘Oh, no! Too provincial. I went to Hong Kong instead.’ Louise took her lipstick out of her purse and reapplied it. ‘What are you doing in London? Let me guess – chasing a fantasy?’

‘Why do you say that?’ asked Ela, disconcerted. Wasn’t that exactly what she was doing? Time away from a life of never-ending commitments was her fantasy.

‘You have that wide-eyed, expectant look about you. London will be quite a revelation after the outback.’

‘I’m from Sydney.’

‘Sydney is not London.’

‘I can’t argue with that.’

Louise finished inspecting herself in the mirror and fixed Ela with a sharp look. ‘So . . . how long do you plan on living here?’

Picking up on her proprietorial tone, Ela found it impossible to resist teasing her. ‘Oh, only a few months.’

‘Months!’ exclaimed Louise. ‘Murdoch would never have agreed to such an arrangement.’

‘Well, it really isn’t any of Murdoch’s business how long I decide to stay in London.’

Louise’s eyes narrowed. ‘I was referring to your current living arrangement, *not* the duration of your stay in London.’

Ela feigned surprise. ‘Oh . . . In that case, not long.’

‘And how long is *not long*, exactly?’

‘I’ve no intention of disturbing Murdoch’s bachelorhood, if that’s what you’re worried about,’ returned Ela, purposefully stressing the word ‘bachelorhood’, but then she regretted allowing herself to be drawn into schoolyard wrangles.

Louise's frown was suddenly replaced by a coquettish smile as she saw Murdoch walking towards them.

'Darling, you've finally graced me with your presence!' she chided. 'Lucky for you it's your birthday, so I can forgive you.'

'Don't even go there,' he advised her. 'You'd be late for your own bloody funeral.'

Louise laughed and, placing a perfectly manicured hand on his shoulder, drew him in for a kiss.

He dodged her mouth and gave her a quick peck on the cheek.

'Have you two become acquainted?' he asked, looking across at Ela.

'Sufficiently,' replied Louise.

'Then let's go, for chrissake! I'm late for my own party.'

Meredith and Richard's 'local' turned out to be a bar in Hammersmith, tucked down a lane and chock-a-block with people shouting at each other above the pumping music.

Murdoch had to create a path for them through the crowd as they headed towards a reserved area at the back, where ten or so people were milling around. The moment they saw him, they started applauding and giving him grief for arriving late.

Sienna walked up and asked: 'Has the birthday boy been given a birthday kiss yet?'

Ela thought she looked gorgeous in a purple lamé minidress and platforms – a look few could pull off – and found herself studying Murdoch for signs he found her attractive.

‘Leave-off, Sienna,’ he replied lightly, looking stoic rather than enamoured. ‘You won’t get a rise from me tonight.’

‘Is that a bet?’ she asked, laughing brazenly.

Louise moved closer and draped her arm through Murdoch’s. ‘Sienna, do go away and find other prey. Murdoch is too soft to save himself from you.’

Sienna raised her eyebrows. ‘Going soft in your old age, Murdochy?’

‘I’d watch it if I were you, Sienna,’ said Richard, walking over with Meredith. ‘He looks harmless, but you know he’s got plenty of ammunition against you. The man’s just biding his time.’

‘Great to know my friends think I’m *soft* and *harmless*,’ said Murdoch. ‘Next you’ll be telling everyone I sleep with the light on.’

‘We won’t judge,’ said Sienna. ‘Sometimes it’s safer to sleep with the light on . . . Depends on who you’re sleeping next to.’ She glanced over at Louise, whose attention had been captured by an acquaintance.

‘You behave yourself,’ warned Murdoch. ‘I know you like to stir, but if I have to deal with tantrums on my birthday, I’ll throw one of my own.’

Sienna chuckled and moved away to join Ela and Meredith, who were standing to one side, chatting.

‘She must give good head,’ she told them, cutting in on their conversation.

‘Sienna!’ complained Meredith.

‘What? You know I’m right.’

‘Who are you talking about?’ asked Ela.

‘Louise. No other explanation for why Murdoch allows her to latch on to him.’

‘They’re family friends, nothing more,’ Meredith insisted, ‘and if you’re going to get X-rated, we should at least have one drink in us first.’

She led the way to the bar and ordered them raspberry vodka martinis, which, according to her, were healthy since they were high in polyphenols.

While they waited for their drinks, Meredith asked: ‘Did you see the article in the *Metro* yesterday about the seats on the Tube?’

‘Oh here we go!’ scoffed Sienna.

Meredith swatted her. ‘They carried out an analysis of the stuff in the seats and found all different types of bodily fluids! And some weird and wonderful germs breeding away.’

Ela screwed up her face. ‘Eww, that’s truly gross.’

‘I’ve also read,’ Meredith continued with relish, ‘that when a passenger sneezes, droplets of saliva remain suspended in the air for over half an hour.’

‘Thank you, Mrs *Ask Jeeves*,’ intoned Sienna, ‘except, we didn’t ask!’

Meredith ignored her. ‘But the worst is when you get a triple whammy: hot day, peak hour, *and* signal failure. Temperatures soar above the legal limits for transporting livestock. I’ve actually had people pass out next to me—’

‘Drinks are ready!’ interrupted Sienna. She handed them out and raised her glass. ‘To Ela! Welcome to London, and the never-ending struggle to get from A to B while preserving your sanity and eluding infectious diseases.’

‘Here, here!’ agreed Meredith.

Two martinis later and several notches up in music volume, Meredith yelled at Ela: ‘That guy over there is checking you out.’

‘Me?’

Ela scanned the bar.

A man across the room offered her a loaded smile. She quickly looked away.

‘Go flirt!’ Sienna instructed.

‘No! I can’t. I’m terrible at it.’

‘He’s cute,’ said Meredith. ‘You might enjoy it.’

‘He looks too young for me.’

Sienna shrugged. ‘Oh well, you’ve missed your chance.’

Ela was surprised to feel a little deflated. ‘He’s gone?’

‘No . . . he’s coming over.’ Sienna grinned and hooked her arm through Meredith’s. ‘Come on Meri-Berry, let’s leave her to practise on the sapling.’

Ela protested as they walked away, but her admirer was suddenly claiming her attention, and she could only throw them a pained look as they gestured with a thumbs up from a safe distance.

Chapter 8

Ela had to admit that chatting with a good-looking younger man was actually fun, but she needed to find the bathroom.

After promising whatshisname to return, she made her way over to the ladies' and joined the long queue that started in the antechamber. The space was well appointed and looked like a luxurious sitting room, with a circular red velvet ottoman, gilt-framed mirrors, marble benchtops, and even an assortment of vanity products to help female customers freshen up their hair and makeup.

It was no wonder the room was full to bursting.

As she looked around, she became aware that the woman in front of her was delivering some sort of monologue, addressing a group of girls ahead in the queue. They looked uncomfortable and were only partly listening to her.

The woman was of Indian descent, with beautiful dusky skin and the body of a model, and her strong, edgy aesthetic (leather and lots of black) clashed splendidly with cut-glass English diction.

‘. . . they trick the indigenous population into abandoning their sustainable farming,’ she was saying, ‘and then get them addicted to a destructive cycle of clearing rainforests and rearing burger meat . . . Burger meat that decimates the farmland so quickly that more rainforest has to be cleared, and the cycle begins again. By the time the farmers catch on to the fact that they’ve sold their future at the altar of big business, it’s too late. They’re hooked.’

She turned her kohl-darkened eyes on two girls who were sitting on the ottoman, snorting something from a compact mirror.

‘Nothing is without its price, is it, ladies?’ she said mockingly.

They threw her dismissive looks and continued their conversation.

She smiled, untroubled, and her eyes travelled around the room and landed on Ela, who had just realised what it was the girls were sniffing.

Her shock must have shown on her face, for the woman asked: ‘Not into Charlie?’

Ela looked at her, confused. ‘Who is Charlie?’

‘Not the sort with a penis and an ego in disproportion to one another. I’m talking about little white crystals of pleasure – the refuge of the experimental, unhappy, or downright dull.’ When Ela continued to look perplexed, she laughed. ‘Coke, sunshine. I’m talking about cocaine!’

‘Oh . . . I don’t do that sort of thing,’ Ela replied in a lowered voice.

‘Neither do I. But we all have our pound of flesh to give, one way or another,’ the woman said enigmatically. ‘*All the world’s a scam, and all the men and women merely victims,*’ she paraphrased. ‘And the few aware enough to see the scam close their eyes anyway, or sell their pound of flesh to the highest bidder. But the majority – the “democratic” masses (and I use that word loosely) – have no idea how they’re being rogered by the governments set up in their name. Though, to be fair, most governments don’t have the brains to roger their people properly. They need powerful special interest groups to tell them how to do it . . . and the military industrial complex, with its never-ending money-making wars, is front and centre. And, of course, the greatest drug mafia of all time, big pharma. No one wants to remember that they’ve paid billions in fines over the years for misleading and lying about their drugs being safe and effective. It’s become just another cost of doing business for them. Lying is profitable.’

Ela had no idea if she was expected to respond.

‘You probably think I’m talking crap,’ said the woman, smiling. ‘I don’t blame you! I can talk crap with the best of

them. And people always believe the crap over the truth, go figure.’ She shrugged.

‘Perhaps it’s easier to believe the lies than face up to a reality we feel powerless to change,’ Ela offered.

The woman studied her with genuine interest.

Ela was a little daunted to be the focus of such a fiercely intelligent gaze.

‘Well, well . . . someone isn’t braindead. Good for you! I’m Kat.’ She held out her hand.

Ela shook it. ‘I’m Ela.’

‘Ela? Nice name . . . How long are you staying in London?’

Ela wondered what gave her away as a visitor. ‘Only a month or two.’

‘Well, if you need a place to stay, sunshine, call my landlady. You’ll love her. Everybody does. Got a pen?’

‘No . . . Actually, I don’t need a place . . .’

Kat grabbed the lipstick off a girl doing her makeup at the mirror beside them and, ignoring her protests, tore off a paper towel from the dispenser and scrawled down a telephone number.

She handed the lipstick back to its infuriated owner, thrust the paper towel into Ela’s hands, and, with a salute, disappeared into a free cubicle.

‘Thank you, but I don’t need accommodation,’ Ela called after her, but she already knew not to expect a response.

Chapter 9

Ela returned to her admirer and accepted the glass he held out to her. She wasn't sure a second martini was the best idea, but she was trying to live a little. Whereas sensible Gabriela Baxtor-Huntington would have declined, Ela McIntosh drank the cocktail with relish.

Josh (was it Josh?) decided at this point that her life would not be complete without listening to a long-winded description of what he did for work (he was an analyst of some sort – she could barely hear a thing above the loud music).

He was some minutes into his fascinatingly boring explanation, which she gamely attempted to follow, when a strange sensation started to creep up her body. It was unlike any alcohol buzz she had ever experienced.

She rubbed her eyes and swayed.

Maybe-Josh leaned closer and said something she couldn't understand into her ear.

She pushed him away, not enjoying his closeness, and, before he could stop her, disappeared into the sea of bodies around them.

As the crowd shifted, she saw Meredith and Sienna by pure luck and stumbled towards them. They had to reach out and grab her arms to stop her from falling.

She tried to tell them something.

'What?' Meredith yelled back.

'My drink . . . my drink was . . .'

 Ela was vaguely surprised that she couldn't get the words out.

Suddenly, it was all too difficult, and she couldn't find the will to care.

She liked this song.

It was time to dance.

As Ela spun off into the crowd, Meredith said to Sienna: ‘Did she just say that she liked her drink?’

‘No, I think she said “my drink was biked”.’

‘Biked? That doesn’t make any . . .’

Sharing a look of alarm, they simultaneously yelled: ‘*Spiked!*’

‘Go after her!’ cried Meredith. ‘I’ll grab Murdoch.’

As Sienna turned to follow Ela, Meredith pushed her way to Murdoch’s side.

She pulled his head down to her level so she could shout into his ear. ‘Ela’s drink’s been spiked!’

‘What?’ he barked, suddenly looking dangerous. ‘Where is she?’

Sienna gestured at the crowd. ‘She disappeared over there somewhere! Sienna’s trying to find her . . .’

Murdoch was gone before she could finish the sentence.

Ela was having the most wonderful time dancing. The music was out of this world, and she had never felt so free and uninhibited.

She grabbed a man close to her and startled him by leading him into an impromptu tango.

But when Kylie’s ‘Can’t Get You Out of My Head’ came on, she lost interest and flung him off so she could dance by herself.

She absolutely loved, loved, loved this song!

‘There you are!’ A man’s arm snaked around her waist and pulled her towards him.

She squinted up at her admirer from earlier.

‘*Ola!* Josh? No . . . Jeremy! Was it Jeremy?’

‘You can call me whatever you want, baby,’ he replied, propelling her towards the entrance.

As they exited the bar, the cool night air made Ela sigh blissfully.

‘Oh, that’s so *lovely* . . . I can finally *breathe*.’ She closed her eyes and allowed herself to be led on.

‘Ela!’

The shout pierced her languor, and she turned to look behind her.

‘Oh, look! It’s the birthday boy! *Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy . . .*’

‘Are you okay?’ Murdoch demanded.

‘Perrr-fect! This lovely gentleman was just escorting me to . . . where are we going, Josh-Jeremy?’

‘We’re getting some fresh air,’ he replied, starting to pull her along again.

‘I don’t bloody think so!’ said Murdoch in a hostile voice, taking hold of her other arm.

Ela giggled, finding it amusing to be caught in the middle of a tug-of-war, until the stranger pulled too hard and she cried out in pain.

Murdoch instantly let go of her and grabbed the man’s arm, tightening his grip until he heard a sharp intake of breath.

‘Get your hands off her,’ he snarled.

‘Who the fuck are you? Her fucking father?’

Murdoch punched him in the face, feeling a satisfying crunch of bone under his knuckles.

The man’s head snapped backwards and he collapsed onto the pavement, blood pouring from his nose. He would have taken Ela down with him if Murdoch hadn’t snatched her up in his arms.

He lay stunned for a few seconds, then gingerly sat up and felt his face.

‘You broke it!’ he shrieked. ‘You fucking bastard, you broke my nose!’

Murdoch made a move towards him, looking ready to kill, but Ela’s limp form kept him weighed down. Whatever look was in his eyes, it made the stranger shuffle backwards and scramble to his feet.

‘You keep the fucking slapper if she means that much to you!’ he threw at Murdoch, and then staggered off down the road.

Richard rushed over, looking concerned.

‘Call the police,’ Murdoch growled.

‘Already done, mate.’

The man, still within hearing range, bolted, and Richard took off after him.

‘I could be a flapper,’ said Ela, smiling up at Murdoch.

Disentangling herself from his arms, she demonstrated the Charleston.

‘You see?’

‘Yes . . . I see,’ he said, trying to keep his voice level so he wouldn’t scare her.

Endorphins were pumping through his bloodstream, and he took several deep breaths to try and bring himself back under control.

That had been too close.

He felt physically sick when he thought about what could have happened.

He scrubbed his hands over his face. When he looked back at Ela, he saw that she had wandered off.

‘Hey! Stay close,’ he yelled, catching up with her.

‘I don’t feel well,’ she mumbled.

She slumped against him, and he put an arm around her.

‘Let’s keep walking. The fresh air and exercise will help.’

A few minutes later, they ended up in a narrow residential street flanked by apartment blocks on either side.

Ela had been quiet for a while when, all of a sudden, she pulled out of Murdoch’s hold and started to sing Shania Twain’s ‘Man! I Feel Like A Woman!’.

‘I’m going out tonight, nana nana na na . . .’

Murdoch shook his head as she kept singing, watching her with indulgent amusement.

Ela lifted her arms to the apartments above them, where she could see people clapping her. ‘Thank you!’ she cried, blowing kisses to the empty balconies. ‘I love you too!’

And then she really went for it.

She belted out the chorus with uninhibited zeal and spun around in circles, arms wide, losing herself in her hallucinations . . .

. . . and then losing her balance.

Murdoch had to dive to catch her before she could fall flat on her face. He landed on his knees with a wince.

Ela looked up at him, safe within the cradle of his arms, and smiled wonkily.

Her hand closed around his beard, and she gave it a tug. ‘Why do you hide behind this?’

He stiffened, disconcerted.

‘I’m hiding too,’ she admitted in a loud whisper. ‘But don’t tell anyone . . . Shh!’ She put her finger on his lips.

He fought an urge to kiss it.

As if deciding to properly torture him, she started to slowly trace the curve of his upper lip. And then his lower one.

She looked intent on her task, her brow furrowed, while he kept perfectly still, not daring to breathe throughout her painstaking exploration.

Then, suddenly, her hand fell away, and she passed out in his arms.

Thank bloody Christ!

And with a whoosh, he finally let out the breath he'd been holding.

Chapter 10

A pounding in Ela's head woke her up.

She opened an eye and scanned her surroundings.

Pillow . . . duvet . . . window . . . parapet.

She was in Murdoch's apartment, in her bed . . . and the pounding in her head wasn't internal. Someone was knocking on the door.

'Come in,' she croaked.

Murdoch walked in carrying a mug and a large glass of water.

'Are you alive?' he asked.

She raised herself on her elbows and tried to focus on him through one eye before remembering that she had two to work with.

'Of sorts.'

'You look terrible.'

She glared at him. 'How charming of you to say so.'

Murdoch's lips twitched. 'Anyone would look terrible after having their drink spiked. Do you remember anything?'

'Bits and pieces . . . My head hurts.' She flopped back down on the bed.

'I brought paracetamol.'

He put the mug on the bedside table, took a packet out of his jeans' pocket, and held it up to her.

'Thought I'd better bring a sealed packet rather than two white tablets,' he remarked, straight-faced.

'Don't you dare expect me to appreciate humour this morning,' she said hoarsely, accepting the pills and water.

When she was finished dosing herself, he handed her the mug of tea.

‘Not coffee?’ she asked, surprised he had gone off script.

‘Let’s avoid strong stimulants today. Don’t worry, I made it with soy milk.’ He looked so disgusted with this admission that she almost managed a smile.

Almost.

She sipped her tea quietly. It was difficult to drink when she was reclining, so she sat up higher against the pillows. The duvet cover dropped to her waist.

Her eyes flew to Murdoch. ‘I-I’m wearing pyjamas.’

‘Yes.’

‘How did I . . . did you . . .’

He looked amused. ‘Are you asking me if I undressed you? No. Meredith and Sienna had that pleasure.’

Ela relaxed against the pillows. There was something about his comment that niggled at her, but she was too tired to focus on it.

Murdoch went to the window and opened it to let in some fresh air, then walked back and stood looking down at her, a warm, almost tender glint in his eyes.

‘I didn’t know I was living with a musical aficionado,’ he said.

Ela was startled out of her drowsiness. She must have blabbed while under the influence!

She put down the mug. ‘I-I’m sorry. I know I should have told you.’

‘Don’t apologise. I was honoured. No one has ever serenaded me before.’

‘Serenaded?’

‘Who knew “Man! I Feel Like a Woman!” would become my new favourite song?’

Ela stared at him, dumbfounded. ‘But I don’t sing.’

‘Oh, I assure you, you do. And not only did you sing – with real gusto, I might add – you also danced and fainted in my arms. It was quite the show.’

Ela groaned and slid under the duvet, then re-emerged abruptly.

‘Did I throw up on you?’

‘No . . . not on *me*.’

She gave him an irate look. ‘If you have any decency, you’ll wipe that smirk off your face and leave me alone to die in peace!’

Murdoch grinned.

He really does have dimples, Ela thought resentfully. How was a girl expected to keep her wits about her?

‘Do you want me to stay home with you today?’

‘No!’ she cried, almost desperately. ‘No, no, you go do what you have to do. I’m fine.’

‘Okay. But stay home and rest. That’s an order.’ He headed for the door. ‘I’ll be back this afternoon to check on you.’

‘No need!’ Ela called after him.

She went over their conversation in her head.

“‘I Feel Like a Woman?’” – seriously?!”

She groaned and pulled the duvet over her head again.

Several hours later, Ela made it outside, sunglasses firmly in place, and walked to the local Waitrose to pick up some groceries. It was slow going, to say the least.

Desperate times called for desperate measures and, ignoring Murdoch’s advice, she stopped at a café on the way

back and ordered herself a triple-shot Americano *with* sugar.

Yuck, but necessary.

By the time she climbed the stone steps of the mansion block, the caffeine and sugar had kicked in and she was humming Shania Twain without realising it.

She took the lift to the top floor, juggling her overfilled shopping bags. Unfortunately, one of the handles broke on the way, and she had to haul the bag up and clasp it against her chest.

After a minor struggle with the door key, she entered the apartment and hurried down the corridor towards the kitchen before she could drop something.

The sound of the vacuum cleaner in the background told her that Marika was here cleaning again. Since the place was already spotless, she could only assume that Murdoch had an unhealthy obsession with hygiene.

As she sped past the living area, something caught her eye . . . stopping in her tracks, she did a double-take and almost dropped the shopping.

An unfamiliar woman was lounging seductively on one of the couches in a see-through lace bra and crotchless panties.

They stared at each other with growing horror.

Ela blinked.

The woman blinked.

‘Are you Murdoch’s girlfriend?’ she asked in a panicked voice, putting her hands over her privates.

‘Er . . . no.’ Did she need a tattoo across her forehead?

The woman relaxed a little at this information. ‘Oh, thank god! I didn’t think he had one, but you never know . . . Um, you’re probably wondering why I’m here. I can leave . . . Do you want me to leave?’

‘I . . . no . . . Don’t leave on my account. I’m just dropping off some shopping.’

‘Oh, I see, you’re the delivery girl!’

Ela felt like she had stepped into the Twilight Zone.

Then, as if matters couldn’t get any more bizarre, the cleaner walked into the room, pushing the vacuum across the floor.

‘Hello, Marika,’ Ela greeted her, unfailingly polite.

‘I clean,’ Marika said with her usual impassive expression and began vacuuming around the couch, indifferent to the near-naked woman spread across it.

‘She told me she’d be finished soon,’ said the woman, evidently feeling the need to explain.

‘I finish soon,’ intoned Marika in agreement.

Ela must have looked as bemused as she felt, for the woman added: ‘I wouldn’t want you to think I’m planning a seduction with the cleaner still here!’ She let out a nervous giggle. ‘Now that *would* be really weird.’

‘Ok then . . .’ said Ela slowly. ‘I’ll just go and . . . uh . . .’

She fled towards the kitchen.

Hearing a faint miaowing coming from one of the bedrooms, Ela realised someone had imprisoned poor Madge. It was probably safest for all concerned. There would undoubtedly be blood shed if she was let out.

After putting away the shopping in record time, Ela called out ‘goodbye’ to herald her departure and rushed out of the apartment.

‘Well, that was mortifying,’ she muttered to herself as she entered the lift.

She had to find herself another place to live. She didn’t know how much longer she could put up with Murdoch’s harem. It was humiliating.

As to *why* it was humiliating was not something she wanted to study too closely. She heaved a sigh and covered her face with her hands.

Idiot.

The lift came to a stop, and before the doors had fully opened, she flew through them, distracted . . .

. . . and slammed into a wall of muscle.

She squealed. In the instant before they both toppled over, she recognised Murdoch.

Her momentum would ordinarily have done little to budge his bulk, but Louise was standing close behind him, and he couldn't step back to regain his balance without knocking her over. He barely had time to reposition Ela against his chest before they hit the marble floor, his back taking most of the impact.

'Oh Murdoch, I'm so sorry! Are you okay?'

'I'll live,' he groaned.

Realising she was sprawled on top of him, she scampered off and pushed onto her knees beside him. 'I'm sorry . . . Here, let me help you up.'

'I don't want to sound ungrateful, but there's no point yanking on my arm if you're kneeling on my hand.'

'Sorry!' She moved her knee. 'I seem to be doing my best to break you.'

Murdoch sat up and massaged his hand, his blue eyes gently laughing at her. 'It's fine. I just wasn't expecting a rugby tackle. What's the rush?'

'I'm going out.'

His face fell into a frown. 'I thought I told you to stay home and rest today.'

'You're being bossy again.' She smiled. She was actually starting to find it endearing.

‘I was going to cook a vegetarian lasagne for you.’

‘Oh . . .’

Why did he have to be so kind and thoughtful?

‘Do you both plan on getting up off the floor anytime soon?’ asked Louise, looking daggers at Ela.

Ela started; she hadn’t even noticed her.

‘Louise is here to pick up a contract,’ said Murdoch, rising to his feet and helping Ela up.

‘You seem to have survived your drug experimenting unscathed,’ remarked Louise. ‘Shame Murdoch had to miss his own party to nurse you back to health.’

‘That’s enough, Louise,’ he warned softly.

‘No, she’s right!’ said Ela, feeling remorseful. ‘You should never have had to miss your birthday party because of me. If I hadn’t been so stupid—’

‘You have nothing to apologise for.’

‘I do, but I won’t argue with you. I owe you one.’ She started to walk off. ‘Oh, I should warn you . . .’ She flicked a glance at Louise. ‘There’s a woman waiting for you in the apartment.’

‘My mother?’ he asked, with rather comical alarm for a man of his age.

‘Definitely *not* your mother . . . Let’s just say she has amorous intentions.’

She saw Louise’s eyes sharpen with interest. Before either of them could ask her any more questions, she hurried across the foyer and let herself out of the building.

A short while later, she was getting on the Tube, on her way to Covent Garden, when she remembered Meredith's comments about the Tube seats. (Why did *that* have to be one of the few things she could remember about last night?)

She resolutely avoided the seats and remained standing, legs wide apart for balance as she also wanted to avoid touching the poles. She was doing quite well holding her pose, with only the occasional wobble, when the driver suddenly put on the brakes and she went flying across the carriage.

She landed ignominiously on the lap of a very proper-looking gentleman in a three-piece suit.

'Oh . . . I-I beg your pardon,' she stammered, as she clambered off him.

'It's quite alright,' he replied in an unruffled voice, barely looking up from his paper. 'These things happen.'

Ela dropped down into the closest available seat.

Germs or no germs, she absolutely refused to find herself on top of another man today – she hadn't had so much action since the turn of the millennium!

For the next several hours, she explored the streets of Central London. From Covent Garden to Soho, on to St James's, Mayfair, and Marylebone, she meandered aimlessly through each neighbourhood. She rarely had the opportunity to spend time in her own company when travelling for work, and she was discovering that she quite enjoyed it. There was no one to tell her where to go, what to do, or how to act. She had only to follow her own inclinations.

At one point, she passed Claridge's Hotel and stood looking up at its grand red-brick frontage. She was tempted to go in and book her usual suite.

But that felt too much like giving up.

She still had weeks of freedom ahead of her, and if she checked into Claridge's, Roger would track her down within

days. She wasn't ready to go back. She would just have to find herself some less disconcerting living arrangements.

It was gone ten o'clock when Ela quietly let herself into the apartment. She heard mumbling (or groaning?) coming from the living room and covered her ears as she headed towards her room.

But before she had gone more than a few feet, Madge startled her by appearing out of nowhere and rubbing against her leg.

'For goodness sake, you scared the living daylights out of me!' Ela whispered sternly. 'I thought you were one of the harem . . . Sorry, no offence meant.'

A loud snore came from the living room.

Ela cautiously poked her head around the wall and saw Murdoch asleep on the couch, in front of a movie on the TV.

Blessedly alone.

After telling herself she should leave him to it, her feet overrode her brain and walked her over to the couch. She smiled as she watched him sleep. He really was distractingly good looking . . . if you liked that brooding-Viking type.

Even in sleep, his brow was creased, as if he was concentrating on something important. She reached out, wanting to smooth out the lines, but at the last moment she stopped herself.

Stupid, Ela. Stupid.

She started to walk away, then turned and went to pick up a cream cashmere throw that had been draped over one of the armchairs. She lay it over Murdoch, turned off the TV, and headed to her room.

Chapter 11

Ela walked into the kitchen the next morning in what Murdoch was starting to recognise as her jetlagged state: tangled hair, heavy eyes, and low brain function.

He was also starting to appreciate that she had incomprehensible taste in pyjamas. Today's ensemble was a short-sleeved shirt and boxers combo printed with the Australian flag.

He was on the phone, grudgingly listening to Louise while she attempted to convince him to invest in a vineyard in France, while Ela stumbled around looking for a mug in every conceivable cupboard but the right one. Then she stood in front of the coffee machine for a full minute, just staring at it.

In the end, he couldn't stand it anymore. He curtly got off the phone and, going over to Ela, put his hands on her shoulders and steered her towards a stool.

'Sit,' he instructed. 'It's too painful to watch. I'll get your coffee.'

He poured out a large mug and helped her to wrap her hands around it securely.

'Thanks,' she mumbled.

He left her to drink in silence while he went to the stove and started to make pancakes with the mixture he had prepared earlier.

'I didn't hear you come in last night,' he said, when Ela was showing signs of returning to the land of the living. 'Where did you go?'

'Central London.'

'You were gone hours.'

'I walked.'

'All that time?'

‘Mostly.’ She finished her coffee. ‘I caught the Tube there and back . . . which, once you get the hang of it, is a lot more fun than people make out.’

He snorted. ‘You need to get out more.’

Ela smiled faintly. ‘You’re probably right.’

‘Did you stay out late on my account?’ he asked, looking at her over his shoulder.

She shrugged. ‘You had friends to entertain. I thought I’d make myself scarce.’

He turned to face her fully, spatula in hand. ‘I know what you’re thinking, but you’re way off.’

‘Am I? I assumed—’

‘Never assume!’

He looked so put-out she couldn’t help smiling.

‘It’s none of my business,’ she said, ‘but if you’re not interested in your friends in that way, you should give them a heads-up.’

‘Julia simply got the wrong end of the stick,’ he grumbled. ‘She lives in the building, and I gave her a key so she could feed Madge when I was away one weekend.’

‘That’s quite a misunderstanding! From “feed my cat” to “get naked and lie in wait for me”.’

He frowned. ‘She wasn’t naked.’

‘Semantics,’ she said wryly. ‘I’m now almost as closely acquainted with her as her gynaecologist! And Louise? What’s the deal with her?’ Thinking she had come across as too invested in his response, she added: ‘I’m simply curious.’

‘Are you?’ He gave her a look she couldn’t decipher.

‘It’s my besetting sin,’ she returned innocently, even though she knew her blush gave her away.

‘To understand Louise,’ he said, ‘you have to understand that she’s a collector, and every now and then, she’ll try to add

me to her collection. She's also extremely competitive, so at the moment, she's worse than usual.'

'Why worse?'

Murdoch stayed silent for a moment.

'She perceives you as a threat,' he said finally.

'Me?' she exclaimed. 'Why?'

'You'll need to ask her that.' He returned his attention to his cooking. 'I hope she hasn't said anything to upset you?'

'Oh, no . . . In her own way, she's been sort of nice,' she replied, making a valiant effort to find something positive to say.

Murdoch raised an eyebrow at her. 'She'd be insulted to hear you say that, and it's blatantly untrue. *Nice* doesn't feature in her emotional repertoire. When we were kids, Louise and her sisters were known as "the Furies".'

He flipped a pancake, held it over the heat for a few more seconds, then added it to the growing pile beside him.

Ela watched him while he poured out the next pancake. There was something very appealing about the domesticity they had fallen into.

She felt a pang of contentment so intense it scared her.

This was not her life.

She cleared her throat. 'Hey, Murdoch . . . I wanted to talk to you about something. About moving out, actually.'

He speared her with a look. 'You want to leave?'

'Don't look so surprised!' she replied with an offhanded laugh. 'Did you think you'd never be rid of me?'

'Did Louise give you the idea you had to leave?'

'No!'

He continued to stare at her, waiting.

Ela sighed. She really was terrible at lying. ‘Maybe a little,’ she owned, ‘but I myself think it’s time to leave. The plan was always to move on and find my own place.’

‘You’re meant to stay here for the whole two months,’ he said, studying her implacably.

‘Oh no. It was only meant to be a week or two,’ she replied glibly. ‘Only until I got my bearings . . . And I have them now. Besides, I’m sure you don’t want me around, cramping your style.’

‘And what style is that exactly?’

‘You know – that peculiar, reserved style that makes British men so British,’ she teased.

‘I’m Scottish.’

‘Of course.’ She almost smiled at his surly expression. ‘Although, in my defence, you barely have a hint of an accent. You sound posh.’

‘You can blame Eton. I boarded for years. But dinna fash, lassie,’ he said in a heavy Scottish brogue, ‘ah can still talk like a right-proper Scotsman when I need tae put it oan. Ye ken, eh?’

Ela stared at him, transfixed.

Who knew a few elongated vowels, dropped constants and rolling r’s could be so thrilling. And calling her *lassie* . . . She didn’t even want to think about what that did to her nether regions.

‘Why are you looking at me like that?’ he asked with a smile, as if he could read her thoughts.

‘Um, that was . . . educational.’

She cringed. *Educational?*

‘Susan sounds posh too,’ she went on quickly. ‘Another boarding-school alumnae?’

‘Cheltenham Ladies’ College,’ he replied, grabbing two plates.

‘That must have been difficult for your mum, having both of you living away.’

‘Our mother is not exactly the doting maternal type,’ he said, as he split the pile of pancakes between the plates.

‘Hmm . . . That explains a lot.’

‘That better be a compliment.’ He held out a plate of pancakes to her.

She took it, but he held on.

‘It *could* have been,’ she replied, and, with a smile, smacked his hand and took possession of the plate.

‘Are all Australian women vicious?’

‘Oh, please. It was the tiniest whack! Aren’t Scotsmen meant to be tough, fierce warriors?’

He sniggered. ‘Your supply of sass is overflowing this morning. Why do I get feisty Ela, while everyone else gets the sweet, butter-wouldn’t-melt-in-her-mouth version?’

Her eyes widened a little. ‘I’m sorry . . . Do I do that?’

‘I’m teasing,’ he said, brow creasing. ‘Never apologise for being you. I’ve already told you to be as disagreeable as you want around me, and you’re failing miserably. I happen to like feisty Ela.’

‘You do?’ She laughed uncertainly. ‘You seem to be the only one who can bring her out in me.’

‘That I don’t believe.’

‘It’s true!’

‘What about friends?’

‘With all the travelling I do, I’ve lost touch with my friends from school and the conservatorium,’ she said, matter-of-factly. ‘And back when they knew me, I was very shy.’

‘So no feisty Ela?’

Ela shook her head. ‘No. I usually invite saccharine adjectives – sweet, nice, friendly.’ She grimaced. ‘So dull! Even I get bored hearing about myself. So, I’ll take feisty any day of the week. It makes me sound interesting.’

He frowned at her. ‘Why in the hell would you think you’re not interesting?’

She considered the question, faintly surprised that he had asked it.

How could she explain how she felt when this was the first time she had given the matter any proper thought?

‘Perhaps because I don’t know myself well enough to find myself interesting.’

‘I can’t even compute that you can feel that way.’

She looked away from the heaviness of his gaze.

‘When you’ve been working as long as I have . . .’ She hesitated, then tried again. ‘I grew up in front of audiences. They still think of me as the wholesome, innocent kid with the long red hair from years ago. They like me in that box.’

She wasn’t certain she should be sharing so much information, but he was listening so intently – as if what she said actually mattered to him – that she found herself wanting to continue.

‘I have an image that has worked well for so long that people are invested in it. And I don’t want to let them down, so I play along. But, in the process, I’ve never had the chance to discover who I really am . . . or who I *want* to be.’

‘Susan mentioned you needed a break from your work . . .’ He left the sentence hanging, watching her as he leaned against the island, arms folded across his chest, seemingly comfortable with the silence that stretched between them.

Ela felt words bubbling up inside her, ready to spill out.

Would he treat her differently if he knew?

Most people's behaviour changed when they learnt who she was. Even if they didn't listen to classical music themselves, just knowing she was one of the stars of the genre seemed to irrevocably alter their perception of her.

It was very isolating.

If there was some way she could perform and avoid being famous, she would do it in a heartbeat. But virtuosity was intrinsically linked to fame; increasingly so in a world connected by technology.

The smell of burning snapped them both out of their thoughts. Looking back at the stove, they saw the pancake pan now held an interesting black smoking mass.

'Bugger!' Murdoch switched off the burner, threw the offending pancake into the sink, and sprayed it with water. 'We have enough anyway.'

He held Ela's gaze for a brief moment, wordlessly letting her know that she had only won a reprieve. Then, picking up his plate and coffee, he headed out of the kitchen.

'Follow me.'

Not certain whether to be relieved or disappointed, Ela trailed after him, plate in hand.

He led the way to his home office at the back of the apartment, and then surprised her by stepping through an opened sash window and onto a narrow walkway between the external apartment wall and the parapet of the façade.

The walkway continued the whole length of the building, but after only a few metres, towards the centre of the mansion block, Murdoch rounded a corner and disappeared.

Following him, Ela saw a space open up between the brick chimneys and zinc-covered domes that decorated each corner of the building. It was a makeshift terrace and, on a beautiful day like today, a hidden suntrap.

‘Oh, wow!’ she breathed.

Murdoch had set up a tartan picnic rug and cushions in the middle of the area, and a tray with maple syrup, glasses, orange juice and cutlery was on the ground beside the rug.

It felt as if they were in their own private world, high above the rooftops. It was so charming and picturesque it took Ela a few moments to realise that Murdoch was waiting for her to sit before he sat down himself.

She hurried over.

‘I don’t know what to say! This is on another level to your usual morning efforts,’ she said jokily, trying to hide how touched she was by his gesture.

‘Thought I’d better pull out all the stops to apologise for yesterday.’

‘That was unnecessary . . . but much appreciated.’ She poured the orange juice into both glasses to avoid meeting his gaze and, sitting cross-legged, cut into her pancake stack.

Murdoch seemed happy to lounge back against the cushions with his coffee and watch her. It made her nervous, and she fiddled with the hem of her pyjama shorts as she chewed.

‘These pancakes are amazing!’ she said, after finishing her mouthful. ‘You must really love to cook for it to taste this good.’

‘I do, but I don’t often get the chance. When I’m in London, it’s just me, so I don’t see the point. And in Scotland, I have a lady who cooks for me and my mother.’

‘You live with your mother?’ she asked with surprise, then quickly added: ‘Not that there’s anything wrong with that.’

‘I inherited a big house. She’s lived in it since before my time; it would be cruel to kick her out.’ He looked vaguely uncomfortable with the topic of conversation.

‘Of course it would!’

Impressed, she stared at him for a few moments before tearing her gaze away. How many men would agree to having their mother live with them because it was the right thing to do? He really was amazingly admirable.

After a pause, she divulged: 'I can't cook. I never seem to have the time to learn properly.'

'I can teach you some basics, if you like?'

Ela looked across at him, uncertain what to say.

The ring of a mobile phone broke the silence. Murdoch frowned and, to Ela's surprise, took his phone out of his pocket and turned it off.

'So what keeps you so busy?' he asked.

'Pardon?'

'You said you don't have time to learn to cook.'

'Oh . . . I travel a lot.'

He smiled lightly. 'Busking?'

Ela looked discomfited.

'Don't explain if you don't want to,' he said, 'but I'm pretty sure a busker's earnings don't stretch to Louis Vuitton luggage. And don't bother telling me it's fake. I know quality when I see it.'

His comment felt loaded with meaning.

'I know it's a terrible imposition,' she said, biting her lip, 'but would you mind if I answered your question in around seven weeks?'

The pleading look in her eyes made him say gruffly: 'You don't have to answer me at all.'

'I want to answer you! Just not at the moment.'

They lapsed into silence as they both ate their pancakes.

Madge rounded the corner, miaowing loudly, and walked over to them.

‘You found us!’ Ela said fondly, and gave her a piece of pancake. ‘No, you can’t sit on my lap while I’m eating . . . I said no! Behave yourself. Go and try your coquetry on your master.’

Murdoch looked amused by their interaction. ‘She knows she can’t sit on me. I’m allergic to cats.’

Ela laughed with astonishment. ‘You’re allergic to cats and yet you got yourself a cat?’

‘Madge is Susan’s cat. She left her with me when she moved overseas.’

‘That’s . . . quite a commitment,’ said Ela, desperately trying to ignore the warm, fuzzy feeling deep in her chest.

What was it about men showing kindness to animals that made women go all fluttery and gooey-eyed?

He shrugged. ‘I don’t mind. I just need to wash my hands after I touch her, and get the house cleaned daily.’

‘Ah . . . That explains Marika’s constant presence! I was starting to worry you were a psycho.’

They exchanged a smile, their gazes holding.

‘Why don’t you stay?’ he said abruptly.

His words hung in the air, exposed and heavy. He almost regretted having spoken them.

Getting rid of Ela had been his intention from the start; he should be relieved she was leaving. And, even if he had got used to having her around, it was prudent to put some distance between them. He made a point of avoiding complicated relationships, and if she stuck around, he might lose sight of that fact.

There was something about her that made him want to protect her from the world and keep her safe . . . and if *that* didn’t scream complications, he didn’t know what did.

Ela was too surprised to say anything for a moment.

It crossed her mind that Murdoch might actually like her . . . not just as a friend.

But male-female undercurrents were not her forte. And though she was fairly certain that he wasn't flirting, he *was* looking at her in a way that made her feel both exhilarated and alarmed.

'Thank you,' she said carefully, 'but I can't stay.'

'I understand,' he replied, already withdrawing.

'I owe you big time as it is! You picked me up from the airport; introduced me to your friends; looked after me; fed me.' She laughed self-consciously. 'Frankly, I'm a little worried what the payback conditions will be.'

There was a slight pause.

'No conditions.'

'Good to know!' she said with forced humour and shoved another piece of pancake into her mouth. After chewing it for a few seconds, not tasting a thing, she went on: 'So . . . I was looking in my *Lonely Planet* last night and I found a cute bed and breakfast in Kew. I was going to go over today and take a look.'

'No.'

She looked at him with surprise. 'What do you mean, *no*?'

'I've got a better idea.'

'I can't stay here—'

'I know. Since you're determined to leave, you should go and stay with my sister.'

Her brow wrinkled. 'Susan?'

'No, Lesley. She's our half-sister, from our mother's first marriage.'

'Su never told me she had a sister!' exclaimed Ela, put out. 'She knows my whole life story, and all these years she

forgets to mention she has a brother *and* a sister! Are there any more siblings I should know about?’

He looked amused. ‘No.’

She nibbled on her lip, regarding him thoughtfully. ‘But won’t Lesley mind having a stranger stay with her?’

‘She has a large house in Chiswick and loves having people stay. And she’s an artist. You’ll fit right in.’

‘Why didn’t Susan ask . . .’ She didn’t finish her sentence.

‘Why didn’t Susan ask Lesley to take you in, rather than her bad-tempered brother?’

‘I wasn’t going to say that! Well . . . not *exactly*.’

‘They had a disagreement, but it won’t last long. They’re very close.’ Ela must have looked uncertain, for he added: ‘Try Lesley’s place for a few days. If you don’t want to stay, I’ll drive you to your B & B myself.’

Chapter 12

Murdoch parked in front of a large house from the Edwardian era, with white stucco bay windows on either side of a dark-pink door and an ancient wisteria trailing up the façade.

Peering out the passenger window, Ela exclaimed softly: ‘It’s so pretty!’

They unloaded her luggage and rang the doorbell.

No one answered.

Murdoch pressed the doorbell again.

‘Coming!’ a muffled voice called from within.

The door opened and an attractive, plump woman Ela guessed to be in her late forties peered out at them. She was wearing a red caftan with a painting smock over the top (which was comprised of more paint than material), and her wildly curling blonde hair was falling out of the combs that were meant to be holding it up.

She greeted Murdoch with a wide smile. ‘Hello, pet! And this must be the Ela I’ve heard so much about!’

Taking off her smock, she handed it to Murdoch and then pulled Ela into an all-encompassing hug.

For some reason, Ela was overcome with an urge to giggle.

‘Thank you for letting me stay with you, Lesley,’ she said, when she was finally released.

‘Any friend of Murdoch’s is always welcome in my home!’

Her West-London accent made Ela wonder why she didn’t have her brother’s and sister’s posher one.

‘And you must call me Les, dear – Lesley is such a mouthful! Although better than Lesley-Ann, I’ll grant you,

which is what my mother insists on calling me. Come in, come in! I've put some scones in the oven so we can celebrate your arrival.'

'I can't stay,' said Murdoch. 'I've got to get back to the office for a meeting.'

'What a shame! But you know you're welcome anytime, pet.'

He nodded and turned to Ela. 'Call if you need anything . . . Susan expects me to keep an eye on you.'

'Oh, you don't have to do that!' Ela said quickly.

He gave her a look that basically told her to shut up. 'Also, Meredith asked me to remind you that you agreed to join them for their regular pub quiz night.'

'Are you going?'

'I don't usually,' he replied noncommittally.

Giving Lesley back her smock, he started to load himself up with the luggage.

'No, please leave it!' exclaimed Ela. 'I can take care of it from here.'

He ignored her and headed for the stairs.

'First room on the right!' Lesley called after him. 'Let him do it, dear. He appears to want to be useful to a woman, for a change.'

Ela caught her assessing look and stammered: 'H-he's very kind and attentive.'

'He is kind, although not many people recognise it beneath all that crustiness. As for *attentive* . . . Well, if *you* think so, dear, then I suppose he must be.'

'What a beautiful house you have,' said Ela, abruptly changing the subject.

Looking about her, she caught sight of a baby grand piano in the bay window of the front room to the left. A tingle of

anticipation shot up her fingers. This was the longest she had gone without playing the piano since she was a child.

‘It is a lovely house, isn’t it?’ said Lesley. ‘I’ve lived here all my life. And it’s very convenient, only a five-minute walk to Chiswick High Road and the Tube.’

It took Murdoch a couple of trips to get the luggage upstairs. When he finally rejoined them in the entrance hall, he leaned down so his sister could give him a goodbye kiss.

It looked as if he would do the same for Ela, but, at the last moment, he held out his hand.

‘Thank you,’ said Ela, shaking it. ‘For everything.’

He nodded once, then walked off.

Ela watched as he made his way back to his car.

‘He can be a little rough around the edges,’ said Lesley, observing her, ‘but he’s got a heart of gold.’

‘Yes . . . He’s wonderful.’

‘That’s nothing to be disheartened about, dear.’

Ela started to deny that she was disheartened, but Lesley had already walked off down the corridor.

‘Would you mind terribly if I finish my pose?’ she said over her shoulder. ‘Such a critical moment! I’m afraid if I don’t finish it now, I may never recapture it. Shouldn’t take more than a minute or two. Come, come! We can talk while I paint.’

As Ela followed her through the house, words like ‘bohemian’ and ‘clutter’ came to mind.

The rooms were all painted in different jewel colours. An eclectic mix of paintings with no discernible curative theme hung on the walls; tribal rugs overlapped each other and covered most of the original timber floors; and photo frames, Venetian masks, vases of peacock feathers, and a hodgepodge of other collectibles decorated every remaining inch of space.

Disturbingly, there was also a large glass box on a stand in one corner of the living room that contained branches, leaves, and a magnificent brown snake with cream and black markings.

‘That’s Amanda,’ said Lesley lovingly, when she noticed Ela staring. ‘She’s a royal python. They can live to more than thirty years of age, if you can believe it! She’s only five, so, apart from my family, she’ll be the longest relationship I’ll ever have,’ she chuckled. ‘She’s the sweetest thing. Don’t worry if you stumble across her every now and then. They’re sedentary creatures, but I do occasionally let her out to have a little explore around the house.’

Ela was rendered tongue-tied.

After that disclosure, she doubted she’d ever be comfortable roaming the house alone. Lesley wanted to keep moving, so there was no time to better her acquaintance with Amanda and try to make friends, for which she didn’t know whether to be thankful or not.

Lesley quickly showed her the kitchen – a large, welcoming space with a battered oak country kitchen table in the centre, a pastel-pink retro Smeg fridge-freezer in one corner, and duck-egg-blue cupboards against two of the walls with open shelving above, cluttered with cups, glasses, utensils and other accoutrements.

After this slight detour, they returned to the living room, crossed it, and entered a conservatory set up as a painting studio.

The conservatory, living room and kitchen formed a U-shape around a lovely Portland stone terrace, and each room had French doors that opened out onto it. At the end of the terrace, a few shallow steps led onto a lawn and an English cottage garden beyond.

‘Welcome to my studio!’ said Lesley, sitting down in front of a large canvas on an easel and picking up her brush.

Ela’s gaze roamed around the space with interest.

The smell of oil paint and spirits was heavy in the air, despite the French doors being thrown open. Paint brushes, paints and solvents cluttered up a desk at one end, and canvases leaned in untidy vertical stacks against walls and furniture.

For the most part, Lesley's style of painting appeared to be a mixture of impressionism and modernism, with bright splashes of colour and broad brushstrokes that managed to convey detail without rendering the image too overdone. Ela genuinely liked it. She could visualise a couple of the paintings on the walls in her apartment.

Continuing her exploration, her eyes landed on an emerald-green divan in the centre of the room, partly covered with a fringed paisley shawl.

With a start of surprise, she realised there was a man reclining on it, one arm thrown negligently above his head . . . naked as the day he was born.

Her mouth fell open.

'Sit down, dear,' Lesley told her kindly.

Ela dropped into a chair.

'This beautiful creature is Alejandro! Alejandro, dear, meet Ela. She'll be staying with me for a little while.'

Alejandro smiled lazily and waved, seeming to be very comfortable with his naked state.

'So, how do you like London?' asked Lesley. 'Our weather certainly can't compare to Australia! What possessed you to come here? No, don't answer that! You must be sick to death of hearing the question. What a bore to have to keep repeating yourself. Apart from the weather, do you like it here?'

'I, er . . . yes,' replied Ela absentmindedly, her gaze rivetted on the exceptionally well-built Alejandro.

'London won't sweep you off your feet like Paris does,' continued Lesley, 'but bit by bit, it will charm the pants off

you. And where is home for you, dear?’

‘Um . . . Sydney.’

‘How lovely! I’ve visited a couple of times and even did a painting course in the Blue Mountains. The light! It’s absolutely gorgeous, in that bright, glaring kind of way that makes every ounce of colour pop. Do you have family there?’

‘Yes . . . Mum, Dad, a few cousins.’

‘No siblings?’

‘I’m an only child.’

‘Do you ever get lonely? I have two siblings and they’ve kept me busy with their shenanigans over the years! Although, I have no cause for complaint these days. Murdoch has reigned himself in to the point of dullness, and Susan . . . well, she’s the baby of the family, and I’m afraid I’ve spoiled her rotten, so she still has her quirks. Still, I love the little miscreant despite it all. She has a good heart – as I’m sure you know! – so I can’t stay mad at her for long. Only, don’t tell her I said that, will you?’

‘No . . . I won’t.’

‘Good, good! I want her to stew a little before I forgive her. So dear, do you get lonely?’

After that meandering stream of consciousness, Ela was almost surprised by Lesley’s return to her original question.

‘I don’t really have time to be lonely.’ She paused, then added: ‘But I suppose I do. I just don’t pay it any attention, if that makes sense.’

‘I can see you’re not a wallower – good girl! What’s the point of wallowing in unproductive emotions? You’ll only make yourself more miserable, and repulse others to boot . . . There! All done! Thank you, Alejandro, dear, that’s all for today. Can you sit for me again on Thursday?’

‘I wouldn’t miss it for the world, *cariño*,’ he replied in a heavy Spanish accent.

‘You’re so sweet to me!’

The specimen of male perfection rose from the divan and, unconscious of Ela’s fascinated stare, took his time putting on his jeans and shirt. He then sashayed over to Lesley and gave her a smouch on the mouth.

With a final, knowing smile at Ela, he walked out.

‘What a beautiful boy!’ said Lesley. ‘Gay as a lark, of course, but still, a girl could get lost in those big brown eyes.’

‘I didn’t notice his eyes . . .’ Ela put a hand over her mouth, embarrassed. ‘Sorry, that just came out!’

‘No need to blush in this household. And I understand your sentiments exactly. Let’s go and get you settled into your room, shall we, dear? Afterwards, we can get to know each other over some scones and tea.’

Lesley guided her back through the house.

They had just reached the staircase leading from the entrance hall up to the first floor when the front door opened.

To Ela’s astonishment, in walked the woman she had met in the bathroom on the night of Murdoch’s birthday . . . Kat.

‘Always a pleasure to bump into Alejandro,’ drawled Kat, throwing her keys onto the console table in the hall. ‘If you gave me some time alone with him, Les, I’m certain I could turn him.’

‘You keep away from him!’ warned Lesley, a twinkle in her eyes. ‘I don’t want you scaring him off. He’s my favourite model, and god help me if he ever leaves! I’ll never again be able to find such perfect proportions.’

‘Spoilsport.’ Kat turned her attention on Ela. ‘Hey, sunshine. Glad you found your way to us.’

‘Do you live here?’ asked Ela, dumbfounded.

‘Yes. Worried?’

Ela almost smiled at her arch look. ‘No. But what are the chances of us meeting like this again?’

Kat shrugged and, not bothering to respond, walked off towards the kitchen.

‘Don’t mind her,’ said Lesley. ‘Kat’s lodged with me for years, and I love her dearly, but no one would call her manners exemplary.’ She started up the stairs. ‘I should warn you, dear, there’s only one bathroom up here – hope you don’t mind sharing? But, on the plus side, all the rooms are a good size, and I just had all the curtains changed to match the carpet. Do you like tartan?’

‘Ah . . . yes,’ replied Ela uncertainly.

‘I was having a nostalgic moment and asked my mother to send me some from Scotland.’

‘Were you raised there?’

‘Oh, no, no! Murdoch and I are half-siblings. We share the same battleaxe who popped us out, but my father was as English as they come. He was from Middlesbrough originally, but we always lived in London – in this very house, actually! He left it to me when he died. Mother had divorced him years before, so she had no cause for complaint . . . not that she would have wanted it!’ She laughed. ‘Her second husband had houses all over Scotland and a monolith of a mansion in Grosvenor Square. He was a bit of a loose screw,’ she whispered confidentially, ‘although very droll, and always perfectly polite to me. As for dear, sweet Papa – he didn’t have an ounce of backbone, bless him! When it came to my upbringing, Mother always overruled him, as she did on most things, and so I was brought up as Scottish as I could be living in Chiswick. Which is why I absolutely adore a nice tartan!’

Ela smiled as she followed her hostess upstairs. She was beginning to realise that no matter how far Lesley strayed from her point, she always found her way back to it.

Chapter 13

It took Ela a few days to acclimatise to Lesley's house. There never seemed to be a quiet moment. Whether it was the steady stream of visitors who dropped by to chat to Lesley, to pick something up or drop something off, or the adult art students who came to her painting and wine classes three times a week, or the music coming from Kat's bedroom at all hours of the day and night, there was always something happening.

Most people would have found it disruptive, but Ela discovered that the background noise of other people's lives was actually rather soothing and wonderfully normal.

When she wasn't out exploring the area, she spent many hours in one of the front rooms reading the pile of books she had bought herself; a few educational, most feel-good. No one seemed to use that particular room, and Lesley was happy to let her have the run of it, bringing her snacks and tea at regular intervals like a mother hen while Ela tried to catch up on years of reading.

The piano in the bay window would often catch her attention, like an old friend beckoning, and she had once or twice strayed over to stroke the keys and check to see if it was in tune (mainly yes). But, although she missed it, she avoided sitting down to play.

Ela McIntosh was here to live a life outside of music. The piano could wait for Gabriela Baxtor-Huntington's return in a few weeks' time.

She hadn't heard from Murdoch since he had dropped her off, however, Meredith and Sienna called her separately to see how she was doing, and both were keen to visit. Meredith raising the idea with great discretion, and Sienna like a sledgehammer.

They arrived after work one night with flowers and champagne.

‘Congratulations, lovely!’ cried Sienna, as Ela opened the door. ‘Ooh, I see the eyebrows have grown back.’

‘Almost,’ laughed Ela.

‘Can I just say, I love this house!’ gushed Meredith as she scanned the frontage with an architect’s eye. ‘And this colour on the front door is to die for! *Radicchio* from Farrow & Ball, right?’

‘Sorry, I wouldn’t know,’ replied Ela. ‘But I love the house too. And the area.’

‘Chiswick is great,’ agreed Meredith. ‘The high street is so vibey. And you’ll have to visit the old higgledy-piggledy pubs by the river. There’s so much history around here – did you know Alexander Pope and Yeats used to live here? Oh, and the name Chiswick actually comes from the Old English “*Ceswican*”, which literally means “Cheese Farm”.’

‘What she means by that exuberant display of general knowledge,’ said Sienna, ‘is that you’ve done well to land here.’

‘I had little choice in the matter,’ replied Ela wryly. ‘Murdoch insisted.’

‘He’s so highhanded!’ complained Meredith. ‘He called me yesterday to inform me that I *had to* come over and check on you.’

‘Did he?’ said Ela, trying to remain unmoved by that information. ‘It must be Susan’s doing.’

‘Maybe, but I couldn’t resist being smug and telling him that we’d already made plans and his input was superfluous.’

‘I can’t believe he’s got two sisters we’ve never met,’ said Sienna. ‘He’s a master at compartmentalising. So, what’s *this* sister like?’

‘Lesley? She’s wonderful,’ replied Ela. ‘And she’s looking forward to meeting you. Come in!’

She gave them a quick tour of the downstairs rooms, then showed them into the living room and introduced them to Lesley, who was waiting with a tray of cosmopolitans.

‘Welcome, welcome! Ela has such lovely things to say about you both. I hope you like vodka on an empty stomach? I find it’s the best alternative to Prozac. Are you ready for a testosterone-free evening? It’s so much nicer having just the girls round for dinner – men have such a depressing effect on a girl’s digestion!’

Sienna looked across at Ela and mouthed *love her*.

‘Quite right,’ agreed Meredith. ‘I’ve had a shocker of a day with my boss, and any male wandering into my vicinity tonight is in for an earful. My poor husband had the misfortune of ringing me earlier to tell me he’d forgotten to pick up the dry-cleaning and got his head bitten off.’

Lesley handed her two cosmopolitans. ‘There you go, dear. No rationing in this house! And there’s more where that came from. Watching *Sex and the City* without cosmopolitans is like watching rugby without beer.’

‘A woman after my own heart!’ laughed Sienna, grabbing a glass. ‘Thanks, Lesley.’

‘Call me Les, dear. My mother’s not around to disapprove.’

Kat sauntered into the room. ‘Have we started Sexing in the City yet?’

‘Not yet, dear. Come meet our guests!’

Introductions were carried out and cocktails passed around.

‘Les, don’t even think of coming near me with that lolly water,’ warned Kat. ‘I’m getting myself a beer.’ She walked off towards the kitchen.

Lesley shook her head. ‘I try and I try to impart some sophistication into that girl . . . but all my efforts are in vain!’

she yelled after Kat. ‘Oh well, more for us. Sit down, sit down! Relax. Shoes off. Pizza is on its way.’

They arranged themselves on two large plush sofas that took up half the room, each covered in a different tartan material.

‘Oh my god, is that a snake?’ Meredith whispered to Ela as she sat beside her, eyes glued to the glass box in the corner.

‘That’s Amanda,’ Ela chuckled softly. A few days’ acquaintance with the python had made her more accustomed to its menacing presence. ‘Don’t worry; Les assures me she’s a sweetheart and quite harmless.’

Meredith raised her eyebrows halfway up her head. ‘Let’s hope we never have to find out if that’s true.’

‘Ah! This is the life,’ sighed Sienna, making herself comfortable on the other sofa. ‘Pop-porn on TV, cosmos and pizza – what more could a girl ask for?’

‘Weed?’ said Kat, walking in again, a beer in one hand and a lit joint in the other.

‘It’s not the strong, overengineered sort, is it?’ asked Lesley.

‘I don’t use crap, Les. It’s the organic, retro kind.’

‘Well, I am a retro girl!’ Lesley accepted the joint and took a drag.

She handed it to Ela, who looked at it suspiciously and then took an inexpert puff.

Coughing and grimacing, she offered it to Sienna.

‘Not for me, thanks, lovely. It just makes me sleepy.’

‘Give it here!’ said Meredith. ‘I need something to relax me or I’ll explode.’

‘Why the bad day?’ asked Ela.

Meredith took a long drag. ‘The imbecile that masquerades as my boss surpassed himself! Seven days before

a major presentation to a client, he dumps me with the responsibility of preparing the whole thing. Everything! He's had four weeks and he's done sod all!

'Prat,' snorted Sienna.

'And he had the audacity to make it sound as if he was doing *me* a favour. He called me "an aspiring young architect". *Aspiring!* I've got a Masters in Architecture and more hands-on experience than he could dream of! And then he blames me for making him late and storms out. Do you know what he was late for?' She made a poking action with her finger in the air. 'His daily constitutional with his mistress.'

She took another drag, too vigorously this time, and ended up coughing.

'Sounds like your boss needs to have his balls removed with a blunt instrument,' said Kat. 'I know someone who could arrange it, if you're interested?'

'That's sweet of you to offer, don't tempt me!'

'He probably can't get it up,' mused Lesley, 'so he has to empower himself by taking it out on you. Petty, but not a rare thing to happen to a girl. I once had an ex-husband like him . . . Well, I suppose I still do! Wiry little man, not a chest hair to speak of. Don't know why I married him, really, but teenagers will be teenagers. I blame my mother for not using a stronger padlock when she locked me in my room to stop me running away with him.'

Her audience regarded her with awed fascination.

'The next time your boss becomes insufferable, dear,' she went on, 'imagine his small, flaccid penis not being able to rise to the occasion.'

'Oh god, I'd rather not! I may end up throwing up on him.'

Kat laughed. 'The old "vomit on your boss" trick. Very effective in conveying utter disdain.'

‘You’re right!’ giggled Meredith. ‘I’ll have to keep that one up my sleeve.’

An hour or so later, they were watching Kim Cattrall simulate an impressively realistic orgasm when Meredith, sunk in mellow loquaciousness, let out a deep sigh.

‘I wish I could do that.’

‘What?’ exclaimed Sienna, sitting up and staring at her. ‘Are you saying you’ve never orgasmed?’

‘I’m not sure . . . by the time I think I can detect something, it’s gone.’

‘It’s not detective work,’ snorted Kat. ‘You *know* when you come.’

‘I didn’t have one until my forties,’ revealed Lesley. ‘Everyone in their own time, I say!’

‘Why haven’t you told me this before?’ Sienna asked Meredith accusingly. ‘I have the perfect solution for you!’

‘It’s not a big deal! Richie doesn’t mind. And I don’t know any different, so I’m not really missing out on anything.’

‘Oh my god! Resignation is not a bloody virtue! It’s not too late, you just have to put in a little work. It’s like learning to ride a bike – it might feel a bit strange at first, and you might get embarrassed when you fall off, but you’ll soon learn to relax into it and have a ball.’

‘Or two,’ smirked Kat.

‘Fall off?’ said Meredith, looking worried.

‘I think we can disregard that part of the analogy,’ giggled Ela.

‘Unless mounting something large enough to fall off of is what Sienna has in mind?’ said Kat.

Sienna frowned at her. ‘Shush! You’ll scare the girl. What you need,’ she told Meredith, ‘is a few tantric massage sessions for couples. You know the guy I’ve been going to in Shepherd’s Bush? He’s taken me places Sting and Trudie can only dream of! It’s all about the flow of energy through your chakras and opening up the blockages.’

‘Tantric massage – is that like shiatsu?’ asked Ela.

‘Shiatsu tends to stay clear of your genitals,’ said Kat.

A horrified look came over Meredith. ‘Is this man going to *touch* me?’

Sienna rolled her eyes. ‘Of course he’s going to touch you – it’s a bloody massage! Nothing to get excited about.’

‘I thought that was the point?’ drawled Kat, making Ela and Lesley guffaw.

‘Don’t worry, he’s a professional!’ insisted Sienna.

Kat raised an eyebrow. ‘I think that’s what she’s afraid of.’

‘Ignore them, Meri-Berry!’ said Sienna. ‘Tantra is an ancient Indian philosophy practised for centuries. It’s nothing to be embarrassed about . . . and believe me, after three hours of tantric massage, you *really* don’t care who’s opening your sacred chakra.’

Everyone dissolved into laughter, apart from Meredith, who shook her head violently.

‘No, no, no, no! No one is ever going anywhere near my *sacred chakra*.’

‘That could be your problem right there,’ observed Kat.

Even Meredith laughed that time.

‘Oh, please stop!’ exclaimed Ela, trying to catch her breath. ‘I can’t laugh anymore without pulling a muscle.’

‘Fun fact,’ Meredith said, wagging a finger expressively. ‘Studies show that laughing is good for stress levels.’

Ela nodded with enthusiasm. ‘That must be true. I haven’t felt this stress-free for ever!’

‘You know what else is good for stress?’ said Sienna. ‘Qigong. Ela, you should come and do a class with me.’

‘Is that another type of tantric thingy?’ Ela asked suspiciously.

‘You see!’ cried Meredith, gesticulating. ‘It’s not so funny when *you’re* in the hot seat.’

‘Relax, both of you!’ tutted Sienna. ‘It’s a type of meditation and martial arts training.’

The doorbell rang.

‘Pizza’s here!’ exclaimed Lesley. ‘Time out while Les is out of the room – I don’t want to miss anything!’

Chapter 14

Lesley threw open the front door with a flourish.

‘Murdoch!’ she exclaimed. ‘What are you doing here, pet?’ Suddenly, her face fell dramatically, and she peered behind him. ‘You didn’t bring Mother, did you?’ she stage-whispered. ‘I got a text from her today telling me she’s in London.’

‘Your eagerness to see our parent is touching,’ he drawled, ‘but she’s not with me.’ He ran a hand over his face. ‘Christ, I’m in no position to cast stones. I bolted as soon as she arrived at my apartment and informed me she was staying for a few days.’

‘Really? What excuse did you give her for leaving?’

‘Said I had a work trip booked.’

‘Why isn’t she staying at the family townhouse in Grosvenor Square? That’s usually her domain.’

‘She told me she was having the house fumigated.’

‘For what? Commoners? Only blue bloods shall enter!’ Lesley laughed uproariously.

He gave her a searching look. ‘She’s not as bad as that.’

‘Says her pride and joy, the Earl of Buchanan! You, pet, are in no position to judge. Ever since she married your father, she’s developed a robust superiority complex. She’s become more of a Buchanan than the old earl ever was! Wait . . . is that a suitcase in your hand?’ She looked down and giggled. ‘I’m sure there’s a punchline in there somewhere.’

‘Are you drunk?’

‘Pfff! I’ve had barely two drinks. Don’t deflect – what’s going on?’

‘I need a place to stay.’

‘I must be remarkably slow tonight . . . Do you mean *here*?’

‘Do you mind?’

She looked surprised. ‘You know you’re welcome anytime, so don’t take this the wrong way, but wouldn’t you be more comfortable in a posh hotel?’

‘Too easy for Mother to track me down.’

If this explanation sounded a little feeble to her, she gave no indication of it.

‘Well then, of course, you must stay here! But what about Madge? Don’t tell me you’ve left the poor kitty with the battleaxe? You know she hates anything furry that’s not dead and wrapped around her shoulders.’

‘She doesn’t hate Madge; she’s wary of her. Most women have reason to be, apart from . . . Anyway, she’s promised to feed her while I’m away. And if Madge does drive her out of the apartment sooner rather than later, I won’t complain.’

‘Well, if you’re certain,’ Lesley said doubtfully. ‘You know I’d love to have Madge here, but I’m afraid Amanda’s penchant for cute small animals might prove detrimental to her health. Gracious, what are we doing standing about in the doorway? Come in, come in! I’ve got a living room full of women, by the way. Try not to get in a sulk about it.’

He looked appalled. ‘Women?’

‘Don’t worry, pet, they’re friends of yours – Meredith and Sienna. Lovely girls! And Ela and Kat, of course.’

He accepted this without comment, but as he followed her down the corridor, he muttered: ‘I never sulk.’

Back in the living room, Kat had gone off somewhere, and Meredith was telling Ela and Sienna about an article she had read.

‘. . . so all atoms are recycled. We could have a bit of Shakespeare in us – how amazing is that?’

‘What if you live in Siberia?’ asked Ela, brow deeply furrowed.

‘Perhaps the atoms travel around on the wind, or bird migration. I’ll have to look into it.’

‘Please don’t,’ said Sienna. ‘You’ve got enough trivia crammed into that head of yours.’

‘Girls, look who landed on my doorstep!’ cried Lesley, walking into the room with Murdoch trailing behind.

Three pairs of eyes fixed on him.

He remained in the doorway, looking uncertain whether to enter or not, but the unguarded look of delight that swept across Ela’s face prompted him to take a few steps into the room.

‘What are you drinking, pet?’ asked Lesley. ‘Still avoiding alcohol?’

‘Yes. A ginger beer would be great, if you have any.’

‘Coming right up!’ Lesley headed towards the kitchen.

‘Hey, you!’ Meredith called out, waving languorously at him. ‘Come over here and give your old friend a hug.’

He gave her a suspicious look but, walking over, allowed her to pull him down over the back of the sofa and wrap her arms around him.

‘I love you, you overgrown teddy bear,’ she said affectionately, ruffling his hair.

‘Are you okay?’ he asked, frowning.

She exhaled loudly, making her lips trill. ‘Of. Course.’

Murdoch sniffed the air.

His gaze travelled to Ela, tucked into the opposite corner of the sofa. She was smiling at him a little too vacantly for his liking.

He reached over and took her chin in his hand, gently tilting her head to the light so he could look into her eyes.

She looked up at him trustingly.

He scowled.

Fixing Sienna with an accusing look, he snapped: ‘What have you done to her?’

‘Me? Why are you blaming me?’ objected Sienna. ‘I’m the only one here who’s *not* stoned.’

He turned back to Ela, his thumb unconsciously stroking her cheek. ‘Have you had weed before?’

She scrunched up her face in thought. ‘Hmm . . . Does once a millennium count?’

A smile tugged at his lips.

She loved making him smile.

‘Do you?’ he asked, his smile growing.

Had she said that out loud?

Time became elastic . . .

. . . and then he abruptly released her chin and stepped away.

‘Don’t smoke any more,’ he directed her. ‘You’ve recently had god knows what other substances in your bloodstream.’

‘Yes, sir!’ She saluted.

‘She’s barely had two puffs!’ scoffed Sienna. ‘Relax.’

‘Aren’t you worried about *me* being stoned?’ asked Meredith, with a playful look in her eyes. ‘I’ve definitely had more than Ela.’

‘My sister would skin me alive if anything happened to her best friend on my watch,’ he offered up brusquely.

With a final glance at Ela, he left the room.

The girls stared after him: one baffled, the other clueless, and the third quietly optimistic.

Lesley was pouring Murdoch's ginger beer into a glass when he walked into the kitchen.

'Here you go, pet,' she said, handing it to him. 'I was thinking . . . Are you heading back to Caeverlock Castle soon? I've half a mind to join you. It's been almost two years since I've been back, and I miss the loch and mountains. And I'd kill for one of Mrs Flockhart's stews! She's still your cook, isn't she? She hasn't retired?'

'As if I could get rid of her!' he returned. 'I tried offering her a generous pension a couple of years ago and she almost bit my head off. I'm sure she'd love to have you stay. She must get bored cooking for just Mother and me . . . Actually, I'm in her bad books at the moment. I haven't been home for a while.'

'You're never away from Scotland for long,' she said, surprised.

'I can't go back just now.'

'What's up? Normally we can't keep you in London for more than a couple of weeks! And I'm not going to fall for the "I want to spend time with my big sister" act, so don't even bother.'

'You know I'll always make time for you, Leyley,' he said, smiling a little guiltily.

'Hmm. I don't want to put a dampener on a heartstring moment, but I feel I should point out that I hardly ever hear from you when you're ensconced in Scotland.'

'Am I a terrible correspondent?'

‘You’re not a correspondent of any kind, pet!’

‘If I promise to do better,’ he said gruffly, ‘will you make me some of your famous scones for breakfast?’

Realising that was as close to an apology as she was going to get, she patted his arm affectionately.

‘Deal. And I’ll even throw in some clotted cream and homemade jam. But don’t think you can distract me with flattery! Why don’t you want to go back to Scotland? Don’t you need to oversee the family business?’

‘Don’t worry, neither my factor nor my business manager are shy about picking up the phone. And since when do you care about *the family business*?’

‘*Care* is a trifle grand. I’m merely overcome with curiosity. It’s my only sin, you know,’ she said coyly.

‘Only one? Far too boring for you.’

She laughed. ‘True! Stop sweet talking me and tell me straight – have you got yourself into some kind of trouble?’

Murdoch sighed and ran a hand through his hair, tousling it even more than usual.

‘Not yet. But if Mother had her way, I’d be up to my neck in it.’

‘What’s she done now?’

‘She’s gone and told everyone I’m “ready to settle down”,’ he grumbled, looking aggrieved. ‘I overheard her say those exact words to her bridge cronies. I’d been wondering why the hell all these women were suddenly throwing themselves at me.’

‘More than usual?’ she asked with sympathy.

‘It’s been beyond bloody belief! Scotland used to be my refuge, but not anymore! If they’re not calling me at all hours of the day, inviting me to bloody parties, they’re making up any damn excuse to oblige me to let them into the house – breakdowns, twisted ankles, bee stings.’

‘Bee stings?’

‘Don’t ask! I never knew women were so accident prone. They even interrupted my golf game. A pack of them swarmed wanting to carry my bag. I felt like a prize bull being fought over for mating. In this day and age, it’s bloody ridiculous for a man to be hunted because of a title!’

‘In their defence, pet, you’re also dangling the carrot of fortune and good looks in front of them . . . Oh, don’t look so put-out! You’re thirty-four. Mother held back the mob of hopefuls for years longer than your grandmother would have done. Remember what that old dragon used to say?’ She put her hands on her hips and glowered in imitation of Murdoch’s late grandmother. ‘Yer gotta breed, lad! That’s what yer were born ta do!’

‘Why do you sound like a witch out of Macbeth?’

‘I thought I captured her evil cackle perfectly. And she *did* used to say that.’

‘Don’t remind me.’

‘So, you see, Mother’s been doing you a favour . . . Until now, obviously.’

‘She should know I don’t dance to anyone’s tune but my own.’

‘So you ran away to London,’ she said bluntly.

‘Tactical retreat,’ he corrected. After a pause, he added sheepishly: ‘And . . . I may have let slip that I was gay.’

‘You’re *gay*?’ screeched Lesley.

Out in the corridor, Ela came to an abrupt halt.

After what could have been seconds or minutes, her brain kicked into gear again and forced her feet to keep moving in the direction of the bathroom.

Chapter 15

‘Since when are you gay?’ Lesley demanded, shocked to the core. ‘Oh, dear lord almighty, you’re gay! You must have known for years and years! Why didn’t you tell me? I’m the most open-minded one in this whole family! You should have come to me . . . Oh, this is going to *kill* Mother.’

‘Calm down. I’m not gay. I only said it in the spur of the moment to get her off my back.’

Lesley’s eyes narrowed. ‘You’re not gay?’

‘No.’

‘Are you certain?’

‘Christ, are you accusing me of not knowing my own sexual preferences?’

‘I’m not the one who opened this particular can of worms! Mother is going to *murder* you when she finds out you’re not gay . . . Now there’s a sentence I never thought I’d say.’

‘She’ll be so relieved she won’t care.’

‘Telling her you’re gay as a diversionary tactic is not something she’s likely to view with leniency. Oh god, she’s going to blame me, isn’t she? I don’t know how she could possibly make this my fault, but she’ll find a way.’

‘If you’d rather I didn’t stay here . . .’

‘Oh, stop! You might be on shaky moral ground, but you know you can always think of this house as your own.’

The doorbell rang.

‘That’s the pizza. We must talk more later! For now, come have dinner.’

‘I’ll go straight up to my room, if you don’t mind.’

‘But I do mind, pet, so you’ll just have to grin and bear it. You have to stop running away from the female sex . . . Are you sure you’re not gay?’

Murdoch threw her an irate look.

Meredith and Sienna were giggling over something as Lesley and Murdoch walked in with the pizza.

There was no sign of Ela or Kat.

With a hold on her brother's arm, Lesley propelled him towards a sofa.

'Sit and eat!' she instructed.

While Lesley was opening the pizza boxes and passing them around, Ela walked back into the room and quietly sat down.

She was light-headed and nauseous, and her limbs felt as if they were moving through a thick and viscous ether. She shouldn't have smoked that joint; it didn't seem to agree with her.

She absolutely refused to consider another explanation for her symptoms.

'Murdochy, are you a fan of *Sex and the City*?' asked Sienna.

Murdoch tore his gaze away from studying Ela and glowered at her. 'Give it a rest, Sienna.'

'Geez, you're touchy!'

'Don't bite her head off, pet,' said Lesley. 'It's not a come-on! It's a TV show.'

'I should warn you,' said Meredith, 'you'll soon be learning more about women than you ever thought possible . . . or even wanted to!'

Murdoch appeared ready to bolt, but Lesley put a hand on his shoulder to restrain him.

Ela forced a smile. ‘There are plenty of gorgeous men in the show too – eye-candy for all!’

Murdoch gave her a long, hard look. ‘You don’t look well. You should go to bed.’

A lump formed in her throat. She shook her head and looked away.

‘Well, I need to go to bed,’ he said, breaking free of his sister’s hold and standing. ‘I’ve had a hell of a week.’

‘I’ll come get you settled,’ said Lesley.

‘No need, Leyley. I know my way around.’ He grabbed a slice of pizza and walked out.

Ela watched him leave, feeling more depressed than she had right to be.

How had she not picked up on the signals?

Her one consolation was that no one else seemed to have any idea either. Even Lesley had sounded staggered. She wondered if Susan knew the truth.

‘Sorry, girls!’ said Lesley. ‘As you know, my brother can be a bit skittish around women.’

‘It’s so cute how he calls you *Leyley*,’ said Meredith.

‘Adorable, isn’t it? A left over from when he was a toddler and couldn’t pronounce his s’s.’

Kat walked back into the room. ‘What is it with you, Les? You only seem to let hot guys through the front door . . . not that I’m complaining! How long is your brother staying?’

‘Oh, a few days.’

Ela looked at her in surprise. Murdoch was staying *here*?

‘I didn’t realise he was staying with you,’ said Sienna, echoing Ela’s thoughts. ‘Is everything ok?’

‘Just family stuff,’ replied Lesley. ‘I won’t bore you with the details.’

Chapter 16

Quiz night was held at a small, traditional pub tucked away in the backstreets of Barons Court. The pub was at least five hundred years old, and its ornate façade of arches, mullioned windows and marble pillars was decorated with several hanging pots of ivy and geraniums.

Inside, it boasted age-blackened timbers, oxblood painted walls above oak panelling, and battered, comfortable furniture that looked like it had been used for generations.

Ela instantly fell in love with it as she followed Sienna through the front door. They were casually dressed in tank tops and leggings, having come straight from their exercise class, but, as Sienna had assured her, the pub's vibe was very low-key and no one batted an eyelid.

Meredith and Richard had commandeered a table near the quiz master, who was collecting entrance fees and handing out the quiz sheets, and they made their way over to them.

'Has Sienna been leading you astray?' Richard asked Ela as she walked up. 'I heard she dragged you along to her qigong class.'

'One cannot be led astray against one's will, Richie, my love,' said Sienna.

'Said the lion to the mouse,' he retorted.

'I hope I don't figure as the mouse in this analogy?' Ela said with mock severity.

'I wouldn't dare!' he replied, grinning and holding up his hands.

'Did you enjoy yourself?' asked Meredith.

'Actually, I did! Although, I'm not entirely sure about the growling.'

'I keep telling you, it's not growling!' said Sienna. 'It's deep, guttural breath work to distribute the energy. Honestly,

I'm throwing pearls before swine.'

Richard's attention was drawn suddenly to the entrance. 'Can't believe it!' he chuckled. 'Murdoch decided to grace us with his presence. And he's brought a *woman*.'

Ela turned sharply around.

'That's Les,' said Meredith. 'The marvellous sister who hosted our girls' night.'

Ela felt a wave of relief that it was indeed only Lesley, and was then immediately annoyed with herself for feeling it.

She was doing her best to get a handle on how to think about Murdoch, how to act around him, but it was a struggle. Inappropriate thoughts would assail her at the most inopportune times.

This morning, she had bumped into him in the hallway on her way back from the bathroom and suffered a shock.

Firstly, she hadn't realised he was sleeping in the room next to hers. It shouldn't have made the least bit of difference, of course, yet somehow, it did. There was now an awareness that sparked every time she thought about how only one wall separated them.

And secondly, at his apartment she had been jetlagged and always up after him. She had never seen him freshly risen from bed, with his shoulder-length hair scruffier than usual and his gorgeous eyes heavy with sleep.

It was distracting, to say the least.

Thank god he'd been wearing a T-shirt and house pants; she might have got used to seeing Alejandro walk around the house naked, but she had a horrible suspicion that seeing Murdoch in a similar state would push her over some precarious mental ledge.

Murdoch walked up to the table with Lesley and introduced her to Richard; and then, while the others proceeded to roast him over his capitulation after years of avoiding quiz night, Ela pulled Lesley to one side.

‘How did you convince him to come? He told me he preferred to catch up on work.’

‘Rubbish!’ huffed Lesley. ‘Who prefers to stay home working rather than go out with friends? He enjoys socialising as much as the next person – he was downright *wild* during his university days! – but then . . . well, things changed. And now he’s so determined to keep a low profile he’s forgotten how to have fun! Utterly ridiculous. The papers will write what the papers want to write, whatever one does.’

‘Susan told me he got burnt in the press a while back,’ said Ela, trying not to dig too overtly.

‘Yes,’ sighed Lesley. ‘Those horrid tabloids! Anyone even remotely interesting – or unlucky – can end up in them. And Murdoch is a stickler for his privacy; he’ll do anything to avoid column inches.’

Ela had only ever had strictly controlled articles written about her, thanks to Roger, and had never had to worry about the press – not that her sedate life warranted tabloid attention.

She wondered what Murdoch could have done to make himself a target. She really didn’t know much about him, other than that he had studied at Cambridge, lived most of the year in Scotland, and was wealthy enough to invest in a club and afford a penthouse in Kensington.

‘I thought it was time to give him a little push,’ continued Lesley. ‘I told him I wanted to join you tonight, and I couldn’t very well show up without him, seeing as you’re his friends.’

She didn’t think it necessary to mention that she had also made a comment (based on a hunch) that Ela would be disappointed if he didn’t show up, and it seemed to have paid off. After some bluster, he had agreed to accompany her.

Ela laughed appreciatively. ‘I see you’re a woman to be wary of!’

‘Well, one does learn a few tricks when one has a mother who thinks manipulation is a virtue.’

Meredith walked over. ‘Do you want to be on my team, Les? In the interest of full disclosure, I must tell you that I know nothing about sport or television programmes before the 80s.’

‘Oh, I can’t stay, dear. Don’t tell Murdoch, but I’ve got a date with the most gorgeous halal butcher. It’s taken me months of outrageous flirting to get him to put down his cudgel and notice me, so I hope you’ll forgive me?’

Seeing her brother look in her direction, she picked up her mobile phone and pretended to answer it.

‘Oh, no!’ she cried. ‘You poor dear . . . Yes, yes, of course I’ll drive over . . . Straight away. See you soon.’ She ‘hung up’ and faced her brother. ‘Oh, pet, such unfortunate timing! A friend of mine has broken down and I have to go and fetch her. And I was so looking forward to tonight! You can find your own way home, can’t you?’

‘Leyley . . .’ he said warningly, unconvinced by her performance.

‘Have to run! Bye-bye, everyone!’

She was halfway across the pub before anyone could react.

Feeling a sense of solidarity with her, Ela distracted Murdoch by announcing: ‘I’m buying the first round – what are you all drinking?’

When everyone had given her their orders, she made her way over to the bar.

Murdoch followed.

‘Did you want to change your ginger beer order?’ she asked.

‘No. I’m here to help carry.’

‘Oh . . . thanks.’

Catching the bartender’s attention, she ordered the drinks.

A silence stretched out as they waited for them to be poured. Unlike Murdoch, who seemed content to stand beside her without speaking, Ela was feeling edgy and horribly conscious this was the first time they had been alone since she had learnt he was gay.

‘The Cock?’ she said with a laugh, reading the pub name from the bar menu. ‘You Brits certainly like your titillation.’

Oh god, why had she said that? Would he take it as some sort of reference to . . . ?

‘We celebrate eccentricities,’ he replied, with a ghost of a smile.

She was spared from having to reply by an inebriated man sitting at the bar beside her.

‘Where’re you from, sweetheart?’ he asked, swaying towards her.

Grateful for the interruption, she replied with a friendly smile: ‘Australia.’

‘Thought I heard an accent. Are you here on holiday or parole?’ He then proceeded to laugh so hard at his own joke that he fell off the stool.

Ela caught him as he landed against her. ‘Whoops!’

Murdoch reached across and none too gently pushed him off her and back onto his stool.

‘You just hold on tight,’ Ela instructed, putting his hands firmly on the brass trim of the bar top.

‘Thanks, sweetheart,’ he slurred. ‘Hope I didn’t hurt you?’

‘Not at all!’

‘If you don’t mind me saying, you’re the prettiest thing I’ve seen in years. Gladdens my heart just to look at you.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ she replied with a laugh. ‘You’ve made my day.’

Murdoch put his elbows on the bar and leaned down to her level.

‘Making friends again?’ he muttered into her ear.

‘Celebrating the eccentricities,’ she replied, turning to smile at him.

His face was only a couple of inches away. She could feel his breath on her face.

Something about his scent affected her on a primal level and made her head spin . . . And she realised that his eyes weren’t simply blue, but aqua bleeding to a deep indigo towards the edges.

Gorgeous, hypnotic eyes.

She drew back suddenly, breaking the gravitational pull between them.

A one-sided gravitational pull, she reminded herself. If that were even possible! Her old high-school physics teacher would probably point out that it wasn’t.

She suppressed a hysterical laugh.

Get a grip, Ela!

He’s gay.

Gay, gay, gay!

Picking up the bar menu, she pretended to read it with avid interest. She could feel Murdoch’s eyes roving over her face. He probably thought she was unhinged.

An interminable length of time later, the drinks were ready, and they carried them back to the table.

‘Do you surf, Ela?’ asked Richard, as she put his beer in front of him. ‘We were just saying Aussie girls seem to have a natural talent for it.’

‘I wish,’ she replied. ‘I never had the time to learn. Do you?’

‘Used to! Haven’t been near a board in years.’

‘There was an *incident*,’ Meredith confided with a smirk. ‘He was scarred for life.’

‘I feel a story coming on,’ said Sienna, draping her arm over Richard’s shoulders.

‘Well, since you insist,’ laughed Meredith.

Richard shook his head. ‘You’re an evil woman, my lovely wife.’

‘Richie and I had just started dating,’ she began with relish, ‘and we were in Australia on holiday. He decides to take me to Manly to show off his surfing skills – typical posturing male!’

‘I was *not* posturing,’ he assured everyone.

‘Love you, baby, but this is my story – back off! So . . . I’m sitting on the beach, watching my stud. Everything was fine for a while, and he even managed to catch a couple of waves . . .’

‘It was more than a couple,’ put in Richard.

‘. . . but then he decides that sticking close to shore isn’t impressive enough, so off he goes to join the experienced surfers further out, where the big waves are. After several wipeouts, he finally catches a wave. The surf was great that day, and a crowd had gathered on the beach to watch. When they see Richie surfing this big wave, they start whooping and clapping. There were even Japanese tourists near me taking photos . . .’

‘It was a huge wave,’ Richard assured them.

‘So, there he is, king of the ocean, riding his wave all the way to shore. He hits the beach, jumps off the board, and does this Conan the Barbarian victory pose – legs apart, arms in the air. The crowd is going wild. Wolf-whistling, applauding – he’s loving it! And it takes him ages to realise that no one is looking at his face . . . He’s standing there stark naked!’

‘I wasn’t starkers,’ corrected Richard. ‘I had my watch on.’

Meredith struggled to keep going through her laughter. ‘He’d lost his board shorts . . . in one of the wipeouts . . . and surfed naked all the way in, so pumped on adrenalin he hadn’t noticed.’ She wiped away tears. ‘But it gets better . . . One of the Japanese tourists had taken Polaroids, and she went over to him – really sweet, bowing and giggling – and asked for his *autograph*.’

Sienna and Ela were laughing so hard they had to hold onto each other for support. Murdoch chuckled.

‘Good to know my wife thinks me sharing my bits with the world is funny,’ complained Richard, trying to look stern but failing.

‘My heart goes out to you, Saunders,’ said Murdoch, slapping him on the back.

‘Yeh, yeh.’

While the boys went off to sign up for the pub quiz, Sienna leaned close to Meredith and, pointing to her crotch, asked: ‘Have you spoken to Richard about you know what?’

‘For goodness sake, shh!’ whispered Meredith, making a face at her.

‘Oh, give me a break, Miss P & P. No one’s listening.’

‘P & P?’ asked Ela, taking a sip of her Sauvignon Blanc. ‘Is that something like S & M?’

‘Not quite,’ replied Meredith with an eyeroll. ‘It’s Sienna’s evil nickname for me: Miss Pride and Prejudice. She made it up at school and used it whenever I refused to skip class and go with her to the park to snog boys.’

‘I would never have suspected *you* needed help kissing boys,’ said Ela, smiling teasingly at Sienna.

‘What can I say? The teenage me needed some friend-induced Dutch courage. But don’t change the subject, Meri-Berry! Did you tell Richie about the tantric massage?’

‘Of course not! I’m not interested. I don’t care if I don’t . . . you know.’

‘Come?’

‘*Shh!*’

‘Meredith Anabel Saunders, every woman deserves to know what an orgasm . . .’

‘*Shh!*’ Ela joined Meredith in trying to shush Sienna.

‘I’ll stop talking about it if you promise to tell him.’

‘I can’t!’

‘Promise, woman, or so help me god, I’ll tell Richie myself.’

‘I forbid you to talk to my husband about my problem.’

‘It is not *your* problem. It’s something you both have to work through together. My tantric guy does couple sessions . . . Here!’ Sienna took a business card out of her wallet and slid it across the table. ‘He’s very sweet, reminds me of Gandhi. Call him. Don’t even tell me you’ve called him, just call him!’

Ela looked over Meredith’s shoulder at the business card, curious despite herself. ‘Is he really that good?’

‘Oh, he’s good. Believe me!’

‘This is so embarrassing.’ Meredith pocketed the card just as Richard and Murdoch returned with the answer sheets.

With a little manoeuvring on Meredith’s part, they arranged themselves into two teams – Richard, Sienna and

Meredith in one, and Ela and Murdoch in the other.

Richard insisted on christening Ela and Murdoch's team *Beauty and the Beast*.

And, following that theme, it was decided that the others would be named *Beauties and the Stud Muffin*. (Richard had lobbied hard for *the Super Stud* but got shot down.)

The quiz had six rounds: general knowledge, history, sports, movies, science, and music.

Beauty and the Beast scored top points in the first two rounds, Meredith blaming Murdoch's double first at Cambridge in History of Art and Land Economy.

Murdoch pointed out that Ela had answered as many questions as he had, and had shown herself to possess an unhealthy competitive streak to boot.

Ela, forgetting to be nervous around him, vehemently disclaimed any such streak, and reminded him that he had been the one to snatch the pen out of her hand and take over writing duties because she'd supposedly been too slow.

The next round was sports, and Ela and Meredith were happy to plead ignorance and sit it out, while Sienna and the boys turned it into an exercise in one-upmanship. And when Richard scored a point against Murdoch (for knowing the year of the FA Cup Final that became known as 'the White Horse Final' was 1923), he had no qualms about doing a victory dance around his rival, while Murdoch watched on, deeply unimpressed, and the girls dissolved into laughter.

Sienna won her team the movies round with her uncanny paradoxical knowledge of 80s teen cinema and French noir films.

Meredith came into her own during the science round, and she would have earned her team a perfect score if Richard hadn't convinced her that the atomic weight of argon was not eighteen but ten. (It was eighteen; he'd got it mixed up with neon.)

The last round was music. Ela snatched the pen back from Murdoch and took over being scribe, only deferring to him on Beatles history and obscure Pink Floyd fandom trivia.

By the time the quiz drew to a close, everyone in the pub was in high spirits.

The quiz master called for the cacophony to subside and, with Simon Cowell-esque tension-building timing, announced *Beauty and the Beast* as the winner.

Good-natured cheering and clapping broke out.

Ela and Murdoch shared a look of jubilation and jumped out of their seats with shouts of victory. Caught up in the excitement, Ela threw herself into Murdoch's arms and found herself enveloped in a bear hug.

It took her a few moments to realise what she had done and, as embarrassment crept in, she tried to draw back.

Murdoch resisted.

Then, his arms dropped and she was able to step away.

Still grinning, she gave him a matey slap on the back and, ignoring his protests, dragged him off to where the quiz master was waiting for them to collect their prizes: a black T-shirt with the Fuller's Brewery logo on it, and an impressively large wheel of Blue Stilton cheese.

Ela sagged under the weight of the cheese wheel as it was handed to her.

Murdoch plucked it out of her hands. 'I'll carry it for you . . . and this is yours.' He handed her the T-shirt.

She laughed. 'Are you sure you don't want it?'

'I wouldn't want to deprive you.'

'Really? Thank you!' she said excitedly.

She put the T-shirt on over her sports tank top and did a spin for him. She looked so thrilled Murdoch thought anyone watching her would think she'd never owned anything as fine.

‘Does it look okay?’ she asked, catching his amused expression.

‘Amazing,’ he deadpanned.

She laughed happily.

Uncomfortable with all the eyes on them, he put a hand on her back and propelled her towards their table.

Chapter 17

Ela awoke the following morning with a feeling of satisfaction, which quickly coalesced into a memory of the previous evening's victory. She honestly couldn't remember the last time she had had so much fun.

Her good mood faltered a little as her thoughts turned to Murdoch. But what was the point of regrets? He was who he was. Everything else was her problem.

She refused to waste time mourning something that could never be. Jumping out of bed, she walked over to the windows and parted the curtains. She looked out across the back garden to the neighbouring houses, crowded around like centurions, and then up to the sky.

It was still early, but the day was shaping up to be glorious. The sky was already a cerulean blue, with not a single speck of white marring its perfection, and the garden was in full summer bloom, showing off its colours – David Austin roses in shades of pink; purple alliums; white dahlias; vibrant blue bellflowers and hydrangeas; and watercolour peonies.

It was all so gorgeous . . . and it beckoned her.

Throwing on a sports top and exercise shorts, she padded through the quiet house on bare feet, across the living room (with a quick good morning to Amanda), and out through the French doors and onto the terrace, already warm with the heat of the day. She made her way down the steps to the lawn and sighed with pleasure as her feet sunk into the deep, springy grass.

Closing her eyes, she took several deep breaths and started her much-neglected yoga practice.

After half an hour of her favourite flow, she remembered yesterday's qigong class and decided to incorporate it into her practice. She started with the eight silken movements and

followed with some harder qigong moves and breathing exercises.

With a great look of concentration, she kicked and punched the air, vocalising the energy flow as it passed through her. Then, bending forward with her hands on her waist, she snapped backwards with a guttural sound deep within her diaphragm.

She repeated the sequence.

Out of nowhere, a concerned voice asked: ‘Are you all right, dearie?’

Spinning around, Ela saw an elderly lady with gold-rimmed spectacles and a blue rinse peering over the hedge of the neighbouring house.

‘Y-yes, thank you,’ she replied, flustered.

‘You sounded like you were in pain.’

‘Oh, no . . . I was just doing some exercise.’ Ela smiled apologetically. ‘Sorry if I disturbed you. Have a lovely day!’ With an awkward wave, she hurried back inside the house.

She entered the kitchen to find Kat sitting at the kitchen table, buttering toast.

She was wearing the same clothes as yesterday – black top, black jeans, motorcycle boots – and her makeup was smudged. She had clearly been out all night.

Ela couldn’t fathom how anyone could survive as a nocturnal creature. Her own brain cut off at midnight no matter what was happening around her (Susan called it her Cinderella switch) and only resumed functioning after eight hours of uninterrupted sleep.

‘Was that you barking and growling in the garden?’ Kat asked. ‘Or did Les adopt a wolf? I wouldn’t put it past her.’

‘You heard me, did you?’ replied Ela, with an embarrassed laugh.

‘I’m not deaf.’ Kat took a bite of her toast.

‘I was practising some martial arts I learnt yesterday. And I managed to scare your poor neighbour.’ Ela flopped into a chair. ‘But, on the plus side, who knew growling was so empowering?’

‘Women are she-wolves in sheep’s clothing. Men know this on a subconscious level and are terrified we’ll wake up one day and devour them. Why do you think female oppression is the greatest global fanaticism of all time?’

‘I’ve always felt more like a lamb aspiring to be a sheep. Where have you been all night?’

‘Had to do a review of Silence of the Masses at the Mean Fiddler.’

‘The gig must have finished hours ago!’

‘I couldn’t review them properly without first partying with them,’ replied Kat, smiling.

‘Isn’t that against some ethical journalistic code?’

‘It’s the music industry, not politics. Our ethics are a lot more clear-cut.’ Kat crammed the last piece of toast into her mouth.

Ela laughed. ‘Clear-cut or non-existent?’

From the snippets she’d learnt so far, Kat’s work as a freelance music journalist, specialising in heavy metal, entailed little beyond endless nights of watching gigs and fraternising and carousing with bands.

‘If you want to debate ethics, come with me to Speaker’s Corner later,’ said Kat, rising to her feet and stretching. ‘But for now, sunshine, I’m off to bed.’

‘What’s Speaker’s Corner?’ Ela called out after her, but Kat only lifted an arm to indicate ‘later’ as she disappeared through the doorway.

Ela smiled and shook her head at her manners, and, getting to her feet, began making herself a green smoothie. (She always cut down on the caffeine once her jetlag was

under control.) When it was ready, she headed back to the terrace, via a detour to the front porch to pick up the newspaper thrown onto the tessellated tiles each morning.

One of the luxuries of having nothing in the diary was that she could take the time to read the paper from cover to cover and catch up on world news. She felt as if she had lived in a vacuum for the last decade; life passing her by as her existence contracted down to practise, promotion, practise, performance, practise, travel, and repeat.

Making herself comfortable on one of the terrace wicker lounges with pretty blue and white striped cushions, she unrolled the paper and flattened it out on her lap.

She leisurely read the articles on the front, then turned the page.

Oh!

Classical Star to Visit London for Charity Gala

A photo of her in a sequined black evening gown, with her long red hair worn down over one shoulder, took pride of place underneath.

It must have been a slow news day. The gala was almost six weeks away. Either Roger was tapping his press contacts to get her some free PR, or PETA was drumming up ticket sales.

She had to admit, they had chosen a great photo of her. The last photographer Susan had found for her promo shots had done an outstanding job. She could hardly recognise the woman on the page, she looked so beautiful and poised.

It was all a sham, of course.

Skilfully applied makeup, good lighting, a splitting headache that brought intensity to her dark eyes, and a talented photographer who knew how to work an angle had all conspired to result in alchemy.

Murdoch walked out onto the terrace, a mug of coffee in his hand, just as she was tearing off the page.

Folding it quickly, she tucked it into her shorts and said breezily: 'Morning!'

His gaze flicked to the newspaper before looking back at her. 'What was that about?'

'What?' she asked innocently.

'That unearthly barking that woke me up.'

'Oh, *that* . . . Sorry! I was practising qigong,' she said, with an apologetic smile. 'Releasing my ego.'

'You have one hell of a loud ego.'

'A joke from my dour roomy? I'll release it outside your door next time if you're not careful.'

He held up a hand in surrender. 'If you spare me, I promise not to tease you about your gong ever again.'

'Okay, but only because there's real fear in your voice.'

They smiled at each other.

He was looking unfairly attractive in a white V-neck top and faded jean.

'Is Les up yet?' she asked, trying to see into the conservatory past the canvases leaning against the glazed walls.

'She's in her studio with some man,' he said, his tone giving her the impression that he wasn't thrilled by the idea.

'Do you mean Alejandro – *la muse*?'

'I didn't stick around to ask who he was. He was stripping.'

'Don't worry, you soon get used to him walking around the house naked.'

He frowned. 'He does that in front of you?'

'As Kat likes to say, he is, unfortunately, perfectly safe.'

‘Why?’

‘Why do you think? He’s gay. Is your gaydar not working today?’

‘Can’t say I ever had one.’

‘That must be inconvenient.’

‘Why would I need it?’

‘Cocky!’ she said with a laugh, ‘but you have a point.’

She could easily imagine guys throwing themselves at him without any effort on his part; she’d seen enough women do it.

He sat on the wicker lounge beside her and, stretching out, put his bare feet on the coffee table. She realised with something approaching despair that even his feet were beautiful.

He rested his head on the back of the lounge and tipped his face to the sun, eyes closed.

A Norse god in repose.

The mug he held rested on his flat stomach, and she couldn’t help but note that it was as solid a surface as a table. How did he maintain all those muscles, for goodness sake? He looked like a labourer.

His lips quirked and he glanced at her, well aware she had been studying him.

She looked away guiltily and concentrated on reading the paper.

They sank into a companionable silence.

He broke it after a few minutes by asking: ‘Did you sleep in your Fuller’s T-shirt?’

She saw that his eyes were closed, but he was smiling.

‘Actually, yes. How did you guess?’

‘I’ve never seen anyone so excited over a piece of clothing.’

‘I like winning.’

‘I gathered.’ He turned his head to look at her. ‘There was a lot of shouting going on.’

She smiled and shrugged. ‘I get loud when I’m excited.’

Something in his gaze changed, and she felt a jolt of awareness course through her. Like a deer in the headlights, she couldn’t look away.

He took a sip of his coffee and broke the connection. ‘What do you have on today?’

‘I thought I’d do something horribly touristy, like taking one of those hop-on hop-off bus tours. Are you working in your office or going to Scott’s?’

‘Scott’s. I need to wrap up a few things before the club’s grand opening this week. If you find yourself near Soho, give me a call. I’ll grab a coffee with you.’

She smiled. ‘I’d like that.’

She’d never had a gay friend before. She could see the benefit. They were great company without any of the sexual overtones that complicated male-female friendships.

She just had to get her body to stop misfiring and behave on the sexual overtones part.

Chapter 18

Ela stood to one side of the group that had gathered around Kat and watched the proceedings with interest. She had been enticed into joining Kat at Speaker's Corner on the promise of being shown a side of London she had never experienced.

As it turned out, Speaker's Corner was a small area of Hyde Park designated for open-air public speaking and debate. Speakers could talk on any subject, from religion to politics and everything in between.

Today, Kat was one of a handful of speakers, each holding court in front of small groups clustered around them. She was standing on an upturned wooden box and reciting a poem she had written.

‘ . . . The voiceless humanity, washed up on the shore of poverty and despair . . . Their destiny stolen from them by ignorance, self-righteousness and greed . . . Caught in the cyclic tide of subjugation, escape is beyond the reach of hope . . . Violence, a way of coping with reality . . . ’

‘What they need is God!’ someone yelled from the crowd.

Kat looked over to them with the cool relish of a predator spotting its prey.

‘Ah . . . the crutch of religion. A medicine for all ills. Take two pills once a day and if symptoms persist, see your priest, rabbi, or jedi knight. Organised religion, my friends, is a tool that was developed for one thing and one thing only . . . Control. Control of the masses for the benefit of a power-hungry elite. But hey, who am I to knock it? It seems to agree with a lot of people . . . if you can forget about religious-inspired wars, religious-incited hatred, and systematic abuse in religious institutions.’ She threw out her arms, her voice building, growing more impassioned. ‘Are we not capable of reaching enlightenment without pedestrian ideas to define our morals? What's wrong with our own innate spirituality? Our

own sense of right and wrong? Why give away responsibility for our own lives to a tarnished ideal that has no basis in reality? I call *bullshit!* Who's with me?

Pandemonium broke out.

People yelled out their opinions and started to argue amongst themselves with an intensity that alarmed Ela. Kat took it all in with a smile and, jumping down from her box, strutted over to her.

'Time to leave, sunshine.'

'Are you sure? It looked like you were having fun,' said Ela, noticing the feverish light in her eyes.

'I like to rile them up with whatever rubbish I can think of and leave them to tear themselves apart.'

Ela regarded her with surprise. 'You looked like you really believed in what you were saying.'

'Perhaps I do . . . but it's all rot, anyway,' she scoffed. 'In the scheme of things, what does it matter what one temporary configuration of atoms does to another?'

Ela smiled wryly. 'Spoken like a true nihilist. Dare I say, you need to lighten up?'

Kat burst out laughing, genuinely amused. 'You're priceless, you know that?'

'It's true! You may as well look on the bright side of things since it will make you feel happier, and you'll enjoy your life a lot more. Whether you think negatively or positively about something, it's not going to change the reality of a situation. You only have control over your own perception of it . . . so you may as well choose to be positive.'

Kat gave Ela a bittersweet smile. 'I almost wish I could live in your world, sunshine. Okay, enough philosophy for one day! Let's hit the town so I can show you the fun, darker side of London. But first, we need to rough you up a bit.'

She pulled an eyeliner pencil out from the satchel she was wearing across her body and, taking Ela's chin, held her still while she applied a heavy black outline to her eyes.

'Better!'

'Are you sure?' asked Ela, taking out her phone and trying to see her reflection in the screen. 'I don't usually wear a lot of makeup.'

'You are today. We're going to take that squeaky-clean shine off you for a few hours so you can see how the other side lives.'

Without asking for permission, she proceeded to ruffle Ela's hair until it had a scruffy, Courtney Love look to it, then she untucked Ela's blouse from her jeans and knotted it above her midriff.

Ela blinked down at herself. 'Everyone can see my navel!'

'It's not against the law. And I had to do something to tone down your look – it was clobbering me on the head screaming "conventional".'

'But I'm not sure I can pull it off.'

'Think positive,' smirked Kat. And with a final glance at her squabbling spectators, she directed them away from the conflict and chaos she had created.

It was almost midnight, and Ela was thinking longingly of her bed. Not that she had any complaints about the last few hours; they had certainly been a lot of fun.

Their marathon 'evening' had started around four in the afternoon at a pub off Piccadilly. Ela had tried suggesting they invite Murdoch to join them, only to be overruled. Kat refused to see the benefit of having a grumpy Scotsman hanging around on a girls' night out.

After this minor disagreement, she had set about teaching Ela the superiority of ale over lager, only to be stumped several hours later by Ela's inability to appreciate either.

They had then caught the Tube to Brixton Academy to watch a thrash metal band from the US that didn't seem to realise volume was not directly proportional to audience enjoyment. Even if Ela's highly musical brain could have discovered a melody amongst the noise, she would still have felt as if her ears were being violated.

But, at least she got a kick out of being in the moshpit (literally and figuratively – she had the badge-of-honour bruising to show for it). She spent most of the set jumping up and down in time with the music and squealing every time she was shoved in one direction or the other, although not even her excitement could keep up with Kat's manic headbanging beside her.

After Brixton, Kat had decided the night was still young. Bundling Ela into a taxi, she had directed their driver across London and they were now sitting in a slam poetry club in Camden.

The small subterranean room was dimly lit and packed to the rafters with twenty-somethings and cigarette smoke. Ela already felt as if she had smoked a packet of second-hand fumes from the pub and music venue, but this was on a whole other level. The air was so thick you could almost slice it with a butter knife.

They had managed to grab two chairs at the back and were chatting while they waited for the first performer to come on stage.

'I can't believe you haven't seen your family in three years,' said Ela. 'Don't you miss them?'

'Sometimes. I send them a photo occasionally.'

Ela looked at her sadly. 'But is that enough, Kat?'

'A photograph only requires you to act happy for a brief moment in time. The impression it leaves is not one I could

replicate in person. Me staying away works for everyone – I get my freedom, and they get to keep their illusions about their happy, perfect daughter.’

‘They must miss you.’

‘They would miss me more if I went back.’

Ela thought that was the strangest statement she had ever heard, but she had to put it out of her mind as a young man, slim and unassuming, walked out on stage and the babble around them died down.

‘I’ve never been to a poetry reading before,’ Ela whispered excitedly.

Kat threw her a sardonic look. ‘And you’re not at one now. This is *spoken word*.’

‘Spoken word?’

‘Performance poetry. It’s physical. Visceral. It hits you here . . .’ Kat slammed a fist into her solar plexus.

Without warning, the man on stage barked out his first line, making Ela jump and her eyes snap to him.

Within seconds, she realised this was hardcore.

Wordsworth it wasn’t.

It felt like complex rap, and she couldn’t deny the passion and excitement of the performance, despite the swearing (excessive in her opinion) and the gross spittle flying off the stage.

And the unusual, complex rhythm of the poetry fascinated her. She recognised 5/4 and 7/8 irregular time signatures, used to convey with eloquence a sense of fury and immediacy. It was all-consuming.

She leaned forward in her chair, mesmerised, and forgot all about her Cinderella switch.

Dawn had come and gone by the time Ela and Kat walked through the front door of Lesley's house, laughing. It seemed to Ela as if they hadn't stopped laughing since Kat had taken her to an all-night drag bar after the slam poetry club and plied her with vodka.

'Shall I make tea?' asked Ela, heading for the kitchen. 'I need something to sober me up before bed.'

'Whatever. Back in a minute,' replied Kat, taking the stairs two at a time.

Ela was sitting at the kitchen table with two mugs of tea and two glasses of water when Kat walked in, a short while later, wearing different clothes.

'Why did you change?' Ela asked, surprised.

'I'm heading back out.'

'We just got in!'

Picking up the glass of water, Kat downed it. 'No rest for the wicked! There's a whole world waiting for me out there.'

Ela drank her tea and watched her as she started opening cupboards, looking for food. She seemed restless, unable to sit still. Even with the muddling effects of several vodkas and sleep deprivation, Ela had the feeling something was off.

'Are you okay?' she asked.

'Better than okay!' Kat laughed feverishly. 'I *live* for these times.'

Finding a muesli bar and a packet of crisps in the pantry, she grabbed both.

'See you round, sunshine!' And with that, she was gone, her tea untouched.

A little while later, Ela was still frowning at the kitchen cupboards when Lesley walked in.

‘Morning, dear! I see Kat has had you out all night – did you have fun?’

Ela came out of her trance and smiled. ‘Yes, it was an amazing night. I’m absolutely shattered. I don’t know how Kat does it on a regular basis.’

Lesley started making herself a cup of tea. ‘She’s such a nocturnal creature. She disappears night after night. Sometimes I don’t see her for days! She must have been a hell of a kid to raise. But, what can you do? She is who she is. I just wish she took her medication more consistently.’

Ela looked at her sharply. ‘Medication?’

‘For her bipolar. You look shocked, dear – didn’t you know?’

‘No . . . Is she okay?’

‘She has her good and bad weeks. She manages quite well, considering. It’s a burden, and she does it alone, bless her! But we all have a cross to bear, don’t we? Some can just hide it better than others.’

Chapter 19

After several drizzly, grey days, the late August sun showed its face again in time for the weekend, producing one of those rarities that sends serotonin levels soaring and makes everyone giddy with the joy of being alive: a perfect English summer's day.

Ela had made plans with Meredith, Sienna, and Richard to ride their bikes to Richmond and spend the day there, and they came past Chiswick on the way to pick her up. Murdoch was working in the morning and was to join them later, but a temporary new addition to the group came along for the ride.

Richard's cousin from Australia, Tony 'Boxhead' Saunders, was partway through a backpacking year around the world and was staying with Richard and Meredith for a few days before starting a Contiki tour of Europe. He was twenty-four going on seventeen, and within minutes of meeting him, Ela felt ancient.

Their route took them through the backstreets of Chiswick to the Thames, past some ancient pubs and river houses, over Chiswick bridge, and along the river path from Kew to Richmond.

It was a lovely, scenic ride, though unfortunately it was also somewhat disrupted.

Ela had borrowed an old vintage bike from Lesley that was pretty to look at but didn't cope well when it came to dirt paths and potholes. The chain had come off twice already, and they had all had to stop while she wrestled with it.

The third time it came off, Richard and Boxhead insisted she let them work their boy magic.

Ela accepted, grateful to be spared getting her hands dirty again. She moved into the shade of one of the huge London plane trees that bordered the river and took her floppy hat off to fan herself.

Meanwhile, Sienna and Meredith had their faces upturned to the sky like sunworshippers.

‘For god’s sake, lovely, why are you hiding from the sun?’ Sienna demanded. ‘You’ve got to absorb it while you can! It’s not around for most of the year.’

‘I’ll burn,’ replied Ela.

Richard, who was holding her bike and offering the occasional word of advice to his cousin as he wrangled with the chain, looked across at her and said drolly: ‘They’ve got ozone up this end of the world! You’d be lucky to get lightly toasted.’

‘I reckon that’s fixed it,’ Boxhead announced in his broad Australian accent. Flashing a grin at Ela, he brought her bike over. ‘Your chariot awaits, El.’

‘Thank you! You’re *both* my heroes,’ she said with a coy smile.

‘All the ladies want me for my handyman skills,’ quipped Richard.

‘Baby, I hate to break it to you,’ said Meredith, ‘but that can’t be what they’re after. You can barely change a light bulb.’

‘Must be my good looks, then.’

She shrugged. ‘Eh . . .’

‘Striking intellect?’

‘Nah-ah.’

He made a sad face, and Meredith burst out laughing. ‘It could be those puppy-dog eyes.’

‘I’ll take it!’ he said with a grin. Removing his phone from his pocket, he checked his messages. ‘C’mon, people, let’s get a move-on. Murdoch’s got a beer waiting for me.’

‘Typical,’ scoffed Meredith, as Richard and Boxhead rode off. ‘I can’t get him off the couch all morning, but at the

slightest mention of beer, he's off and running.'

She got back on her bike and set off after them, while Ela and Sienna followed at a more leisurely pace.

'I hope Murdoch hasn't been waiting long,' said Ela, navigating around a pothole.

Sienna, riding beside her, threw her a look. 'He's a big boy. He'll survive.'

'I know. But he had a meeting at Scott's this morning, and he was going to leave that early just so he could meet us.'

Sienna laugh-sniggered.

'What?' Ela asked defensively. 'Scott's grand opening was last night. He has a lot on his plate . . . I don't want to mess him around.'

'Okay, firstly: why wasn't I invited to the grand opening?'

'Murdoch didn't attend himself . . . at least, not the celebration part, he was working in the back office. He didn't come home until after midnight.'

'And that brings me to my second point. You're starting to sound invested.'

'He's a friend; of course I'm invested.'

'You're not falling for him, are you?'

'What? *No!*' exclaimed Ela, keeping her eyes on the path. 'That would be ludicrous . . . Insanely insane. I'm not into self-flagellation.'

Sienna looked at her oddly. 'He's not *that* bad. A bit of a difficult case, but not impossible.'

'Impossible is actually the correct word.'

'Why?'

'Forget it . . . It's not my place to say anything.'

'Ooh, that sounds like juicy gossip! How can I bribe you to spill?'

‘You can’t; I’m unbribable.’ Ela smiled across at her. ‘Sorry!’

Sienna huffed loudly. ‘God, I can’t stand people with principles. They’re so difficult to manipulate.’

Ela laughed and sped up, pulling out in front. ‘On the positive side, you know I’ll never share *your* secrets.’

‘I don’t have any!’ groused Sienna. ‘I’m an open book! People actually *beg* me to stop revealing so much.’

They arrived at The White Cross, an old-fashioned pub beside the river at Richmond, and parked their bikes against the black lamppost out front. There were people everywhere – walking along one of London’s most picturesque sections of the Thames, patronising the restaurants and bars, or sitting on the riverbank and enjoying the view.

Murdoch had grabbed one of the high tables in the front yard facing the river. A beer and a jug of Pimm’s waited on the table beside his ginger beer.

He watched as Ela got off her bike and secured it. She removed her hat and shook out her hair, laughing at something one of the others had said to her.

She had the most amazing laugh. Her eyes crinkled until they almost closed shut, and her whole face came alive with joy. The sound of it was like a punch in the gut, radiating warmth through his whole body.

She entered the yard first and, smiling brightly upon seeing him, walked over and gave him a peck on the cheek in greeting.

Murdoch thought it disgustingly platonic and almost growled with frustration. He wanted to kiss her with enough violence to annihilate that damned friendly look on her face.

‘Sorry we’re late!’ she said, happily ignorant of the danger she was in. ‘Have you been waiting long?’

‘No,’ he ground out.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Are you in a grumpy mood?’

‘No.’

‘Then why are you scowling at me?’ she demanded with amusement.

‘That’s just my face,’ he grumbled, but he made an attempt to smooth out his features. ‘You look nice.’

‘Thanks.’ She looked down at her long-sleeved white T-shirt, black shorts, and Converse trainers. She didn’t know what he found nice about the outfit; *functional* was probably the best word to describe it.

Richard walked over and introduced his cousin to Murdoch.

‘Any friend of Richie’s is a friend of mine!’ said Boxhead, shaking his hand and slapping him on the back with an enthusiasm reserved for male posturing and sports victories.

Murdoch accepted the beating without batting an eyelid. ‘I didn’t realise you were joining us. I’ll go grab you a beer – Fosters?’

‘Don’t drink that shit, mate. We just sell it to tourists or export it to England.’ After a beat, his country-boy grin appeared. ‘Just pullin’ your leg! I’ll get my own beer, cheers . . . El, wanna come with me to the bar?’ He gave Ela a hopeful look.

‘No thanks, Tony,’ she replied, insensible. ‘I’m happy with Pimm’s.’

Boxhead took this rejection in good form and bounded up the steps to the pub’s front door, almost two metres above

ground level due to the regular flooding of the river.

‘You get used to the Boxhead charm,’ said Meredith, pouring the Pimm’s out for the girls. ‘Although it feels like we have an overgrown puppy living with us. I’m fairly certain I’ll have to sanitise the carpet when he leaves.’

Ela took a seat beside Murdoch.

‘Has he been annoying you?’ he asked her.

‘Tony?’ she said with surprise. ‘No! He’s actually quite sweet . . . *Young*, but sweet. How did your grand opening go last night?’

A glow of satisfaction entered his eyes. ‘Better than we could have hoped. We’ve had to start a waiting list for membership.’

‘Fantastic! Congratulations, you deserve the success. You’ve put in a lot of long hours.’

‘You must know something about hard work yourself.’

‘I do,’ she agreed, with a self-effacing smile. ‘But it’s the same for all musicians.’

His gaze slid to her cheek.

‘You’ve got something here . . .’ He pointed to his own cheek. ‘Something black.’

‘Oh, that’s probably the oil from the bike chain. The dratted thing kept falling off.’ She scrubbed at the spot he had indicated. ‘Better?’

‘Not quite. Let me.’ He gently rubbed his thumb across her cheekbone, back and forth.

She forced her expression into neutral.

Hang in there!

You’ve been doing so well.

The moment he stopped, she quickly turned away and said to no one in particular: ‘It’s so beautiful here! What’s that lovely stone bridge over there?’

‘Richmond Bridge,’ responded Sienna, looking up from the menu. ‘That’s where we’re picking up our skiff. The boat hire place is underneath.’

‘I can’t wait to get back on the river,’ said Meredith, as she rubbed sunscreen on Richard’s face. ‘I got into rowing at Cambridge, and I still love it! It’s the only thing that can get me out of bed at the crack of dawn.’

Boxhead came back with his beer and, picking up a spare stool, positioned it beside Ela.

She glanced at him and smiled.

That was all the encouragement he needed, and he proceeded to monopolise her attention by asking her opinion on the tourist spots he should visit.

‘Not sure I’ll cope on my own,’ he sighed sorrowfully, when she had finished setting out an itinerary for him. ‘What do ya say to takin’ me on a tour of London?’

Even Ela couldn’t fail to decipher his suggestive smile this time.

‘I don’t think that’s a good idea,’ she said gently.

‘What if I promise to keep these to myself?’ He put up his hands as if they were weapons of mass molestation.

Ela smiled. ‘No. Sorry, Tony.’

Boxhead caught Murdoch glancing at them (again), and his male-rival radar switched on. ‘Are you and the big fella together?’

Ela’s smile disappeared. ‘Why do people keep asking me that? No! We’re not together! He’s not even into w—’ She bit her lip, so annoyed with her slip-up that she could have smacked herself.

‘He’s not into *women*?’ probed Boxhead, leaning closer.

‘Shh!’ She glared at him.

He snuck a cautious peek at Murdoch, then hurriedly leaned back so that Ela shielded him from view.

She rolled her eyes. ‘He’s not going to jump you just because you’ve got testosterone and an extra appendage.’

‘Yeh, so ya say, El, but I’m a good-lookin’ bloke. It’s not safe for someone like me to be hangin’ out with a—’

‘Shh! For goodness, Tony, be quiet!’

‘Hey, don’t get upset. I can keep a secret. But only if ya call me Boxhead.’ He flashed her a grin. ‘Tony sounds too formal between *friends*.’

He wiggled his eyebrows so suggestively that she couldn’t help but smile. ‘Fine. It’s a deal.’

‘Ya sure ya don’t wanna show me ’round London? I could use a pretty girl to protect me from the big, bad city.’

She sighed, suppressing a laugh. ‘You’re incorrigible!’

After lunch, they locked up their bikes and went to pick up the skiff Sienna had hired – a beautiful traditional timber boat with bench seating and two large oars clipped in on either side.

Meredith, in her element, assigned herself and Murdoch as rowers, and they sat on the middle bench, their backs upriver. Richard claimed the bench behind them and stretched himself out. Sienna did the same on the smaller bench behind his, nestled in the pointy end at the front.

Boxhead joined Ela on a padded U-shaped seat with a timber surround, towards the back of the boat, which faced the others and gave them a view upriver.

Murdoch and Meredith set a leisurely pace in the direction of Hampton Court Palace, while everyone else lounged back

on their seats in various states of relaxation, apart from Boxhead who suddenly declared that he needed to work on his tan and made a show of taking off his T-shirt.

He would have been disappointed to know that Ela, at whom this display was aimed, was thinking with amusement that he was very immature.

Rather than linger on his undeniably attractive torso, her gaze settled on the banks of the river.

They passed several lawns and terraced gardens, where groups of picnickers had settled in for the day like multicoloured butterflies against the verdant grass.

Up ahead, she could see the incongruous sight of a herd of cows marooned in a small field; a remnant of the area's rural past, hemmed in by encroaching development.

It was all so idyllic it almost hurt to look at it.

'This is the life,' she sighed, resting her head on the timber surround. 'Why don't we do this every weekend?'

'Because you only get one sunny weekend every six months in this bloody country,' said Sienna, as she tried to find a comfortable spot to settle against.

'London's balmy compared to Scotland,' remarked Murdoch, pulling his oar through the water with barely a ripple.

Ela caught his eye and said teasingly: 'Not enough of a challenge for you, huh?'

He gave her a lopsided smile.

It was heady stuff and did terrible things to her pulse. She looked away, properly punished.

'For great weather ya can't beat Oz, mate,' put in Boxhead. 'You should visit. You'll fit right in – loads of Irish around!'

'What are you talking about, you overgrown twit?' objected Sienna, who had known Boxhead since he was

thirteen and treated him like a little brother. ‘Murdoch’s Scottish!’

‘Hey, sorry, mate!’ Boxhead said with ready contrition. ‘Could’ve sworn I heard some Irish in there.’

‘I’m as Scottish as you can get,’ said Murdoch. ‘A pureblood, as my mother likes to remind me.’

‘We’re all mongrels in Australia,’ said Ela, her eyes irresistibly drawn to Murdoch’s shoulders as they flexed with his stroke.

‘Speak for yourself!’ exclaimed Richard. ‘I’m pureblood convict and proud of it.’

‘That explains a lot,’ deadpanned Murdoch, and then laughed when Richard flicked water at his back.

‘I’m watching you!’ Richard warned him. ‘Think of me as Big Brother.’

‘Oh, did you see the last episode?’ asked Meredith, momentarily diverted from concentrating on matching Murdoch’s stroke. ‘It was so X-rated I couldn’t believe they were allowed to put it on air.’

Ela pulled a face. ‘I can’t believe you watch *Big Brother*.’

‘The girls force me to watch it,’ Richard piped up, in a holier-than-thou tone.

‘Oh, please!’ scoffed Sienna. ‘You’re the worst of all! Meredith and I at least don’t record it if we’re not home.’

‘Can’t remember the last time I was allowed near the remote control, so don’t know how you can accuse me of having a say in anything we watch.’

‘We’d allow you near it if you didn’t keep changing over to the sports channel.’

‘Outnumbered in my own bloody house!’

‘All I can say to you weirdos is that George Orwell must be turning in his grave,’ remarked Ela, as she readjusted her

hat lower over her eyes.

‘I only watch it for the psychological element,’ said Meredith. ‘It’s a social commentary on different personality types and how they interact.’

‘Bull!’ exclaimed Sienna. ‘You watch it for the same reason as the rest of us: to see who’ll get their kit off and shag.’

‘I do not!’

‘We all know what you repressed English types are like,’ said Richard.

‘Actually . . .’ Meredith became contemplative. ‘You’re not entirely wrong. I was watching that chat show *The Wright Stuff* when I was home sick the other day, and apparently the English are the biggest lovers of masochistic sex in Europe.’

‘That doesn’t surprise me,’ said Sienna. ‘I’ve been on the dating scene for over a decade, and I can tell you it’s “mad, bad, and dangerous to know”.’

‘Byron?’ asked Meredith, glancing at her over her shoulder.

‘Lady Caroline Lamb describing him.’

‘Ah, of course.’

‘As far as I’m concerned,’ said Ela, ‘the only watchable show on TV is *The X Factor*.’

‘*The X Factor*?’ hooted Richard. ‘And you’re judging *us*?’

‘It’s about talent,’ Ela insisted. ‘And, I don’t care what anyone says, Simon Cowell is a hottie.’

‘Oh, sweetie,’ said Meredith, looking at her as if she was in need of psychiatric help. ‘Do you realise what you’re saying?’

‘I do! Simon can talk tough to me any day.’

‘Now *that’s* masochistic,’ chortled Sienna.

‘She’s pulling your leg,’ said Murdoch, capturing Ela’s gaze. He knew the mischievous twinkle would be in her eyes, even before he saw it.

‘Only half!’ she replied with a chuckle.

They descended into a tranquil silence, heavy with the promise of an endless summer day. As they glided towards Petersham, the iconic grade II listed Royal Star and Garter building looked down on them from its position high on Richmond Hill.

A few minutes later, they were passing Marble Hill House – a pretty white neo-Palladian villa on the banks of the Thames at Twickenham – when Boxhead roused himself from his uncharacteristically deep thoughts.

‘The Scots like wearin’ those skirts, don’t they?’ he said vaguely. ‘Wonder if that somehow turns a man.’

‘Turns a man into what?’ asked Murdoch, frowning.

‘Into a . . . *Ow!*’ Boxhead threw Ela a hurt look and rubbed the arm she had just pinched.

‘Mate, you’ve got to brush up on your general knowledge,’ said Richard, opening his eyes to frown at his cousin. ‘They’re kilts, not skirts.’

‘It’s like saying you wear a *thong* when you play sport,’ put in Meredith. Seeing Boxhead’s vacant expression, she added: ‘*G-string* in your vernacular.’

He looked appalled. ‘Hey, Meri, ya can’t go accusin’ a man of something like that! I’ve never worn a G-string in my life.’

‘We’ve seen you boys in your jockstraps!’ She laughed. ‘You really should leave the itsy-bitsy underwear to us girls.’

‘She’s got us there, mate,’ said Richard.

Boxhead turned to Ela. ‘It’s not a G-string!’ he said vehemently. ‘It’s not!’

‘Speaking of jockstraps, I’ve brought along a rugby ball,’ said Sienna, who was obsessed with the holy trinity of English sport: rugby, football and cricket. ‘There’s a big lawn up ahead on the left, in front of Ham House. How about a friendly game? Australia vs Engla— Actually, we’d better make it Britain, or Murdoch will whine.’

‘I never whine,’ he retorted. ‘And there’s no such thing as a friendly game of rugby.’

Ela smiled at his tone. ‘Worried we’re going to show you up?’

‘He knows he’s outgunned,’ said Richard, with a cavalier wave of his hand.

‘I played state level at school,’ preened Boxhead. ‘Won awards and everything.’

‘Don’t know about you, Murdochy,’ said Sienna, ‘but I’m up for showing these smug Aussies how the game’s meant to be played.’

Murdoch shrugged. ‘Can’t say I’ve ever wanted to play on the same team as the English . . .’

‘Right back at ya, you Scottish babe,’ she drawled.

‘. . . but it will be a damn sight better than putting up with cocky Australians.’

‘Count me in!’ laughed Meredith. ‘Only, let’s keep the testosterone to a minimum and make it a game of *touch* rugby.’

‘*Touch?*’ exclaimed Boxhead, disgusted.

‘It’s not rugby unless blood is spilt,’ declared Murdoch.

‘Definitely no blood!’ shrieked Sienna. ‘I’ve got a hot date tonight.’

Boxhead leaned close to Ela and whispered: ‘Didn’t realise gays played—’

She smacked him across the back of the head before he could utter another moronic word.

Chapter 20

They left the skiff tied up by the river path and made their way to the stretch of lawn that lay between the river and the formal gardens leading up to the entrance of Ham House. This stately building was a 17th-century brick-and-stone country house that at one time had belonged to the Earls of Dysart. It was eventually donated to the National Trust, like so many other great houses whose owners couldn't afford the crippling inheritance tax and upkeep costs.

After Richard and Boxhead had offered the girls some instructions on the rules (to which Sienna had not taken kindly), they launched into a plodding but fun game of touch rugby, accompanied by a good deal of giggling (Ela and Meredith) and barbed mockery (Sienna and the boys).

Partway through the game, they attracted several male players from nearby picnickers, and their friendly three-a-side game morphed into a noticeably more serious five-a-side, with the boys starting to tackle each other, despite Meredith's shouts that it was against the rules.

'Get ready for total annihilation,' Sienna told Boxhead, crouching down in the scrum, facing him.

'Do I look scared?' he shot back.

The ball was suddenly in play and in Boxhead's possession. He passed it to one of the new players on the 'Australia' team just as Sienna got close enough to touch him.

The new guy caught it and tried to run, but Meredith was beside him in seconds, forcing him to pass it to Richard.

Richard ran with it for a few feet before Murdoch bore down on him, and just before he was tackled, he passed it to Ela.

Ela squealed in an embarrassingly girly and ineffectual way as the ball almost slipped through her hands, but somehow she managed to hold on and keep running.

The try line, delineated with a few jumpers, was almost within reach when someone slammed into her, knocking her onto her stomach and landing on top of her as the momentum carried them both over the line.

Murdoch suddenly appeared above them and, with a growl, grabbed the back of his teammate's shirt and waistband and threw the unfortunate man off Ela.

'What the hell do you think you're doing?' he shouted at him.

His teammate rose to his knees and held up his hands in apology. 'Hey, buddy, I'm sorry! Didn't mean to land on her. I slipped as I was reaching out to touch her.'

'If you can't control your bloody feet than stay the hell away from her!' barked Murdoch.

Meredith and Sienna, standing to one side and watching the proceedings with interest, exchanged a look.

Murdoch fixed his attention on Ela's prostrate form. 'Ela? Are you okay?'

She was facedown in the dirt, her shoulders shaking.

'Ela?'

He was starting to worry, but then she rolled over and he saw that she was laughing.

He relaxed and shook his head at her. 'Why are you laughing, you lunatic?'

She gasped and tried to compose herself, but giggles kept breaking through.

'It just occurred to me . . . how appalled . . . my insurance company . . . would be.'

A smile played around his lips. 'You should sit out the rest of the game.'

'No chance! I got a touchdown,' she said excitedly.

'Try.'

‘What?’

‘You got a try, not a touchdown.’

‘Oh, okay.’ She grinned up at him. ‘I’m actually good at this game.’

‘That’s debatable.’

‘Spoilsport.’

Murdoch helped her to her feet and tried to wipe some of the dirt from her face.

Ela’s smile dimmed as she stared at him.

Becoming aware that they had an audience, and that the game couldn’t continue as she was clutching the ball to her chest, she pulled away from him.

‘Are you hurt, El?’ Boxhead asked with concern as he walked over.

‘No. All good!’ she replied cheerily as she threw the ball at him. ‘Let’s play.’

‘You heard the woman!’ shouted Richard.

Chapter 21

‘It’s just a nosebleed!’ groused Murdoch, holding a tissue to his nose. ‘I’m fine.’

‘You need to put ice on it,’ insisted Ela.

The game had turned brutal towards the end, with some violent male-on-male tackles, which the boys all seemed to think of as ‘fun’. Murdoch had sustained a blow to the head in the last maul, and Ela had insisted on putting her bike in his car and driving him back to Lesley’s herself.

No one had been home when they got there, and she had forced him to lie on one of the sofas in the living room and brought him ice wrapped in a kitchen towel.

‘I don’t need ice,’ he insisted as she tried to hand it to him.

‘It could be broken. We need to keep the swelling down.’

‘I’ve had my nose broken before; this is a tickle by comparison.’

‘You either let me put ice on it or I’m driving you to the hospital.’

They stared at each other, neither wanting to back down.

Murdoch harrumphed. ‘Fine.’

His sudden capitulation took her by surprise. ‘Fine?’

‘I’m bleeding here, do you want a damn invitation?’

‘Grouchy!’ She smiled and, shaping the ice gently around his nose, held it in position.

‘Argh . . . that’s freezing!’

‘It’s ice; it’s not meant to be room temperature.’

‘Not sure I like this new take-charge Frau Ela. Can I at least sit up?’

‘No! Stay.’ She laughed at his disgruntled expression. ‘I don’t mean to be domineering, but this is for your own good. How about I make us some hot chocolate and put on a DVD?’

‘Do I have a choice?’

‘Of course! You can choose what movie we watch.’ She walked out of the room, smiling to herself.

‘I don’t want hot chocolate!’ Murdoch yelled after her. ‘I’m not bloody six!’

Ela popped her head back through the doorway. ‘No, you’re not, but if you continue to act like it, I’ll be tempted to smack your bottom and put you to bed.’

Murdoch raised an eyebrow, looking intrigued.

‘Oh, honestly! You know I didn’t mean it like that,’ she said with exasperation, then disappeared again.

‘At least put some whisky in it,’ he called out.

She was still smiling as she made them both spiked hot chocolates. He was so adorable that if he hadn’t been gay, she would probably be in love with him by now.

She immediately sobered at that appalling thought.

Now *that* would be a disaster of monstrous proportions. She’d have to be a real glutton for punishment to put herself in such a pointless, heartbreaking position.

Something inside her clenched painfully.

It had to be indigestion.

When she returned to the living room, Murdoch accepted his hot chocolate without complaint and even agreed to watch two movies – *Grease* and *Dirty Dancing*. If she hadn’t already known he was gay, the fact that he didn’t kick up a fuss over either of her suggestions would have tipped her off.

By the time they were ready to call it a night, Murdoch’s nose had stopped bleeding, and Ela was pleased to see there

was only a bit of swelling. The rest of him, however, was in worse shape.

As soon as he tried to move off the sofa, he discovered why not many professional rugby players last past their mid-thirties.

He groaned as he rose to his feet.

‘Meredith warned you to keep the testosterone to a minimum,’ said Ela, frowning. ‘What hurts?’

‘Everything.’

‘Let me see.’ She lifted up his T-shirt, ignoring his protests. ‘Oh . . . good grief! You’ve got some serious bruises. We should put ice on those too.’

‘Christ, no! They’ll be gone tomorrow.’

She doubted that very much. Inspecting his torso more closely, she became aware of the hard ridges of muscle under the bruising.

Spectacular muscle.

She yanked down his T-shirt.

Gay, gay, gay.

‘Come on, then!’ she said in a bracing tone, for both their benefit. ‘I’ll help.’

She put an arm around his middle, the top of her head barely reaching his chin.

‘I don’t need help,’ he muttered, but didn’t pull away.

She took this to mean that he did actually need help. ‘It’s okay, Grandpa, lean on me.’

‘You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?’

‘Would I admit to it if I was?’

He grunted but offered no further protest.

As they headed out of the room, it quickly became obvious to her that she was indeed a glutton for punishment.

What had possessed her to offer to help him?

At such close proximity, his earthy scent – sweat, dirt, male – played havoc with her senses.

She was in purgatory.

Her body, too idiotic to recognise futility, was tormenting her with a sex hormone overload. She felt like she was on heat – was that even possible for humans? (She'd have to ask Meredith, the fount-of-all-knowledge.)

She attempted to put a little space between them, but Murdoch had an arm clamped over her shoulders and she couldn't budge.

She discreetly turned her head away.

'Do I smell?' he asked.

'What? No!'

He gave her a disbelieving look.

'Maybe a little,' she owned. 'But it's not . . . unpleasant.' It was the opposite of unpleasant.

'I would've showered earlier, but you wouldn't let me off the sofa.'

'Then it's my own fault if you're fragrant,' she replied, smiling up at him.

'You smell nice.' He appeared surprised that the words had come out of his mouth.

'Do I? It must be deodorant. I'm not wearing perfume.'

'It's not deodorant. It's you.'

'Oh . . . uhm . . . thanks.'

Gay, gay, gay!

She steered him towards the stairs, and they started to climb at a snail's pace.

'Shall I get behind you and push?' she puffed out. 'It might be quicker!'

‘Thanks a lot,’ he groused, but he was smiling above her head. Having her arms around him felt too damn good – he was purposefully keeping their progress slow.

His foot suddenly slipped off a stair tread and he went down, landing on his side and taking Ela with him.

‘Bloody hell!’ he groaned.

Ela, partially sprawled across several treads and him, couldn’t stop laughing.

He pushed back the hair that had fallen over her face so he could assure himself she was okay. ‘Did I hurt you?’

‘Of course not,’ she replied, her laughter fading as their gazes intertwined. ‘But we really must stop meeting like this . . . On the floor, I mean.’ Her eyes danced with humour.

‘I don’t mind.’

She gave him a quizzical look, then hurriedly pulled herself off him with the help of the banister and got to her feet.

‘You should have seen the look on your face as you fell,’ she said with a chuckle. ‘It was hilarious!’

‘I’m glad I can offer you so much amusement.’

‘For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbours, and laugh at them in our turn?’ she said, quoting Jane Austen. ‘Let’s try again, shall we?’

She held out her hand to him.

He took hold of it and allowed her to pull him up. She put her arms around him, and they continued up the stairs. She could have sworn he was leaning on her more heavily than before.

‘I feel like a work horse,’ she said, her voice strained.

‘My self-confidence is blossoming under your attentions.’

‘Oh, don’t make me laugh! I need all my energy to get you to your room.’

By the time she dropped him onto his bed, she was panting.

She caught him grimace faintly as he landed and felt compelled to ask: ‘Do you need help with your clothes?’

‘Christ, no!’

‘No need to get jumpy. Your virtue is safe with me.’

‘I don’t think I can take anymore flattery tonight.’

Ela smiled and turned to leave. ‘Good night.’

‘Actually . . . I am a bit sore.’

She turned back, her smile slipping. ‘You want me to help you take your clothes off?’

‘If it’s not too much bother.’

She almost groaned. ‘Right . . . okay . . . arms up.’

He put up his arms, making a show of wincing (although, annoyingly, he realised it wasn’t all show).

Ela took hold of the bottom of his T-shirt and pulled it up. She slowed as muscle after muscle was revealed, then stopped altogether when her gaze snagged on the dark hair trailing down his flat stomach and disappearing into his shorts.

Oh dear lord.

Gay, gay, gay.

‘Everything okay?’ he asked through the material covering his face.

‘Yep! Just checking your bruises.’ With a brisk tug, she yanked off the T-shirt and threw it on the bed. ‘Do you need help with anything else?’

Murdoch noticed she had gone bright red and refused to meet his eyes.

About bloody time she realised he was a man. Her platonic friendliness had been aggravating the hell out of him.

Women usually had no problem finding him attractive, and he'd be lying if he said he hadn't taken full advantage of that fact in the past. But these days he avoided being the focus of so much ardent attention.

Though, in Ela's case . . . she might be an exception.

He wasn't certain if that was a good thing or not. It was certainly complicated.

Just as he was debating whether to pull her against him and kiss her, she took the decision out of his hands.

'Oh . . . Is that Lesley calling me?' she exclaimed. 'I think it is! I'd better go and see what she wants. Night!'

As soon as she left the room, his muscles relaxed from their primed state. Probably just as well she bolted, he decided. He didn't need *complicated* in his life.

But, as he continued to contemplate the spot where she had disappeared, a smile slowly spread across his face.

His sister couldn't be home. He knew for a fact that she was staying overnight at a friend's house.

Chapter 22

The next morning, Ela stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around herself, feeling surprisingly bright-eyed and bushy-tailed for seven o'clock in the morning. The longer she stayed on holiday, the more bounce she seemed to have in the mornings.

She was standing in front of the wardrobe and getting out her yoga gear when she heard a loud crash coming from Murdoch's room.

She poked her head out into the corridor. 'Everything alright in there, Murdoch?'

She heard a groan in response.

Overcoming her scruples, she knocked on his door. There was no answer, so she opened it a fraction and peered in.

'Murdoch, are you okay?'

'I was,' said his disembodied voice, 'until the bloody stool got in the way!'

She found him lying prostrate on the floor on the other side of his bed, partially dressed in house pants (thank god!). An upholstered stool with a broken leg lay on its side beside him.

'It's covered in the same tartan as the rug,' he muttered. 'I didn't see the blasted thing.'

Ela smiled and readjusted her towel. 'Your sister does like her tartan! Do you need a hand getting up?'

Noticing the state of her undress, he scowled up at her. 'Why don't you have any clothes on?'

'I just got out of the shower,' she replied, surprised at his tone. 'How do you feel this morning? Anything hurt?'

'No.' He got to his feet without her assistance.

‘Your nose looks more swollen today. We should put ice on it again.’ She took a step towards him to take a better look.

He took a step away from her. ‘I’m fine.’

‘I can see,’ she said sarcastically, her gaze skimming over his torso. ‘You’re covered in bruises and your nose is double the size.’

‘I’m not some Sassenach hypochondriac.’

‘I never said you were a sasquatch!’

He almost smiled. But then he noticed her towel start to slip, and he looked away, rattled.

‘What are you doing in here?’ he snapped.

‘I heard a crash and wanted to make sure you were okay,’ she replied, a little hurt by his tone.

‘Thank you. But, as you can see, I’m fine . . . Just go and put some damned clothes on.’

‘Oh, for goodness sake! Stop being such a drama queen. Alejandro has seen me with just a towel on, and he didn’t kick up a fuss.’ When he still refused to look at her, she huffed in annoyance. ‘Fine! I’ll remove my repellent female nakedness from your sight.’

His gaze snapped back to her. ‘Don’t put words in my mouth! Anyone with eyes in their head can see you’re the opposite of repellent, which is why you shouldn’t be in a man’s bedroom half-naked . . . not unless you want to send him a clear invitation.’

‘Oh, please!’ she scoffed. ‘We both know there’s no danger of anything like *that* happening.’

‘Why?’ he retorted, annoyed by her casual dismissal of the attraction between them.

‘I know you’re not that way inclined,’ she said vaguely. ‘A girl can pick up signals.’

‘Can she?’ he said with deadly calm.

Ela regarded him warily. There was something dangerous in his eyes she hadn't seen there before. She started to take a step back . . .

He grabbed her bare shoulders and, crushing her against him, slammed his lips on hers.

She let out a muffled exclamation.

The kiss was punishing – it seemed to have a point to prove. Yet somewhere along the way it changed into something Ela could almost believe in, and her body began to respond of its own volition.

Reality hit all too soon.

She froze in his arms.

It took him a few seconds to realise that she had stopped kissing him back. He opened his eyes to find her looking at him with a stricken expression.

'I told you it was dangerous to come into a man's room half-naked,' he growled, and thrust her away.

She grabbed at the edges of her towel to keep it from falling.

'You've certainly made your point!' she replied, anger and mortification warring inside her. 'You almost made me forget . . .' She shook her head and smiled with self-derision. 'I'm sorry if you haven't yet come to grips with who you are, but please don't use me to prove something you believe needs proving!'

Turning on her heel, she stormed out of the room.

'What the hell does that mean?' he yelled after her.

She was almost at her bedroom door when she heard Lesley call out 'Good morning, dear!' from the stairs.

'Oh . . . Hi, Les.' She smiled wanly.

'You've caught me doing the walk of shame – although, it would be more accurate to call it the walk of satisfaction!'

Lesley chortled. 'I had the most wonderful night with my gentleman friend. The real shame is that I had to come home early to prepare for my class . . . Everything okay, dear? You're looking a trifle peaky.'

Tears welled in Ela's eyes.

'Oh, my dear! Whatever is the matter?'

'I-I'm fine. It's just . . . your brother is so . . . he's so . . . *urgh*. There's no point talking about it! Sorry, I'd better go and put some clothes on before Mr Prude in there has an apoplexy.' She walked into her room and shut the door.

Lesley looked after her with a bemused expression, wondering what could have happened to upset her. She continued down the corridor and, seeing Murdoch's door open, poked her head in.

'Morning, pet. Do you know why Ela is upset?'

'Can't a man have some privacy around here?' he said irately, and slammed the door in her face.

Lesley raised her eyebrows. 'Gracious! Everyone's mighty touchy this morning.'

Chapter 23

Ela looked up from her copy of *Pride and Prejudice* and saw Meredith and Sienna enter the coffee shop.

They had organised to do some shopping on Oxford Street, and she had decamped to here to wait for them after her ‘altercation’ with Murdoch. (She could think of no better word to describe it since she refused to think of it as a kiss.)

She had got here almost two hours early because she’d needed to put some distance between herself and her roommate.

He was clearly struggling with his sexuality, and though, as a friend, she wanted to support him, the ‘altercation’ had rattled her, and she needed time to pull herself back together before facing him again.

‘Sorry we’re late!’ said Meredith, sitting down.

‘I’m early, don’t worry,’ replied Ela. ‘And I had Mr Darcy to keep me company.’

‘Ah, Mr Darcy,’ sighed Sienna. ‘Man of my dreams and destined to remain there. I keep fantasising about being seduced by a Mr Darcy-like Mr Right, but reality seems to have other ideas. I’m hoping for integrity, honour, passion, and the guys I date are hoping I’m into threesomes. *C’est la vie!* I’m off to the ladies. Order me a latte, would you?’

‘I have to warn you,’ Meredith told Ela as Sienna walked off, ‘she’s on a mission to find you a man.’

‘Why?’

‘She’s got it into her head that you want one. But if you told her you were already interested in someone . . .’ She let the sentence hang.

‘Who?’ Ela asked warily.

‘I’m just saying *if* there was someone . . .’ Another pause.

‘Why are you giving me that weird look? There isn’t anyone.’

‘Murdoch?’

Ela laughed. It sounded bitter, even to her. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘I suspect he likes you.’

Ela waived a hand dismissively. ‘Not in that way. Trust me.’

‘But he’s always so attentive around you.’

‘Only because his sister coerced him into it!’

‘Murdoch’s a great guy, but he’s not *that* self-sacrificing. If he’s spending time with you, it’s not because of his sister.’

‘You don’t know his sister. Look, I know he likes me as a friend, but that’s all there is to it.’ Ela paused for a moment, debating with herself. ‘Have you never wondered why he doesn’t respond to any of the women throwing themselves at him? From what you’ve told me – and what I’ve witnessed! – he gets a lot of female attention. Why doesn’t he act on it?’

Meredith’s brow puckered. ‘I’m sure he’s dated – I can’t imagine him living like a monk – but he hasn’t introduced anyone to me for years, which means there’s been nothing serious.’

‘Exactly. So, why do you think that is?’ prompted Ela.

She had no intention of giving away Murdoch’s secret; she only wanted to nudge Meredith in the right direction.

‘He simply hasn’t found the right girl . . . There are extenuating circumstances that have made it difficult for him to trust people.’

There certainly were extenuating circumstances, thought Ela.

‘Anyway,’ continued Meredith, catching sight of Sienna returning from the bathroom, ‘prepare yourself to be subjected

to Sienna's little black book.'

'My little black book is legendary,' said Sienna, dropping into a seat.

'I don't need setting up,' Ela informed her.

'You're the one who said the last time you had a relationship Ricky Martin was *Living La Vida Loca*.'

'Now, he's a hottie and a half,' said Meredith. 'Do you have anyone like him for Ela?'

'I wish! I would *She Bangs* him anytime.'

'Oh, that's lame.'

'I don't need setting up,' repeated Ela.

'All I'm going to do,' said Sienna, 'is make some suggestions based on my past experience. What you decide to do with the information is entirely up to you.'

'I can't date anyone you've had "past experience" of!'

Sienna held up her small black notebook. 'Most of the men in here are simply friends or friends of friends. I've even got the numbers of the handymen I've come across. Electricians, plumbers – you name it, I can call someone to fix it.'

'If I ever need my plumbing fixed, I'll let you know.'

'Oh, and I have my gynaecologist in here as well.'

'Well, that sells it for me!'

'What do you have to lose?' asked Meredith. 'Unless you're interested in someone already?'

Ela dropped her face into her hands and groaned. 'I never thought I'd have to stoop to raiding my friend's list of exes and tradesmen for a date.'

Not that she was doing spectacularly well choosing men by herself. One ill-fated relationship six years ago, a handful of dates that had quickly fizzled out, and a perverse crush on a gay guy – poor pickings by anyone's standards.

‘Hormonal?’ Sienna asked with sympathy.

Ela nodded. ‘You can tell?’

‘Of course – I’m a naturopath! Here . . . try some elderflower extract and ginseng to rebalance your chi.’

She pulled out two bottles from her handbag and handed them to Ela.

‘Now,’ she continued, opening her notepad, ‘let’s see who we have in here . . . Anil – no, too intellectually challenged for you . . . Brian – he’s engaged . . . Drew – possibility, but not until the braces come off . . . Frank – nuh-uh, you don’t want to go there! Unnaturally attached to his car . . . No, not him either . . . No . . . No . . . Maybe.’ She looked across at Ela, then seemed to change her mind. ‘No, not for you. He likes it both ways. No . . . No . . . Yes. Yes, yes, yes!’

‘Definitely skip that one,’ said Ela.

‘You don’t know what you’re missing out on. This guy gives the best . . .’

‘Sienna!’ Meredith cut her off, looking about them. ‘Keep your voice down.’

‘Well, he does! And he’s an electrician. You don’t realise how hard it is to find a good one in London. And he’s got the biggest toolbox you’ve ever seen.’

Ela shook her head. ‘Good for him, but no!’

‘Your loss. He built it himself and everything . . . uh . . . Jerry – possibly. Do you like the bruiser type?’

‘Have you ever been out with him?’

‘No, he’s a friend of a friend. Seems like a nice guy. Let’s put him down as a *maybe* . . . Next, we have Matt . . .’

Ela sent Meredith a *help, please!* look.

Meredith smiled. ‘If there’s no one else, then think of it as practise.’

Chapter 24

‘I don’t see why I need a makeover for a hypothetical date I don’t even want,’ said Ela, digging in her heels as they stood outside Selfridges.

‘If you want to find someone who can sweep you off your feet,’ said Sienna, ‘then you’ve got to look like someone who a man wants to sweep off her feet. And, lovely, I say this with unblinded affection – you’re not there yet! You’re an attractive girl but—’

‘She’s beautiful,’ cut in Meredith.

‘She might be beautiful, but what does it matter when she hides it by dressing like a Mormon!’

Ela was a little stung, probably because there was an element of truth to what Sienna said. Her style was an odd mix of laid-back teenager chic when out of the public eye and mature couture gowns when on tour.

She liked buying gorgeous, well-made clothes as much as the next girl, but in reality, her everyday uniform was jeans or shorts and concealing tops that protected her skin from the sun. Unless she was touring, and then she had to glam it up; although she suspected Sienna would have no problem in classifying her tour wardrobe as boring.

‘The man of your dreams isn’t going to just drop at your feet without some effort on your part,’ said Sienna. ‘You need to—’

‘Okay! Can we please stop talking about how crappy my style is and go find me some clothes that won’t make you cringe at the sight of me?’

‘Hallelujah!’ cried Sienna.

‘We would be delighted to help you shop,’ said Meredith over the top of her. ‘But only if you want us to – there’s no pressure!’

Ela smiled. ‘I work best under pressure. Do your worst.’

Two hours later, Sienna and Meredith were sitting outside the changing rooms on a grey linen couch, while Ela was putting on the first outfit from the pile they had selected for her.

She stepped out of the cubicle and presented herself wearing a pair of wide-legged black trousers and a cream polo neck sweater.

‘We didn’t approve that,’ said Sienna, frowning.

Ela threw her a mutinous look. ‘I like it.’

‘You look like Diane bloody Keaton!’

‘I love her style!’

‘And you’re free to copy it . . . when you’re *seventy*. You need something that shows off your boobs, for god’s sake – she put them there for a reason.’

‘I don’t want to be a Page 3 girl!’

‘I’m not asking you to be Page 3! Did you hear me say, take off your top and flaunt your boobs in a national newspaper? No!’

‘What Sienna is trying to say in that inimitable style of hers,’ said Meredith, smoothing the way, ‘is that you have a wonderful shape, and it would be a shame to keep it hidden *all* the time . . . Perhaps you could try on the Comptoir des Cotonniers little black dress next?’ She picked it out of the pile between her and Sienna and handed it to Ela. ‘It’s not too *outré*.’

With a look of resignation, Ela complied.

When she next stepped out of the cubicle, Meredith and Sienna gasped in delight.

‘I love it!’

‘Perfect!’

They fluttered around her, adjusting a seam here, a sleeve there; Sienna even plunged her hand down Ela’s décolleté and,

ignoring her protests, realigned her bosom so that it sat higher.

‘I feel so *Trinny and Susannah* right now,’ she said to Meredith gleefully.

‘Can I have my breasts back?’ asked Ela.

‘All yours!’ Stepping back, Sienna admired her handiwork.

Meredith joined her. ‘It looks amazing!’

Ela studied herself in the mirror, turning from side to side.

The dress did look great. She somehow felt more womanly; more in control.

She wasn’t used to showing so much cleavage, or leg, but then again, she was no longer an inexperienced teenager needing to cover up so a lecherous conductor wouldn’t stare down her top.

Times had changed, and she needed to change with them.

‘I like it,’ she declared with a nod. ‘What’s next?’

‘That’s my girl!’ cried Sienna. ‘Go on, Meri-Berry, give her the next one.’

In the end, they agreed on four new outfits and three pairs of shoes.

Ela was happy to keep adding more, but it became obvious that Meredith and Sienna thought her budget wouldn’t stretch that far, and she didn’t want to launch into an explanation of why money was not a problem.

They visited the makeup section next.

Meredith took the lead, saying: ‘Sienna’s idea of doing her makeup is to close her eyes and rummage around in her makeup drawer until she picks up three items at random. I give you exhibit A . . .’ She pointed to Sienna’s unusual selection of green and yellow eyeshadow and bubble-gum-pink lip gloss.

‘I like to surprise myself,’ shrugged Sienna. ‘Makeup should be fun.’

‘I don’t mind fun,’ said Ela, ‘as long as it’s vegetarian, involves no animal testing, and looks natural. Oh, and I absolutely *detest* lipstick. I’ve eaten enough of it to last me a lifetime.’

Two eye-pencils, a translucent foundation, and a smoky eyeshadow palette later, they left Selfridges.

Meredith then led the way to Liberty so she could stock up on her favourite perfume. From there, Sienna took them to a boutique nearby so they could give her their opinion on a dress she had put on hold.

Ela and Meredith both agreed it was a winner.

‘Please don’t argue over the price this time,’ added Meredith. ‘It’s so embarrassing. Just pay what it says on the label.’

‘I don’t argue, I haggle,’ corrected Sienna.

‘We’re in London, not Bangkok!’

‘You can haggle here?’ asked Ela, surprised.

‘No!’

‘Yes!’ said Sienna. ‘The intrinsic principle of money is based on haggling. The price they print on the tag is only a starting point and you negotiate from there. It’s practically law!’

‘We’ll stay right here while you go and try to convince them of that,’ said Meredith.

‘Ye of little faith,’ said Sienna as she walked off towards the cash register.

‘Where did she get that idea from?’ Ela asked with amusement.

‘A leftover from an amorous liaison with a radical lawyer,’ replied Meredith, rolling her eyes.

They watched as Sienna spoke with the sales assistant.

The manager was then called over, more talking ensued, a deal seemed to be struck, and Sienna paid for the dress.

She smiled as she walked back towards them, bag swinging from her wrist.

‘It worked?’ asked Ela, incredulous.

‘No,’ replied Sienna airily. ‘But I had fun.’

Ela smiled. ‘Does it ever work?’

‘Of course! Many people recognise the ancient law of haggling . . . Especially if the ancient law of a shit sales week also applies.’

They finished off the day in a rooftop bar opposite the London Palladium, a theatre overlooking Regent Street, which Meredith called her best-kept revival secret after a hard day of shopping.

‘My feet are killing me,’ groaned Ela. ‘I can’t believe I let you two convince me to buy these evil heels.’

‘They’re not even three inches! Stop whingeing,’ scoffed Sienna.

‘That’s three inches more than what I usually wear!’

A waiter came to take their drinks order, and, as soon as he left, Meredith leaned forward to get Ela and Sienna’s attention.

‘Girls, I need your help! Loulou is flying in from New York this week to see me.’

Sienna laughed with delight. ‘Fabulous! Your mother is such a blast.’

‘You call your mother Loulou?’ asked Ela.

‘Her idea,’ replied Meredith. ‘It’s apparently very ageing to be called “Mum”.’

‘Is she bringing her latest hubby for us to meet?’ asked Sienna.

‘Oh no. He doesn’t like to leave the US . . . Seems to think he’ll be attacked by terrorists,’ said Meredith, keeping her expression bland.

Sienna guffawed.

‘Please tell me one or both of you are free to join us on Tuesday and share my pain?’ pleaded Meredith. ‘Loulou wants me to take her shopping.’

‘Hell no,’ said Sienna. ‘Sorry, Meri-Berry! You know I love Loulou, but I’ve paid my dues. My normally healthy ego takes a battering after every encounter with your mother. I walk away feeling like an overweight failure in need of a nose job. Luckily, I’m busy with clients all day, otherwise I’d have to make up an excuse and lie to you.’

‘You just said her mother was a blast,’ Ela pointed out, bemused.

‘Oh, she definitely is! When there’s bigger prey than me for her to focus on. Or a man! One-on-one girl time with Loulou is bloody awful.’

‘I understand,’ sighed Meredith.

‘Well, I’m free if you need me,’ said Ela.

‘Are you? Oh, thank you. I’ll love you forever!’

The dirty martinis arrived just as Ela’s phone rang. She looked down at the screen.

Murdoch.

She let it ring out.

‘Everything okay?’ asked Meredith.

Her gently searching gaze made Ela suspect that she had seen Murdoch’s name.

‘All good! So, I was thinking . . .’ She turned to Sienna. ‘. . . perhaps I will let you set me up on a date. But only a *lunch* date.’

‘Was there ever any doubt?’ asked Sienna, looking surprised.

‘Yes, there was doubt! If you remember, I never actually agreed to anything.’

‘Fine. I won’t quibble. So, who will it be? And where shall I tell him to meet you?’

‘You choose the who. And as for the where, next week I’ve booked myself into some afternoon lectures at the National Gallery, so the restaurant on the top floor would make things easier.’

‘God, you’re almost as much of a nerd as Meredith,’ remarked Sienna, smiling at her fondly. ‘But never fear, your matchmaker is on the case!’

Chapter 25

Ela was walking through Trafalgar Square on her way to the date Sienna had organised for her when her phone started ringing in her bag. She looked at the screen.

Murdoch again.

Since Sunday, he had called her at least twice a day, but she was yet to pick up.

She had successfully avoided him at the house by retiring to her room early and staying in bed for longer in the mornings. Lesley clearly suspected something, but so far she had kept her questions to herself, for which Ela was immensely grateful, given that she would have been hard-pressed to answer them.

Her anger at Murdoch had long since evaporated. He was fighting his own demons, and she wanted to be there for him. The problem was that she didn't trust herself to be in close proximity with him without betraying herself.

It was a ridiculous, untenable situation, and she had decided that morning to rip off the band-aid.

She accepted his call.

'Hi, Murdoch.'

There was a moment's silence on the other end of the line.

'I didn't think you'd pick up.' He sounded nonplussed.

She smiled. He was always so in control. It was nice to know that she had managed to throw him off-balance.

'Sorry I haven't returned your calls. I thought it best to give us both some time to get our heads back in the right place,' she replied, deciding honesty was the best option – or as close to it as she could get.

'I wanted to apologise for attacking you,' he said gruffly.

'You didn't attack me! Why would you think that?'

‘You looked so horrified . . . I’m sorry.’

‘I was startled, that’s all. But it’s no big deal, I know you didn’t mean it.’

‘Do you?’ There was an odd catch in his voice.

Ela sensed his vulnerability, and her heart went out to him. ‘You know you can talk to me if you ever need to confide in a friend. On any subject.’

‘A friend.’

‘Yes. I’m here for you, if there was something you wanted to tell me.’

‘Like what?’

‘Whatever you want! You’re obviously dealing with a lot, and it’s good to get things off your chest.’

‘You think I attacked you because—’

‘You didn’t attack me.’

‘So you think I *kissed* you because I have a lot on my plate?’

‘I know you do,’ she said softly.

‘You really don’t believe I meant that kiss?’

‘No.’

There was a long pause.

‘Can I ask why?’ he said at last.

It was her turn to pause. ‘Can we agree that you had something to prove?’

She heard his sigh down the line. ‘Yes. I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t worry, I’ve already forgotten it.’

‘So . . . everything’s back to normal between us?’

‘Do you think I’d break up such a golden pub-quiz partnership?’

‘There is that, of course,’ he said, a smile in his voice. ‘What are you up to today? Want to meet me at Scott’s? The chef has me doing food tastings as I asked for more vegetarian options in the menu.’

‘I’d love to, but I’m actually on my way to a lunch date.’

‘A date?’

‘I know, shocking, right? Sienna set me up with some guy she knows. If I emerge from the experience unscathed, it will be a miracle.’

‘Can’t you trust him?’ he asked tersely.

‘Oh, I didn’t mean it like that! I’m sure he’s harmless.’

‘Just take care.’

‘Of course.’

‘And come visit the club after so I can see for myself that you’re in one piece.’

‘Ha ha.’

‘Seriously . . . Susan will have my head if something happens to you. And I want to show you the club.’

‘I’d like that, but I can’t get there until after five. I’m attending a lecture at the National Gallery.’

‘I’ll still be here.’

‘Okay, great! See you then.’

She smiled as she hung up. They seemed to be finding their friendship mojo again.

Chapter 26

Ela sat opposite her date, Harry, in the elegant surrounds of the National Gallery's top-floor restaurant, with a spectacular view of the London skyline spread out before them. This really was one of her favourite places in London to while away an hour or so.

Shame that today the view was being spoiled by boredom.

'Was that the fifth or sixth time you won the championship?' she asked, doing her best to keep the conversation flowing.

'Seventh,' replied Harry, smiling proudly.

'Wow, that's great.' She took a sip of her water as she surreptitiously checked her watch.

'And we almost won it an eighth time, but our defence was weak that year. One of the forwards was out half the season with a groin injury . . .'

Ela tuned out again, her attention wandering over to the dessert trolley.

Was that Black Forest cake? Maybe she would have a slice to treat herself for not falling asleep.

She became conscious that silence had descended, and, looking across at her date, she realised he was waiting for her to speak.

'Ah . . . you must be good at rugby to have won all those championships.'

'Football,' he corrected, his faltering smile telling her that she had disappointed him.

'Sorry! Sport is not my forte. Although I know a little about cricket since my dad is crazy about it. Do you play cricket?'

His fork slipped out of his hand and clattered against his plate. He stared at her with a frozen expression.

Had they already had this conversation? she wondered guiltily.

Suddenly, Harry's face crumbled, and he started to sob; big, pitiful sobs that heaved his shoulders.

Ela looked on horrified. 'I-I'm sorry, Harry . . . Was it something I said?'

His sobbing increased in volume. The other diners started turning their heads to look at them.

Ela caught the attention of a waiter and desperately signalled for the bill.

Ela paid the driver and peered out the window of the black cab.

They had stopped in front of a beautiful old building four storeys high, made of pale brick and with arched window surrounds carved from stone. It was larger than its neighbours in this historic part of Soho, but discreet enough not to overwhelm them.

Murdoch had told her it had a chequered past. Having been originally built as a parish school, it had passed through several owners (some more dubious than others) over the intervening century and a half before he had bought it from the local council, which had been using it as office space. An ignominious use for what she now saw was a wonderful gem of utilitarian Victorian architecture.

It was positioned discreetly down a narrow road that housed several boutiques and creative-industry businesses. The only signage to let visitors know they were in the right place was a brass plaque beside the double front doors with a cursive 'S' inscribed into it.

Ela frowned as she noticed a small group of paparazzi waiting on the pavement in front of the building.

It was unlikely they were there for her. But, to be on the safe side, she put on her sunglasses and pushed her hair forwards to cover part of her face.

Opening the cab door, she stepped out.

The paparazzi looked her over with interest, cameras poised.

‘What’s your name, love?’

‘Have you seen the earl?’

‘What’s he like?’

‘Hey, love, are you a member?’

Ela felt her anxiety spike. She was used to navigating the press with Roger and Susan at her side.

Putting on a bright smile, she walked unhurriedly up the front steps and pressed the buzzer. The door opened almost immediately. She thanked the porter and stepped inside, heaving a sigh of relief as he closed the door behind her.

She stood for a moment studying the impressive reception hall. The floors were chequered in green and white marble, classical murals covered the walls and ceiling, a backlit marble reception desk was tucked against one wall, and a beautiful steel and glass spiral staircase formed the focal point.

A man, who she assumed to be the manager, broke off a conversation he was having with a staff member behind the reception desk and walked over to greet her.

He was exceptionally well groomed, with neck tattoos visible above his impeccably cut suit, and he had the look of a man who was comfortable in his own skin.

‘Good evening, miss. Welcome to Scott’s. Do you have your membership card on you?’

‘Oh . . . I’m not a member,’ Ela replied apologetically.

‘Are you here to inquire about becoming a member?’ he asked politely.

‘Actually, I’m here to see Murdoch . . . Mr Barclay,’ she clarified and took off her sunglasses. ‘He’s expecting me.’

‘Who shall I say is . . .’ He smiled suddenly. ‘I beg your pardon. I didn’t realise it was you, miss.’

‘Have we met?’ she asked, taken aback.

‘We were never properly introduced, but I had the pleasure of being led by you in a tango at Mr Barclay’s birthday drinks.’

Her eyes widened. ‘Oh dear . . . I’m so, so sorry! I wasn’t myself that evening.’

‘Please don’t apologise. You were very good in the lead! Much better than I would have been.’

A laugh escaped her. ‘That one lesson I had in Argentina last year must have done the trick.’

‘I’m honoured to have benefited from your firsthand experience,’ he replied with humour. ‘If you would follow me, I’ll take you upstairs to await Mr Barclay in the bar. But first, if you have a mobile phone or camera on you, please hand it in to reception.’

‘You want my phone?’

‘It will be stored in our safe room and returned to you upon departure. We take our members’ privacy seriously, and with these new camera phones becoming more prevalent, we decided on a blanket ban.’

Ela couldn’t fault their reasoning. She handed her phone to the lady at reception and, after signing the relevant paperwork, followed the manager towards the staircase.

‘Why is the press outside?’ she asked him.

‘I apologise if you were harassed. They’ve been here since the opening, trying their luck. We have a private entrance

for our more well-known members. I would be happy to show it to you, if you would prefer to use it in future?’

‘Thank you,’ she said with a smile, ‘but I won’t be in London long enough to need it.’

They walked up to the first floor and entered an L-shaped bar.

The space was gorgeous. The walls were covered with chinoiserie wallpaper in shades of gold and copper (hand painted *de Gournay*, if she wasn’t mistaken); funky handmade crystal wall sconces and floor lamps provided discreet illumination; and plush velvet lounges, tub chairs, and private booths, all upholstered in shades of crimson and orange, were dotted around on the dark timber floor.

The bar itself was made from ebonised wood and brass and ran down the length of one wall, with large sash windows above it.

The place was full of people, and there was a lively hubbub in the air. The manager found Ela a seat at the bar and gestured to the barman.

‘A glass of the Dom Pérignon for Miss Baxtor-Huntington, please, George.’

Ela stared at him in shock. ‘H-how do you know that name?’

He hesitated. ‘I beg your pardon . . . Perhaps I am mistaken, but I thought I recognised a certain resemblance between yourself and a pianist I enjoy listening to.’

Ela gave him a sheepish look. ‘I would be grateful if you could forget that resemblance for the time being.’

‘It is forgotten, Miss . . .?’

‘McIntosh,’ she supplied with a smile. ‘Ela McIntosh.’

‘I will inform Mr Barclay that you are here, Miss McIntosh.’

He left, and Ela was at leisure to study her surroundings.

She didn't have long to wait before the barman placed a glass in front of her and carefully poured out her champagne.

She thanked him and added conversationally: 'I can't believe how busy you are!'

'Every day since the opening,' he replied, looking pleased. 'Some members haven't left the building since Sunday.'

'They've slept here?'

'Creatives don't keep normal hours. We're open round the clock, and there are bedrooms on the top floor available for booking.'

'I had no idea you were such a professional operation.'

'Throwing aspersions on my club already?' a voice asked from behind.

Ela spun her stool around and smiled at Murdoch. 'I wouldn't dare! I just hadn't realised the extent of the services you offer.'

'You should see the cinema and state-of-the-art recording studio on the levels below ground.'

He perched lightly on a stool beside her, and his gaze took in her little black dress (the operative word being *little*, she thought nervously).

She resisted the urge to pull down the hem, making do with squeezing her crossed legs more tightly together.

'New dress?'

'Sienna and Meredith took me shopping,' she said, blushing a little.

'For your date?' he asked stiffly.

She groaned. 'Oh, please don't mention the date!'

His face relaxed into a smile. 'Intriguing.'

'Intriguing implies there was something interesting about the experience. All I got was story after story of manly

sporting prowess, topped off by a bout of tears at some repressed childhood memory . . . Something about his mother running off with a test cricketer.'

'You made your date cry?'

'Sob, actually. It was quite a show. I don't think a single person in the restaurant missed it. And how unjust of you to blame me! How was I to know the guy has a deep-seated aversion to cricket? I have a deep-seated aversion to his conversation, but I didn't bawl my eyes out into my risotto.'

Murdoch burst out laughing.

She smiled. 'Needless to say, I got out of there as soon as I could and rushed over to see a friendly face. But I won't stay long, I know you're busy.'

'If you can wait half an hour, I'll be finished and can take you on a tour of the club.'

'Great! I'll wait.'

He pushed away from the stool. 'Have you had dessert?'

'I wish. When you have a room full of people judging you, you tend to lose your appetite.'

'I'll send something out.'

She sipped her champagne as she watched him walk off.

It seemed the awkwardness between them had passed, for which she was extremely grateful. She had missed him. She hadn't realised until the last few days how much his presence in her life had come to mean to her.

It was a blessing and a curse.

In only a few weeks she would have to leave London and embark on a long tour of Asia. The thought filled her with a sense of despondency; the grip of her right hand slackened and her glass slipped, champagne spilling down her front.

'Drat!' she exclaimed, trying to flick off the liquid.

‘Shall I get you another, me darlin’?’ asked a dapper older gentleman in a felt Fedora hat, who was waiting at the bar to order.

Ela smiled across at him. She had always been a sucker for an Irish accent.

‘Thank you, that’s lovely of you to offer, but that won’t be necessary.’

‘You’d be doing an old man a great kindness by indulgin’ him.’

She wondered if he was lonely. ‘In that case, I would be delighted. Thank you, sir.’

‘Oh no! *Sir* is too grand for the likes of me,’ he protested, and then called over the barman. ‘Another champagne for the lady, and a double Loch Buchanan whisky for me, thanks George. Hold the ice this time. Just a drop of water to release the oils.’

The barman nodded and went off to pour the drinks.

‘And what would be yer name, Miss . . .?’

‘Oh, *Miss* is too grand for me,’ she returned, eyes twinkling. ‘I’m just Ela.’

‘Just Ela?’

‘Short for Gabriela.’

‘A fittin’ name for an angel.’

She beamed at the old charmer. ‘And may I know your name?’

‘Joshua. A good Catholic name. Not an angel, but a saint. My parents lived in hope!’

She laughed as a waiter appeared at her elbow and put down a large slate platter on the bar.

‘Compliments of Mr Barclay,’ he told her.

Ela’s mouth started to water as she looked down at the desserts arranged before her: layered dark chocolate and

cherry cake, lemon meringue tart, mille-feuille, and apple pie with clotted cream.

She was in heaven.

‘Please bring another spoon for my friend,’ she said, looking across to Joshua with a smile. ‘I’m going to need help!’

They spent the next half an hour demolishing the dessert platter, while Joshua regaled her with stories about Ireland and his misspent youth.

‘Ah, it’s done me a world of good to relive the old days,’ he chuckled, ‘but I’d best be goin’ now, me darlin’. I’m expected elsewhere, and I’m more than a wee bit late!’ He downed the remainder of his whisky. ‘I regretfully take my leave of you. You’ve been a most charmin’ companion.’

‘Allow me to return the compliment,’ she replied. ‘I’ve loved listening to your stories! Not many people can claim they once shared a dodgy curry with U2, or went cow tipping with Stevie Nicks during a bender.’

He laughed. ‘It’s been grand! I’ve enjoyed the craic.’ As he rose to his feet, his eyes dropped to her hands. ‘You know, you should have that wrist seen to. You’ve been rubbin’ it a fair bit.’

‘Have I?’ She made a face. ‘I had tendinitis a while back and I guess I now do it out of habit . . . or maybe because I fear it will come back,’ she admitted.

She had never articulated that fear before; it was too dreadful to contemplate. What good was a concert pianist who couldn’t play?

‘Now that would be a great shame,’ said Joshua, eyes warm with compassion. ‘To live life fearin’ somethin’ that may never be is a worse fate than the thing we fear.’ He tipped his hat to her. ‘Good day to you, Gabriela-the-angel. I’ll be hopin’ we meet again.’

‘As will I, Joshua.’

Ela watched him thoughtfully as he walked away.

At the entrance to the bar, she saw him stop to talk to Murdoch, who was coming the other way. They shook hands and spoke for a few minutes, then Joshua continued on his way and Murdoch came to join her.

‘How do you know Joshua?’ she asked as he sat down.

‘His son is my lawyer. I’ve known him for years.’

‘He’s quite a character! He’s been telling me the most hysterical stories.’

‘He certainly has plenty of them,’ Murdoch said dryly. ‘He’s one of the top music promoters in the country. He’s seen it all.’

Chapter 27

‘Are your shoes hurting you?’ asked Murdoch.

They had had to park the car two blocks away from Lesley’s house, and Ela was limping down the street.

Her new ‘date shoes’ were not made for a long impromptu walk through Soho, to Neil’s Yard (where Ela had wanted to buy some natural skincare), and then on to Covent Garden Market to watch the opera-singing buskers.

Her feet were in agony.

‘No!’ she lied, trying hard not to grimace and failing.

He gave her an amused look.

‘Alright, yes!’ she groaned. ‘But I don’t appreciate you forcing me to tell you. Marilyn Monroe once said a lady never admits that her feet hurt.’

‘Marilyn Monroe was a drug addict who couldn’t cope with the pressure of being Marilyn Monroe. Are you sure you want to base your podiatric philosophy on her?’

‘In fairness to her, it was her character in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* who said it, but I suppose I get your point.’

‘Piggyback?’

‘In this dress? It’ll be indecent!’

‘It’s either that or pain.’

‘True,’ she said on a sigh. ‘And it’s not as if you care about a pair of female legs.’

Murdoch had no idea what she was talking about. He cared deeply about a certain pair of female legs. The way her knees had dimples above them had been driving him crazy all evening.

He hurriedly looked away as she hiked up the skirt of the dress until it clung to the tops of her thighs.

Putting her hands on his shoulders, she jumped up onto his back. He grabbed the underside of her bare legs as they came around his waist and adjusted her higher up his back.

Neither said a word as he set off.

The whole piggyback experience from start to finish was pure torture, for the both of them.

By the time they arrived at Lesley's front door, Ela was desperate to get off.

'I can manage from here,' she said breathily.

Murdoch let go of her legs and she slid down his back. She yelped as her feet took her weight, and he turned just in time to grab hold of her arm as her legs buckled.

'Women are crazy,' he muttered.

Kneeling in front of her, he took hold of her foot, making her sway and have to clutch his shoulders, and removed her shoe. He did the same with the other.

Exquisite agony pierced her feet as they stretched out flat on the ground.

'Oh, thank goodness!' she gasped. Using him for support, she flexed her toes. 'That feels amazing! Thank you.'

'You're welcome.' He smiled up at her and resolutely refused to look at her breasts, which hovered enticingly at his current eye level.

But his periphery vision was killing him.

As Ela stared into his upturned face, she could feel a pull of attraction between them.

Clearly impossible.

She'd had a couple of drinks, so it must be alcohol-induced wishful thinking.

The loaded silence was pierced by the ring of Murdoch's phone.

Ela let go of him and stepped away.

He stood and, transferring her shoes into one hand, took the phone out of his pocket to cancel the call.

Ela glanced at the screen.

Who was Katherine?

Not that it was any of her business. Just like it was none of her business that he was in denial about being gay and was still obviously dating women.

She opened her bag with greater violence than its small clasp warranted and rummaged inside looking for her key.

Murdoch's phone rang again.

'Oh, for goodness sake!' she said sharply. 'Just answer it! It's clearly an emergency if she's calling this late.'

A booty-call emergency, she thought darkly.

'Sorry. I'll be quick.'

'No need to apologise to me! I don't care.' She continued to search for the key.

Murdoch watched her as he answered the phone. 'Katherine. Everything okay? . . . Of course I don't know where your passport is . . . How did you get out of the country without it? Actually, don't answer that. I don't have time now . . . Okay, I'll check your room.'

The woman's voice filtered through to Ela, and she thought it sounded oddly familiar.

' . . . If it's there, I'll courier it to you . . . '

Ela's head snapped up.

' . . . Just text me the address. Bye.'

'Was that Kat?' she asked accusingly.

'Yes.'

Ela was shocked into silence.

They were all staying in the same house; there was no reason why Kat and Murdoch couldn't have become close.

But something felt off.

It occurred to her that she had never actually seen Kat and Murdoch in the same room together. Kat had been away for work recently, but even before that, she couldn't remember ever seeing them interact.

'How do you know Kat well enough for her to be calling you late at night?' she asked, not really wanting to hear the answer.

'She's a friend.'

'How good a friend?'

'If you're asking if we ever dated, then yes,' he said in his blunt way. 'Briefly, when she first came to live with Lesley.' When Ela didn't speak, he added: 'It was a long time ago.'

Ela wasn't really listening. Something niggled at the back of her mind.

'*Katherine!*' she exclaimed all at once. 'As in the Katherine you were talking to on the phone that first morning? You told her you didn't want to be saddled with baby-sitting, and that someone – Lesley, probably – had said there was plenty of room at her place . . . you were talking about *me*, weren't you? I'm the one you didn't want to baby-sit!'

'That was before I got to know you.'

'I never asked you to baby-sit me!' she said indignantly, turning away from him and shoving the key in the lock. 'If you didn't want me staying with you, all you had to do was tell me and I would have been happy to leave.'

Murdoch didn't think it a good moment to mention that his sister would have killed him if he had done what Ela suggested.

The key didn't seem to want to work, and Ela let out a grunt of frustration.

She suddenly faced Murdoch again as something else occurred to her. 'Kat was there for *you* the night of your birthday drinks . . .'

‘Yes. She dropped in.’

‘And you were the one who put her up to telling me about the spare room here.’

‘She did that off her own back.’

‘I don’t believe you!’

‘In the end I asked you to stay, didn’t I?’

‘Only to assuage your conscience! You were quick enough to deliver me to your sister’s house.’

‘You were determined to move out,’ he said, trying to remain reasonable. ‘You’d already found a B & B, for chrissake. I had no choice but to take you to Lesley.’

Ela huffed.

But before she could give him another piece of her mind, the sound of a drunken ruckus reached their ears. It sounded as if it was coming from inside the house.

‘Stay here!’ Murdoch ordered, suddenly alert.

Grabbing the key off her, he opened the door and walked in.

‘Stop acting all gentlemanly,’ Ela said crossly.

‘Don’t be daft.’

‘Daft!’ she grumbled to herself. ‘I’m not the daft one, pretending to be something I’m not.’

She followed him down the dark corridor and bumped into him at the foot of the stairs.

‘I told you to stay outside,’ he whispered irately.

‘Just because you snap orders at me doesn’t mean I’m going to follow them!’

‘Is that you, Ela, dear?’ Lesley’s voice called down the stairs, making Ela jump.

‘Yes, Les . . . I thought you were on a romantic getaway with your butcher friend?’

‘Imran caught the flu! Very inconsiderate of him, but what can you do?’

Lesley turned on the lights from the upstairs landing and peered down at them through the handrail.

‘Oh! I didn’t realise you were here too, pet. Why are you both skulking around in the dark? Anything deliciously inappropriate I should know about?’

‘We heard voices,’ said Murdoch. ‘Do you have someone with you?’

‘No, just me! You probably heard the teenagers out in the back alley. They’re awfully rowdy tonight. Why don’t you both come up and have a drink with me? Come, come!’

Ela started up the stairs, then stopped suddenly as her gaze landed on the rifle loosely gripped in Lesley’s hand.

‘Good grief, Les, is that a gun?’

‘Gracious, no! It’s only my air rifle.’

‘But why?’ said Ela, approaching with caution.

‘It’s half term.’

‘Is that a hunting term, like open season or something?’

Lesley chuckled. ‘That’s one way to think of it.’

‘You don’t shoot the foxes, do you?’ Ela asked with dismay.

‘I would never shoot a defenceless animal!’ exclaimed Lesley, looking hurt that Ela could think it of her.

‘Sorry, Les . . . but, in that case, what *are* you shooting?’

‘The teenagers, dear. They’re out of school and making a nuisance of themselves again.’

‘That’s a sport that could gain popularity fast,’ observed Murdoch from behind Ela.

‘You shoot teenagers?’ Ela wasn’t certain if she was being teased or not.

‘Oh, only the ones who cause trouble,’ replied Lesley. ‘They get drunk then come into the back alley smashing bottles, throwing rocks at houses, that sort of thing. I simply give them a little incentive to move on. And it’s only a *small* air rifle. They may get a bruise or two, but nothing more serious than that. Now, follow me and I’ll grab you both a drink!’

As she walked off to her room, Ela turned to Murdoch. ‘Is she joking?’

He grinned. ‘I doubt it.’

The beginnings of a smile started on her lips. But then, remembering why she was annoyed with him, she turned away and followed after Lesley.

The master bedroom had its own sitting area, complete with a tartan-covered sofa, a rocking chair by the window, several bookcases crammed full of books and knick-knacks, and a drinks trolley straight out of the seventies.

‘There’s nothing like a good gin and tonic to steady the hand,’ said Lesley, picking up her glass from a side table and taking a sip. ‘What can I offer you two?’

‘I’ll join you in a G & T,’ replied Ela. She needed a stiff drink to cope with being in Murdoch’s company without strangling him.

‘Just tonic for me,’ he said.

‘Do you plan on wearing those, pet,’ said Lesley, pointing to the high heels still in his hand, ‘or did your Cinder-Ela leave them for you to find?’ She chuckled at her own witticism.

Ela snorted inelegantly, and, grabbing her shoes out of Murdoch’s hand, headed for the door. ‘Excuse me, I need to change.’

‘She seems a trifle out of sorts,’ remarked Lesley, going over to the drinks trolley. ‘What did you do?’

‘Why does it have to be my fault?’ he asked, frowning. ‘It could be because she didn’t enjoy her date.’

‘Really? Were you a bore?’

‘I wasn’t her date.’

‘And why not?’ she asked, unperturbed by the steely look he gave her. ‘Susan placed her in your care. It’s your responsibility to show her a good time.’

‘Are you pimping me out?’

‘Just offering a little encouragement! You’ve been here a couple of weeks and you’ve done little more than moon over the girl.’

He looked discomfited. ‘What are you talking about? We’re just friends.’

‘Are you? I would never have suspected that you stare at your friends with such longing. It must get rather tiresome for them!’

‘You’re imagining things.’ He sat on the sofa and flung an arm across the back, his ankle resting on the opposite knee.

‘Is that how you’re going to play it?’ she asked, handing him his tonic water.

Murdoch refused to answer.

His sister ruthlessly continued to hold his gaze.

‘Christ, Leyley! You’re like a bloody hound dog! You don’t understand . . . It’s complicated. There’s no point going there.’

‘With that attitude, pet, you deserve to fail. Didn’t anyone ever tell you that you need to fight for anything worth having?’

‘And what a prize she’ll get in return,’ he said derisively. ‘You seem to have forgotten my past . . . and with Ela, it would be even more of a problem.’ Seeing Lesley’s baffled expression, he sighed. ‘Forget it.’

‘Why have you fallen into such extravagant hyperbole when referring to *your past*? You sound as if you believe the

rubbish the tabloids wrote about you. You just happened to pick the wrong girlfriend. You were only twenty-two! We're expected to make stupid decisions at that age.'

His lip curled in revulsion. 'My *girlfriend* turned out to be a high-priced escort who used me to steal privileged parliamentary papers from my father. Age can't excuse that level of stupidity,' he said bitterly.

'You were a little gullible, but that's hardly a crime. The House of Lords cleared you of any wrongdoing.'

He gave her a cynical smile. 'My father saw to that.'

'And so he should have! That's what fathers do.'

'You've got the wrong end of the stick. His precious reputation had to be saved at any cost.'

'That may have been a part of it, but I'm certain he wanted to protect you too.'

'You've got no idea . . .' He stopped and took a sip of his water. 'It doesn't matter now.'

'It clearly still matters to you, pet. But you're placing too much importance on a brief lapse of judgement . . . Though, I admit, it baffled me at the time why you chose that hussy when you had so many perfectly lovely girls at your disposal. I thought her more in your father's style.'

Surprise registered in Murdoch's eyes.

'Did you think I didn't know about his mistresses?' said Lesley, smiling sympathetically. 'If I was being charitable, I might have thought his fondness for young, buxom, blonde and beautiful secretaries was mere coincidence. But he swapped them over for a newer model so regularly that it became difficult to practise blindness like Mother did.'

Seeing the rigid set of his expression, a thought struck Lesley, and she paused to observe him more closely.

'You know . . .' she said slowly, '. . . Susan made a strange remark recently. She told me she couldn't mourn a

man who threw his own son under a bus. Was your father somehow—’

‘I can’t talk about it,’ he said, cutting her off. ‘And Susan can’t talk about it either. Don’t blame her. She overheard something she shouldn’t have, and I swore her to secrecy.’

‘How annoying of you!’

‘I gave my word to keep this particular secret, and I know you wouldn’t want me to break my word.’

‘Maybe not, but it’s still annoying!’

He smiled faintly. ‘Susan thinks you now hate her, by the way.’

Lesley tutted. ‘She’s such a drama queen! I’m only punishing her a little by not returning her calls. I knew she was lying to me.’

They looked up as Ela walked back into the room.

She was wearing her flannel pyjamas and granddad slippers, her face had been scrubbed free of makeup, and her hair was scraped back into a messy topknot.

‘You certainly look more . . . comfortable,’ said Lesley. ‘Here’s your G & T, dear.’

‘Thanks, Les.’

The only place to sit was on the sofa, beside Murdoch, so Ela perched herself on the arm, as far away from him as possible.

‘Better,’ he said, scanning her outfit with approval.

‘Better!’ she exclaimed, glaring at him. ‘It took me hours to look date ready!’

‘Why bother? You look fine as you are.’

‘And *fine* is just what a girl wants her date to think when he first sees her.’

‘Beautiful, then. You don’t need hours to get ready. Spare yourself the trouble next time we go out.’

She was determined to ignore his casually delivered ‘beautiful’ comment. ‘What do you mean, *next time we go out?*’

‘I’ve been told that I’ve been remiss in my duty.’

Ela’s lips pursed with annoyance. ‘You know where you can stick your duty.’

‘I only meant it’s my duty to—’

‘I don’t want your blasted duty!’

‘Pet, in the interest of health and safety,’ said Lesley, ‘I feel you should refrain from using the d-word.’

‘Thanks for interpreting.’ He returned Ela’s frosty gaze with a faint look of bafflement.

‘I think I’ll bring up the family whisky,’ said Lesley, heading for the door. ‘I have a lovely bottle of the Loch Buchanan single malt in the cellar – it’s exactly what we need! Gin and tonic seems a trifle chilly for the occasion.’

Ela and Murdoch didn’t notice her leave.

‘What’s got you riled up?’ he asked.

‘I’m not your *duty*,’ replied Ela, almost spitting out the word. ‘If you want to spend time with me, do it for your own reasons and not because your sister told you to. I’m not a burden that has to be baby-sat, or checked up on, or entertained!’

‘I do not think of you as a burden,’ he said with restrained force. ‘You should know that by now. I was making an attempt at being witty . . . but clearly, I failed.’

‘Clearly!’

He gave her a lopsided smile. ‘Do good intentions count, or am I to be banished to Siberia forever?’

She sighed. ‘You’re so annoying.’

‘I’ve never denied it.’

Her lips twitched despite her best efforts to subdue them. 'I'm starting to seriously dislike you.'

'You shouldn't smile at a man like that when you're insulting him. He'll get the wrong idea.'

'Trust me, I don't want to smile at you!' Agitated, she got to her feet and went over to the drinks trolley to put down her glass, untouched. 'Where did Les go?'

'I'm here!' said Lesley, puffing from exertion as she came back into the room. 'Don't pretend you missed me. Whisky?'

'No, thanks,' said Ela and Murdoch in unison.

Lesley ignored them and poured out three drinks.

'You have to try some Loch Buchanan, dear,' she told Ela. '*Uisge beatha*, they used to call it. It means "the water of life", did you know? Murdoch's family have been distilling single malt whisky for generations, and it's divine! Even Murdoch, who rarely drinks these days, makes an exception for Loch Buchanan, don't you, pet?'

Ela looked across at Murdoch. 'You make whisky?'

'The distillery was started by one of my ancestors. I simply inherited it,' he replied with a shrug.

'Don't listen to him!' said Lesley. 'He makes it sound as if he's hands-off, when the truth is he loves being actively involved in the whole process! From sourcing the barley, to working with the "noses", to ageing, packaging, marketing. It's downright impressive, if you ask me.' She handed her brother his glass. 'Just a little nip to help lubricate the translation process,' she said, winking.

'Les, are you trying to get us drunk?' asked Ela, looking at the almost full glass Lesley handed to her.

'As if I would do such a thing!'

The sounds of shouting and breaking glass filtered through the open window and Lesley tutted.

'There go the rowdy little buggers again!'

She picked up her air rifle, positioned herself at the window and, taking aim, fired off several shots.

Someone yelped in pain.

‘That should keep them in check for a little while,’ chuckled Lesley. ‘What fun! I might treat myself to a rifle with a longer range for my birthday.’

‘Speaking of your birthday,’ said Murdoch, ‘are you sure you don’t want a caterer? It’ll be my shout.’

‘Gracious, no! Too posh for me, pet. And I’ve already ordered everything. It’s this Sunday, don’t forget! We’ll just lay out a big spread for people to graze on throughout the afternoon. Although, it would be lovely if you would man the barbecue for me?’

Murdoch nodded, resigned to the fact that another sister played fast and loose with his time. ‘Of course. I’m back from Scotland Sunday morning.’

‘Scotland?’ asked Lesley, cocking her head.

‘You’re leaving?’ said Ela.

He saw disappointment flash in her eyes before she looked away. Hope stirred in him, and he couldn’t drum up the will to caution himself that it might prove counterproductive.

‘I need to go up for a few days,’ he addressed Ela. ‘My business manager wants me to take care of something urgent.’

She sipped her whisky and tried to appear indifferent.

‘Well, at least I can now stop lying to Mother!’ Lesley said with relief. ‘I was a nervous wreck yesterday when we had lunch and she quizzed me on your whereabouts . . . oh, and by the way, she has enlisted Louise to help track you down.’

‘Christ, I know!’ grumbled Murdoch. ‘I’ve been avoiding her for days. No easy matter when she’s always dropping in at Scott’s.’

‘It’s not as if you discourage her from hanging around you,’ remarked Ela, feeling aggrieved for no good reason, as she well knew.

‘Louise is part owner of the club,’ he said gently. ‘I can hardly keep her out.’

‘She’s your business partner?’ exclaimed Ela.

‘She’s an investor.’

Her expression lightened. ‘Oh . . . so that’s why you put up with . . .’ She broke off, looking self-conscious, and returned to sipping her whisky.

‘I needed capital, and Louise’s family had the money to invest,’ he said, watching her.

Lesley laughed. ‘I bet she loved that!’

‘She saw it as a good business opportunity.’

‘If by *business* you mean *marriage*, then you’re spot on! She’s been looking for ways to hitch her wagon to yours for years. Eagerly assisted by our mother, I might add. I bet she was the one who gave you the idea to approach Louise in the first place?’

A frown descended over Murdoch’s face.

‘Ha! I knew it!’ cried Lesley, showing too much enjoyment for her brother’s liking. ‘I’m sorry to tell you, pet, but they’ve manoeuvred you to right where they want you. And then you went and told Mother you were g—ahem . . . Well, all I’m saying is *that* must have set the cat amongst the pigeons.’

Chapter 28

The day of Lesley's birthday party was gloriously sunny, and surprisingly hot for early autumn.

More than sixty people were milling around Lesley's back garden, a jazz trio was playing on the terrace, and the buzz of people enjoying themselves filled the air.

Like some exotic dragonfly, Lesley was flitting from group to group in a blue and green kimono, with a glass of Pimm's in one hand and her boyfriend in the other.

As she had requested, her brother was stationed at the barbecue and was cooking his way through a pile of vegetable kebabs, burgers, and sausages. Richard had gravitated to his side – like any Aussie male worth his salt, he knew his way around a hotplate and grill – and was lending him a hand, while Sienna and Alejandro stood nearby, chatting to them.

Ela had been commandeered by Meredith for moral support and was sitting with her and her mother on one of the wicker lounges, doing her best to distract Loulou from becoming too fixated on the perceived inadequacies of Meredith's life.

This was Ela's first introduction to Loulou.

Their girls' lunch for earlier in the week had been cancelled, Loulou flying to Paris for a fashion event instead. She had only arrived in London that morning, leaving Meredith with the choice of missing Lesley's party and spending the whole day alone with her mother, or bringing Loulou along and sharing the pain around.

Despite the guilt, it had been an easy choice.

Dressed in head-to-toe Versace, Loulou was a stunning vision to behold, with a slim, curvy figure, a face reminiscent of Sharon Stone (and just as well maintained), and a blonde mane that was perfectly styled thanks to a visit to Harrod's blow-dry bar (to which she had also dragged Meredith, bemoaning the state of her daughter's hair).

Ela had met her less than an hour ago, and already she was wearing the bemused expression often worn by people when first confronted with Loulou's personality.

'Is Richard still pining for a brood?' asked Loulou, moving on from her critique of how ageing her daughter's work was proving to be.

'We haven't discussed kids in a while,' replied Meredith carefully. 'We're both too busy at the moment.'

'Oh, you're perfectly right to wait, darling! *I'm* certainly not ready to be a grandmother, and I would hate for you to think that I'm one of those vulgar mothers who urge their children to reproduce. The longer you wait, the better. Why, I must have been almost thirty by the time I had you.'

'I'm thirty-two,' Meredith reminded her, battling the urge to bang her head on the table repeatedly.

Loulou stared at her with an appalled expression. 'Darling, don't under any circumstances say that out loud! Are you sure? I don't know how you can be! I'm only in my early fifties.'

Meredith's inner devil prompted her to say: 'Not according to Nana.'

Loulou bristled. 'Well, you know what a bitch she is! She always hated me. No one was ever good enough for her darling boy. When your father died, I swear she expected me to move into a convent for the rest of my life and pine away for him – so gothic! But she soon learnt her mistake! I loved your father dearly, but he would have been the first to tell me to enjoy my life to the fullest. He was a wonderful man – none of my other husbands compare to him!'

'How many husbands have you had?' asked Ela, wide-eyed.

'Only four, darling. I'm an old-fashioned kind of girl. I don't do boyfriends. I fall in love and marry them.'

'Oh . . .' was all Ela could think to say.

‘But Meredith’s father is by far my favourite. It still staggers me that he was raised by *that woman*. You know, she was the one who pushed and pushed for us to have children – and see where that got me? Gestational diabetes and a prolapsed uterus. Not that I didn’t adore you on sight!’ she assured Meredith. ‘But I swore never again to subject my body to such a violation. And look how well that turned out for you! You never had to fight with any siblings for my attention, and when I die, you’ll inherit everything. Just remember *that*, darling, next time you feel the urge to populate the world with unnecessary offspring.’

Meredith sent Ela a pleading look.

‘Ah . . . I read the other day,’ Ela jumped in gamely, ‘that Aristotle believed we reproduce for the sake of attenuated immortality.’

Loulou blinked at her.

‘A-as in, the desire for children is linked to the realisation of our own mortality,’ stammered Ela. ‘An inbuilt compulsion to reproduce something in our own image . . . Something that will endure once we’re gone.’

For several seconds Loulou simply stared at her with a stunned expression.

‘Ela, *darling*, you clearly read too much. You must stop it at once! I don’t wish to offend you – particularly since we’ve only just met – but it’s always best to have these little faults pointed out as early as possible. Intellectualising may be acceptable in a man, but in a woman, it can be deadly to your marriage prospects.’

‘But I’m not looking to get married,’ replied Ela, flustered.

‘Every woman looks to get married! Even if they don’t know it yet.’

‘But . . . I’m happy being single.’

‘Are you? Are you *really*?’

‘Y-yes.’

Loulou shook her head pityingly. ‘Even if such an outrageous statement were true, it’s only temporary. You’ve obviously suffered a recent disappointment. A romance gone bad, perhaps? Or unrequited love?’

Ela tensed.

‘Mum – Loulou! – you’re prying,’ Meredith said reproachfully. ‘If Ela says she’s happy being single, then she’s happy being single.’

‘Who’s happy being single?’ asked Murdoch, walking over with a plate piled high with vegetable kebabs.

‘Ela, apparently,’ replied Loulou, with a dismissive laugh. ‘But if you believe that, you’ll believe anything.’

The probing look in Murdoch’s gaze made Ela blush.

She hadn’t properly seen him since he had left for Scotland a few days ago. Their last night together, they had stayed up late with Lesley, talking and laughing their way through a whole bottle of whisky.

When Lesley had finally kicked them out of her bedroom, Murdoch had walked her down the corridor to her door. She had become conscious of a certain warmth in his eyes and, for the umpteenth time, had to remind herself it was nothing more than the warm regard of a friend.

Fearing she would do something stupid if she stayed a moment longer, she had patted him (like a dog!) and fled into her room.

The next morning, she had remained in bed until he had left the house. They hadn’t spoken since, apart from a quick hello earlier, when he had arrived to help with setting up for the party.

‘Saved you some before they go,’ he said, placing the plate of vegetable kebabs on the wicker coffee table.

‘Thank you, Murdoch.’ Her tone was friendly as she glanced up at him, before settling her gaze on the plate.

His eyes lingered on her.

The orange-red colour of her strapless maxidress looked amazing against her skin. Her hair was pinned back, exposing her delicate neck and pale shoulders, and all that expanse of flesh was making the tug in his gut difficult to ignore . . .

Suddenly remembering Meredith and her mother, he looked across at them. ‘I’ll bring over the sausages and burgers when they’re ready,’ he rasped. He cleared his throat.

Loulou, who had known Murdoch for years, smiled. ‘No need, Murdoch, darling. We can pick off Ela’s plate. You’ve given the poor girl enough to feed an army! Her figure will never last if she gets used to such large helpings.’

‘Actually, I would love some sausages,’ said Meredith with gentle defiance.

Her mother gave her a disappointed look. ‘Processed meat? Really, Meredith?’

‘They’re not meat,’ interjected Murdoch. ‘Lesley’s boyfriend provided the sausages and patties; they’re all plant-based.’

This drew a laugh from Ela. ‘You’re kidding? Lesley’s halal butcher is a *vegetarian*?’

‘He’s rebranding his business.’ His eyes crinkled as they met hers. ‘He’s been approached by the BBC to do his own TV show – The Plant-Based Butcher.’

Ela chuckled. ‘You mean, I’m no longer the only weirdo you know?’

‘I’ve never thought of you as a weirdo . . . You know that.’

Ela looked away from the intensity in his eyes. Picking up a skewer, she nibbled on a mushroom.

He waited for her to look back at him.

She kept her gaze averted.

He glanced at Meredith and Loulou and found them studying him. 'I'll be back with the rest,' he muttered, and walked off.

Loulou let out a gurgle of laughter. 'Oh, how delicious! Not so unrequited after all.'

Ela looked at her sharply. 'Pardon?'

'There's no point in acting dumb now, darling. There's no man around to appreciate it.'

'It *is* unrequited . . . I mean, it can't be *unrequited* because there's no *requited* part, and there's no *un* part. There's only . . . nothing.'

Loulou raised an eyebrow.

'There's *nothing*,' Ela insisted desperately. 'At one point I may have found him . . . you know . . .'

'Hot?' suggested Loulou. 'Unbelievably attractive? Someone you want to wrap your legs around and climb like a fireman's pole?'

A pained look flitted across Meredith's face at her mother's brazenness, but she was too interested in Ela's response to object.

'No!' Ela shook her head. 'We're just friends. He's not interested in me in that way.'

'Darling, the man brought you food, could hardly take his eyes off you, and never once glanced at my cleavage. He's obviously head over heels!'

Chapter 29

‘Murdoch!’ cried Lesley tipsily, bearing down on him where he stood talking to Richard as they flipped burgers.

She was arm in arm with a painfully thin woman in a figure-hugging dress, her suspiciously large, spherical breasts pushed high up on her bony chest.

‘I must introduce you to Fiona, pet! She’s been absolutely dying to meet you.’

Murdoch turned to face them with a forbidding expression.

‘Hello, Richie, dear!’ continued Lesley, oblivious. ‘So lovely of you to muck in with barbecue duties! And you’re such a good-looking boy to boot. I can see why Meredith wants to save her sacred chakra just for you.’

‘Eh . . . thanks, Les,’ he replied, looking confused.

‘You are most welcome! When the shoe fits and all that. As I was saying, I would like to introduce you two fine gentlemen to Fiona here. She’s my neighbour from . . . across the . . . Oh, dear lord! What is *he* doing here?’

Murdoch turned and scanned the man standing on the terrace, holding a bouquet of sunflowers. He was wearing a retro suit, a floral shirt, and an eager expression, and looked to be in his late twenties at most.

‘Who is he?’ he asked.

‘One of my painting students,’ sighed Lesley. ‘Very talented! But he insists on thinking himself in love with me.’

Murdoch guffawed. ‘He must be twenty years younger than you.’

‘Are you saying he couldn’t be attracted to me?’

Seeing his sister’s prickly expression, he quickly suppressed his amusement. ‘No, of course not.’

‘As it happens,’ said Lesley with a huff, ‘he has a worldly, old soul, and is a most considerate lover.’

‘For chrissake, Leyley. Too much information!’

‘But, though I’m vastly flattered,’ she went on in a pious tone, ‘I’m a taken woman these days, so he will just have to learn to live with his disappointment. I suppose I had better go and let him down gently – again!’

Murdoch watched as she made her way over to her admirer, expertly dodged a kiss on the lips, and accepted her flowers.

Grinning, he turned away . . . to find Fiona waiting to catch his eye.

His smile disappeared, and he started to flip burgers as if it was an Olympic sport.

Not sharing his friend’s fickle manners, Richard stepped into the breach and introduced himself.

Fiona was only a few years older than them, with beautiful eyes, a rather masculine jaw, and improbable platinum hair that fell past heavily toned shoulders. She could have been called a ‘striking’ woman in a positive sense, but cow-like false eyelashes and drag-queen makeup veered the connotation towards the negative end of the spectrum.

She seemed content to return Richard’s small talk, although her gaze continually landed on Murdoch. In the end, Richard hit him on the arm to get his attention and, when he played dumb, grabbed the tongs off him and took over the barbecue.

Murdoch’s eyes promised retribution as they met Richard’s amused ones. Reluctantly, he faced Fiona.

She was eyeing him up like a Cheshire cat about to pounce on her dinner, and he suppressed a shudder of distaste as he shook hands with her.

Once in possession of his limb, she didn’t seem to want to give it back. ‘I do like a man with a hard grip,’ she tittered.

‘You know what they say about a hard grip, don’t you?’

‘No,’ he replied curtly.

‘Hard grip, hard . . . everywhere.’

Murdoch scowled.

From across the garden, Ela saw Murdoch holding hands with a woman she could only describe as being dressed like a hooker. (Harsh but fair . . . okay, maybe a *little* unfair.)

She took a large gulp of her Pimm’s and almost choked on a piece of cucumber.

She had joined Sienna and Alejandro on the lawn, having taken the opportunity to run away from Loulou when the outlandish woman had whisked Meredith off to the bathroom to redo her makeup. For the last half-hour, Ela had successfully avoided looking in the direction of the barbecue, until just now, when Alejandro had made a comment about Murdoch needing to be rescued.

‘He’s perfectly capable of saving himself,’ Ela observed tartly. ‘If that’s what he wants.’

Alejandro, gorgeous in a pink silk shirt and tight white pants, sighed. ‘Him, I would run in a flaming house to save,’ he said in his heavy Spanish accent. ‘*Delicioso.*’

‘You’re wasting your time,’ laughed Sienna. ‘That boy is as straight as they come!’

Ela snorted.

Sienna looked at her in surprise. ‘Is there something you want to share with us?’

‘No!’

‘Hmm . . . You know you’re a terrible liar, right? You’re lucky I’m fixated on my own love life right now and don’t

have time to get it out of you. That salt-and-pepper-haired hottie over there has been giving me the eye for the last half an hour, and I plan on finding out what he's going to do about it!' Sienna grinned wickedly and walked off.

Ela finished off her Pimm's and said to Alejandro: 'He's not, you know.'

One perfectly plucked eyebrow arched in question. 'I do not understand?'

Ela waved in Murdoch's direction. 'He's not straight.'

'¿Qué? ¿Realmente? But I have not the signal from him. I try, of course, but *nada*.'

'You were probably too subtle – subtlety won't work! He's in denial about being gay. You have to make it impossible for him to say no to you.'

She went to sip her Pimm's and realised it was finished. She desperately needed another.

Alejandro looked over at Murdoch with interest. 'He is a gay? This, you are certain?'

Ela nodded gloomily. 'Yes.'

'Oh, you're such a flirt!' laughed Sienna, leaning closer to her salt-and-pepper-haired conquest.

'When a beautiful woman decides to pay me attention, I'm not going to let the opportunity slide.' He grinned. 'So, how do you know Lesley? Do you also take her painting classes?'

'Oh no, I have nil artistic talent! I'm a friend of her brother's.'

'Just a friend?'

'Yes. Just a friend.' She laughed.

‘I saw you talking to him earlier and wondered.’

‘No need to be jealous. Trust me! We’d kill each other within hours if we got together.’

‘Is he still difficult?’

‘Still?’

‘He was known for it back in the day. The drinking, public brawling . . . and that scandal with the hooker.’

Sienna frowned faintly. ‘You definitely have the wrong person. The Murdoch Barclay I know would never go anywhere near a hooker! It’s not his style. As for drinking, he’s been a teetotaler for as long as I’ve known him.’

‘You mean Murdoch Buchanan,’ he corrected.

‘No . . . his name is Murdoch Barclay.’

‘I must be thinking of someone else.’ He gave her a disarming smile. ‘Why are we talking about him when I’d much rather be finding out more about you?’

Murdoch walked over to where his sister was chatting with her boyfriend and a group of friends, and, with a curt ‘excuse us’, took hold of her arm and dragged her away.

‘Why did you do that?’ she complained. ‘I was in the middle of a conversation!’

‘Did you tell Alejandro I was gay?’ he asked sharply.

‘Why would I do that? You told me you weren’t . . . You’re not changing your mind again, are you?’ she said accusingly.

‘I did not *change my mind*,’ he ground out. ‘I was never gay in the first pl—forget it!’

He walked off and disappeared into the house.

Lesley threw up her hands in exasperation and followed him. ‘Wait . . . what happened with Alejandro?’

‘I’m going upstairs to gargle,’ he threw over his shoulder, then took the stairs two at a time.

‘Murdoch, come down this instant and tell me what happened . . . Murdoch . . . !’

Before she could start up the stairs after him, Alejandro himself appeared in the hallway.

He looked ruffled, his handsome countenance contorted with emotion.

‘Alejandro, dear, is something the matter?’ she asked uneasily, noticing the front of his silk shirt was crumpled and his normally perfectly slicked-back hair was sticking out in different directions.

‘I leave!’ he uttered dramatically.

‘So soon?’

‘This’—he gestured down at his body with a flourish—‘everyone wants. *Everyone!*’ he stressed indignantly.

‘Yes, they certainly do,’ Lesley agreed readily, nodding. ‘I most certainly do.’

‘Your brother? ¡*No!* He . . . he, *no.*’ And with a sob, he rushed past her.

The front door slammed behind him.

A wrathful glint entered Lesley’s eyes. She put a hand on the banister and started up the stairs, determined to give her brother a tongue-lashing for upsetting her darling muse.

She had barely started climbing when the doorbell rang.

‘Oh, thank goodness,’ she muttered.

Hurrying to the door, she threw it open.

‘Alejandro, dear, I’m . . . *Mother!*’ She exclaimed in horror. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Don’t look so happy to see me, Lesley-Ann,’ said Lady Agatha Buchanan, the dryness of her refined Edinburgh accent conveying her displeasure.

She was a trim, buxom woman who had once had a claim to great beauty. Whatever remained of that beauty was now offset by a habitually stern expression and a hairstyle reminiscent of Camilla Parker Bowles.

The outfit she wore was the same outfit she wore every day, rain, hail, or shine: a tweed skirt, a sweater twinset, a double strand of pearls the size of large peas, and low-heeled Ferragamo pumps. Only the colours changed from day to day.

Today she had chosen black.

Lesley thought she looked like she was in mourning (probably intentionally!).

‘Well? Where is he?’ Pushing past her daughter, she waltzed into the house, leaving Lesley to scramble after her.

‘Where’s who?’

‘Don’t play coy with me, Lesley-Ann. I know Murdoch is hiding out in this house!’ She stuck her head into each room she passed. ‘How could you not tell me? I never expected such treachery from my own flesh and blood!’

‘I don’t know what—’

‘I had to hear it from Louise. That dear girl is the only one who understands how much I suffer at the hands of my children. So? Where is he?’

She threw open the next door, startling a woman in the process of sitting on the toilet.

‘Mother, will you stop! He’s not hiding in the bathroom . . . Do forgive us, Melissa, dear!’ she told her alarmed guest. ‘Dodgy lock! Best to use the bolt next time.’

She shut the toilet door and turned to follow her mother, who had walked off towards the kitchen.

‘Murdoch is here, Mother, but he only arrived this morning. He’s been in Scotland on business. I’ll happily go and fetch him for you . . . but I won’t have you badgering him,’ she added, regaining some of her spirit.

Lady Buchanan put down her Hermès Birkin bag on the kitchen table and faced her daughter.

‘What a ridiculous statement! I never badger your brother. He’s a grown man. Not to mention, he is the seventeenth Earl of Buchanan and head of the family. I believe I don’t need *you* to tell me what consideration he is owed. As his mother, I simply want to know that he is safe and well.’

‘Why wouldn’t he be?’

‘Don’t be impudent! I also have something very important to discuss with him.’

The sound of laughter and music drew Lady Buchanan’s eyes to the windows overlooking the garden.

‘What are all those people doing here?’ she asked with annoyance.

‘I’m having a party.’

‘Whatever for?’

‘For fun . . . It’s my birthday.’

‘Your birthday is tomorrow.’ Opening her handbag, Lady Buchanan pulled out a bottle of Loch Buchanan Special Reserve whisky and placed it on the table. ‘Happy Birthday.’

‘You remembered!’ said Lesley, amazed.

‘Of course I remembered. I was the one who pushed you out forty-seven years ago – all nine pounds of you! Do you think I would forget something like that? Have you seen a nine-pound turkey? Not even Murdoch was that big when he was born.’

Lesley almost apologised for her inconsideration. ‘Thank you, Mother.’ She walked over and kissed the cheek Lady

Buchanan held out for her. ‘The 25 Special Reserve is my favourite.’

‘I know.’

Lesley was oddly touched by the taciturn response.

Before she could feel too warm and fuzzy, however, her mother went on: ‘But we were speaking of your brother. You’ll never believe what he has gone and done – I certainly can’t believe it! Did he tell you?’

‘I’m not sure. What are you – ’

‘He’s *turned*.’

‘Turned?’

‘He’s . . . he’s decided that he’s . . . ’ Lady Buchanan waved her hands agitatedly.

‘Gay?’ supplied Lesley.

‘Shh! We could be overheard.’

‘Mother, there’s nothing wrong with being gay.’

‘Nonsense! Look at Oscar Wilde. I rented the video after Murdoch told me. It’s outright *appalling* what they did to him. I could never survive my son going to jail.’

‘Things have moved on since the 1890’s, Mother—’

‘And what about my grandchildren? No one ever thinks of them!’

‘Perhaps because they don’t exist – ’

‘And why don’t they exist? You’ve been utterly useless in that department.’

Lesley opened her mouth, then shut it again.

‘Who will inherit from Murdoch one day? Am I the only one who thinks about the future of the Buchanan Family? He has some distant cousin – in South America, of all places – who is just waiting for his chance to pounce and take it all away from us!’

‘Mother, please don’t get your knickers in a twist. Murdoch is no more gay than I am.’

Lady Buchanan’s expression turned appalled. ‘You’re gay too?’

‘What? No! I . . . I have a boyfriend.’

‘You have a boyfriend, and you didn’t see fit to tell me?’

Lesley exhaled loudly. ‘Let’s open the whisky, shall we?’

She grabbed two glasses off the shelf, poured a generous slug of whisky into each, and handed one to her mother.

‘Slàinte mhath!’ Lesley raised her glass, and before the toast could be returned she downed the lot.

How her brother managed to live under the same roof as their mother and not drink was beyond her. Sure, the family home was an enormous castle, but it could have been Buckingham bloody Palace and it still wouldn’t have been big enough to keep *her* sober.

Chapter 30

Murdoch stood inside the conservatory, watching Ela through the glazed walls.

He had come in here to be alone for a few minutes and simmer down (it was not every day he was cornered and kissed by a man), and he had discovered he could observe her undetected, shielded by the canvases around him.

She was meandering around the edges of the garden, her bare feet peeking out from under her flowing dress, and, judging by the faint wobble every time she leaned over to smell a flower, she was tipsy.

There was an air about her that reminded him of the first few days she had come to stay with him.

She seemed lost.

He didn't like it.

She glanced in his direction, as if feeling his eyes on her, and he ducked behind a painting.

When he looked for her again, he found she had continued her tour of the garden. He watched her bend over and pick a yellow dandelion from the lawn and tuck it behind her ear.

He smiled; she would pick a weed.

Her hand stilled in the air.

Slowly, she turned her head . . . her eyes unerringly locating his.

'Found you,' a seductive voice purred.

Murdoch spun around and almost groaned as he saw Fiona walk in from the living room.

'I followed the pheromones,' she smiled. 'I hope you don't mind if I join you?'

‘I don’t see why we’re chasing after Murdoch,’ complained Sienna, as Ela pulled her up the terrace steps towards the conservatory.

‘Because he was staring at me!’ Ela replied crossly, the pleasant anaesthetising effects of several Pimm’s all but forgotten and replaced with Dutch courage. ‘He shouldn’t be staring at me. Not like *that*. And it’s about time I told him so!’

‘I still don’t understand why you need *me* to tag along while you tell him. I was having a perfectly naughty conversation with that gorgeous man before you dragged me away.’

Ela didn’t reply. She could hardly admit that she didn’t trust herself to be alone with Murdoch.

‘What’s wrong with you, anyway?’ demanded Sienna. ‘Most women would be deliriously happy if Murdoch was staring at them *like that*. And don’t bother trying to convince me that you’re any different! I know you’re besotted with him. What I don’t know is why you’re fighting it so hard.’

Ela gasped. ‘I am *not* besotted! It’s impossible . . . do you hear me? *Im-possible*.’

‘I hear you perfectly well, but I don’t believe you.’

Ela threw her an irritated look. Walking up to the French door of the conservatory, she yanked it open and stepped through . . .

. . . just in time to see Fiona wrap her arms around Murdoch (like an octopus!) and kiss him.

She came to a standstill.

Sienna bumped into her, a smirk blossoming as she looked over her shoulder. ‘Seriously?’

Murdoch’s head snapped in their direction.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’ Ela asked him with awful composure.

He unceremoniously disengaged Fiona’s arms from around his neck and pushed her away.

‘Don’t jump to conclusions,’ he replied, holding his hands up.

‘You’re *still* kissing women?’

‘I wasn’t kissing her. She kissed me. Without my permission, I might add.’

‘Oh, stop! Stop pretending! It’s bad enough I have to deal with you kissing guys, but you insist on kissing women as well!’

‘*Guys?*’ exclaimed Sienna and Fiona with stunned expressions.

Murdoch wondered if she had seen him and Alejandro. What a day this was turning out to be! The only person not trying to kiss him was the only one he actually wanted to kiss.

‘Do I have to remind you that you’re gay?’ Ela snapped, well and truly losing control of her temper. ‘Don’t you have any self-restraint? She might look like a man in drag but that’s no excuse!’

‘How dare you!’ humphed Fiona.

‘And that’s an exit line if I ever heard one,’ quipped Sienna, holding the door open for her.

Fiona glanced at Murdoch. He seemed to have forgotten her existence, and she flounced off outside.

‘Sienna, you too,’ said Murdoch, his eyes on Ela. ‘Get out.’

‘But Ela wants me here for moral support,’ she objected, eager to watch the drama unfolded.

‘Out!’

She exhaled noisily in protest, but stepped outside and closed the door behind her.

‘Look, I don’t know what you saw,’ Murdoch told Ela slowly, as if Ela was a wild animal about to bolt, ‘but I’m not gay.’

‘Please spare me! Just because you’re in denial doesn’t mean I have to be.’

‘I can’t be in denial over something that isn’t true.’

‘Why didn’t you come to *me*?’ she asked with a hurt expression.

He looked at her strangely. ‘What do you mean?’

‘If you insist on kissing women, why didn’t you come to me? I’m the only woman you should be kissing!’

‘Ela, lassie – ’

‘Don’t you *lassie* me!’ she retorted. ‘I’ve had about as much as I can take of your insidious charm! Ha, was Susan wrong about *that*. She obviously has no concept of what women find charming if she thinks you’re lacking in that department. And I’m not a robot. I can’t shut off my emotions just because it’s inconvenient. I can’t do it. I’ve tried – believe me, I’ve tried! And for goodness sake, stop looking at me like that! You keep doing it and I can’t think, I-I can’t *breathe*. And I know it’s idiotic and absurd to feel this way about a gay guy, but I can’t switch it off. It’s too much, I ca – ’

‘For the love of god, woman, be quiet!’ he bellowed, stalking closer.

Ela fell into a shocked silence.

‘You’re not hearing me.’

He grabbed her head and kissed her.

The ferocity of the kiss bent her backwards and, eyes widening, she grabbed onto his forearms to stop herself from falling.

She protested against his lips.

He kissed her harder.

She tried to push him away.

He put an arm around her waist and hauled her closer.

With a groan of defeat, she closed her eyes and kissed him back.

When he at last raised his head, he looked into her dazed, upturned face and muttered: 'I've been wanting to do that since the moment I let you walk out of my bedroom with your towel still on. I deserve a bloody medal for self-restraint.'

'Your beard tickles,' she said weakly.

He smiled. 'Is that a complaint?'

She reached out and touched one of his dimples. Then her hand travelled upwards and smoothed back a lock of his hair.

Giving herself a mental shake, she frowned. 'You have to stop kissing me.'

She tried to pull out of his arms, but he wouldn't let her.

'You just told me off for not kissing you sooner.'

She coloured, her eyes sliding away from his. 'I didn't say that . . . not exactly. And it's certainly not something we should make a habit of!'

'But I want to make it a habit.'

She looked back at him, dismayed. 'No, we can't! I-I'm not saying it's not nice —'

'*Nice?*' He raised an eyebrow.

She rolled her eyes. 'Wonderful. Spectacular! Toe-curlingly amazing. Happy?'

'It's a start.'

'But it doesn't matter how much I like your kisses. You're gay!'

‘I’m not bloody gay.’

She sighed. ‘I overheard you telling Les.’

‘I see you need another demonstration.’

He drew her hard up against him and kissed her again.

This kiss was gentler, but she still felt as if she was being kissed into submission.

It was devastatingly effective.

When he pulled away, it took her a while to open her eyes and get her bearings.

‘You clearly didn’t overhear the whole story,’ he said. ‘If you had, you’d know I made up a load of bollocks about being gay to get my mother off my back. She’s been pestering me about getting married.’

‘Getting married to whom?’ she asked, latching on to this suddenly important detail.

A smile softened his eyes. ‘My mother decided it was time for me to settle down. There’s no one else.’

Else?

‘It’s none of my business if you do have someone special in your life,’ she insisted.

Considering her arms had circled around his neck, and he had a hand on her back and another gripping her bottom so that her whole body was pressed tightly against him, the incongruity of that statement wasn’t lost on either of them.

And then it hit her.

‘You’re not gay?’

‘No.’

‘Are you kidding?’ She struggled to get out of his arms. ‘Let go of me!’

He released her and she took a step away, hands on hips, glaring at him.

‘For the last two weeks I’ve been tormenting – *tormenting* – myself! And you’re not gay?’

He shook his head as he watched her with tender amusement. ‘No.’

Her eyes snapped with indignation. ‘We even had a conversation about it!’

‘When?’ he asked, brow creasing.

‘On the phone, while I was walking to my date. You asked me why I didn’t believe that you had meant that kiss in your bedroom. And I asked you, could we agree that you had kissed me to prove something . . . and you said *yes!*’

‘I did have something to prove. I was frustrated as hell that you were ignoring the attraction between us and wanted to force you to confront it.’

‘Oh . . .’ she exclaimed softly.

‘What did you think I meant?’

‘I . . . I thought you were struggling with your sexuality and wanted to prove to yourself that you weren’t gay.’ She lifted her hands to her temples and regarded him with incredulity. ‘I can’t believe you’re not gay. I’ve felt like such an idiot for being attracted to you . . . for thinking I was . . . for having these feelings . . .’

She stopped talking. Now was not the right time to be making these admissions. He didn’t even know her real name. She’d been lying to him for weeks.

‘What feelings?’ he pressed.

She groaned and briefly closed her eyes. ‘Oh, this is such a mess.’

‘It’s complicated,’ he agreed, amusement colouring his tone. ‘But I’m told you have to fight for anything worth having.’

‘You don’t understand. I’m not . . .’ She steeled herself. ‘I’m not the person you think I am.’

‘I know.’

‘No! I’m not talking about an existential concept this time – who am I? Who do I want to be? That sort of thing,’ she replied distractedly. ‘I’m trying to tell you that my name is not Ela McIntosh. It’s Gabriela Baxtor-Huntington. And I’m not a busker, as you’ve probably already guessed. I’m a concert pianist . . . actually, quite a famous one.’

She let out a self-deprecating laugh and rubbed her fingers over her eyes.

‘This is going to make me sound like a pathetic princess!’ She looked back at him, intent on making him understand. ‘I needed to escape from it all. From my career, from a life that was no longer mine. Every last part of me felt drained and I had nothing left to give – not a drop! So Susan forced me to disappear and take a break. And I’m sorry it involved lying to you . . . but I’m not sorry I took that time for myself.’

‘Ela,’ he said with gruff tenderness, ‘even if I hadn’t known who you were all along, you don’t owe me an apology.’

There was a pause as she stared at him, her forehead furrowed.

‘What do you mean . . . Are you trying to tell me you already knew?’

‘My sister clearly has a poor opinion of my memory if she thinks I don’t remember that five years ago she took a job as your PA.’

‘But she said you had no idea what she did! That you thought she was a PA in an office somewhere.’

‘She was purposefully vague on the details when she told me about the job. She went overseas to get away from our family’s influence . . . and, to some extent, from me. I knew she didn’t want me involved. She’s had a difficult time being my sister, and she needed to find out that she could make it on her own merit. I respect that, but it doesn’t mean I’m not going

to keep an eye on her. She's my little sister. I've looked into every single one of her employers over the years.'

Ela opened her mouth, then closed it.

She looked away. Looked back. Then looked away again.

'I don't know whether to strangle you or hug you,' she said conversationally.

Without warning, she whacked him on the arm.

'How could you not tell me you knew?' she cried accusingly. 'I've felt so guilty!'

He stroked her cheek. 'I'm sorry. I was hoping you would trust me enough to tell me yourself . . . but, to be perfectly honest, at the same time, I dreaded you confiding in me. It was like the pot calling the kettle black.'

'Why?'

'It's a long story.' He stepped closer. 'Can I tell it to you another time? Right now, all I can think about is someone informing me, in a very imperious way, that she is the only woman I should be kissing.'

Ela blushed and ducked her head. 'Please stop bringing that up! Forget I said it.'

'I don't want to forget it . . . Ela, look at me . . . I don't want to forget it because I have every intention of making it a reciprocal arrangement.'

She searched his eyes.

She wasn't certain what she was looking for, but she found it anyway . . .

. . . and then she was pulling his head down and kissing him with an urgency that caught him off guard.

It took him a moment to catch up, and then his much-vaunted self-control went up in flames. He lifted her off her feet and strode forward until her back collided with the wall.

Her legs wrapped around his waist, and he settled closer, groaning with the pleasure of it.

He tore his lips from hers, and she whimpered as he turned his attention to devouring her exposed neck, all the way down to her naked shoulder.

‘Murdoch Barclay Buchanan, what in heaven’s name are you doing?’ a woman’s voice demanded.

Ela’s eyes flew open.

Murdoch tensed.

Turning his head, he looked over to where his mother and sister were standing in the doorway to the living room regarding him with varying degrees of astonishment.

Lesley mouthed *I’m sorry* and shrugged helplessly.

‘Did I not hear from your own lips,’ said Lady Buchanan, ‘that you were of a different persuasion?’

‘I’m a little busy at the moment, Mother. Could you berate me later?’

‘Mother?’ exclaimed Ela.

She started to wriggle in his arms until he let her go. Quickly righting herself, she smoothed down her dress and faced the woman in the doorway with as much composure as she could muster.

‘Does this mean . . . what does this mean?’ Lady Buchanan asked her son with confusion.

Murdoch looked at Ela. She could read amusement in his eyes.

‘It appears I’m not as indifferent to women as I thought,’ he replied gravely.

Ela was appalled he chose this moment for levity.

‘I see . . .’ said Lady Buchanan, looking uncertain. Then, mustering her sense of purpose, she went on doggedly: ‘Well . . . in that case, I wish you would stop being contrary

and focus your energies in a more proper direction! I think we can all agree that Louise has been very patient.'

He frowned, his humour disappearing. 'What's that got to do with me?'

'Don't dissemble. You know perfectly well that she is waiting for you to propose.'

'Louise is nothing more to me than a family friend.'

'Now is not the time for this conversation,' she said imperially. 'Who is this girl?'

Murdoch threw her a warning look. 'Allow me to introduce you to Gabriela Baxtor-Huntington. Ela, this is my mother, Agatha Buchanan.'

'Lovely to meet you, Agatha,' said Ela, smiling nervously. For some odd reason, she felt she should be curtsying.

'My son is too modern in his ways. As the Dowager Countess of Buchanan, you may call me Lady Buchanan.'

Murdoch sighed. 'Mother, you're being rude.'

'I'm often rude, it's part of my charm.'

Ela looked from her to Murdoch with bewilderment. 'Countess? But . . . does that mean . . . are you . . .?'

Murdoch grimaced faintly. 'An earl. Yes. This is where the pot and kettle analogy comes in,' he said apologetically.

Ela gaped at him. 'You're an *earl*?'

'Yes.'

'A lord of the realm?'

'Last time I checked.'

'And you didn't think to tell me?'

'I never use my title in London. I attract less attention that way . . . People act differently when they know.'

'And you thought I would do the same,' she stated flatly. She knew she had no right to feel upset, particularly since she

had kept her identity from him, in part, for a similar reason.

‘I didn’t think that,’ he said with gentle gruffness, seeing the hurt in her eyes. ‘But I didn’t see the point in telling you either. You were only passing through my life.’

‘And am I still only passing through your life?’

‘What do you think?’

He drew her towards him, giving her time to pull away. She watched him warily but didn’t resist when he lowered his head and captured her lips, claiming her.

As answers went, the kiss was exceptionally convincing.

Lady Buchanan cleared her throat with an imperative staccato. ‘Are you saying that you didn’t know my son is the Earl of Buchanan?’ she asked Ela, patently unconvinced.

Ela and Murdoch drew apart reluctantly.

‘I didn’t know,’ replied Ela. ‘Not that it would have made any difference.’

‘Not made a difference!’ exclaimed Lady Buchanan. ‘Young woman, you do not appear to appreciate the importance of our family. The Earls of Buchanan can trace their heritage back five hundred years! They are one of the oldest aristocratic families in Scotland.’

‘Mother, this is not the time to be giving a history lesson,’ said Murdoch.

She ignored him. ‘Over two thousand employees and eighty tenant farmers depend on my son for their livelihood. They look to him to perform his duty to the best of his ability. He is responsible for almost all the industry on his land and that of the surrounding villages – sheep rearing, wool and tartan manufacturing, whisky distillation, hydropower, wind energy, fishing. Not to mention the events and festivals we run on the estate or in the castle.’

Castle?

Ela's head was spinning. No wonder Murdoch was always so busy. He was in essence the lifetime CEO of a company that had numerous business interests across numerous sectors.

'There is great responsibility that comes with being part of this family,' Lady Buchanan continued implacably. 'My son must marry a woman who understands that responsibility and embraces it! Do you really think that woman is you? Do you have the necessary abilities and commitment to become the next Countess of Buchanan? To take on the many onerous duties that come with the role?'

Ela almost laughed at the ludicrousness of the situation.

How could she answer such questions? They were loaded on so many levels.

She and Murdoch had kissed for the first time only a few minutes ago, and already his mother was hypothetically marrying them off. She was probably doing it to scare Ela off (and him!), to overwhelm her with the impossibility of the match.

And yet, to Ela's surprise, she wasn't scared.

The idea of tying her life to Murdoch's had a rightness to it she had never before experienced. Everything else suddenly became secondary.

She glanced across at Murdoch, half expecting him to be freaking out.

He winked at her.

'Ela is more than capable of taking on the duties of the Countess of Buchanan,' he said to his mother. 'However, she will be the one to decide what form those duties take . . . or if she even wants to take them on.' The look he gave Ela was filled with raw tenderness.

Her heart was in her eyes as she stared back at him, awed.

Was that an almost-proposal?

Had they been watching her, they would have realised that Lady Buchanan had suffered a shocked.

‘You’re not Scottish, are you?’ she asked Ela accusingly.

‘I’m Australian,’ replied Ela. She was feeling light-headed from how fast matters were progressing and had to take a deep breath to steady herself.

She needed her wits about her. It felt as if Murdoch’s mother was auditioning her, and she had to up her game.

Her competitive streak kicked in.

‘But my mother’s family is from Scotland,’ she added. ‘I have relatives in Inverness-shire, and I’m told they can trace their ancestry back to the eleventh century, when the son of chief Seach MacDuff assumed the name “Mac-an-Toisch” and began the Clan MacIntosh.’

Thank you, mum!

Those family history lessons her mother had inflicted on her weren’t wasted after all.

Lady Buchanan humphed. ‘Where did you find this girl?’ she asked her son. ‘Do you know anything about her family, other than their last name? Can she be trusted? I hope you didn’t pick her up in some bar – we all know how badly that turned out the last time!’

‘I would tread carefully if I were you, Mother,’ advised Murdoch, his gaze hardening. ‘I won’t allow anyone to speak that way about Ela . . . not even you.’

Lady Buchanan stared into his intractable face.

Moments passed as their wills locked in battle.

Then, all at once, she let out a sob.

‘No one understands the burdens I live under!’ Taking out a handkerchief from her handbag, she dabbed at her eyes. ‘There are battles that I must wage for the good of the family, but does anyone appreciate what I do? No! I never hear a word of thanks from any of my children.’

Murdoch and Lesley exchanged a long-suffering look.

Not yet acquainted with Lady Buchanan's repertoire of manipulative tactics, Ela was taken aback by their lack of sympathy.

'You made your mother cry,' she whispered to Murdoch. 'Go and do something!'

He shook his head slightly. Folding his arms across his chest, he waited.

Ela frowned at him. Being too soft-hearted to do nothing, she approached his mother herself.

'Lady Buchanan . . .' she began tentatively, '. . . I'm certain Murdoch didn't mean to sound so harsh. He knows you only want the best for him.'

Lady Buchanan emerged from behind her handkerchief and gave her an assessing look. 'Yes! That is all I want.'

'Any mother would feel the same. And I'm sorry we gave you a shock earlier when you walked in. Murdoch seems to have misled you about his sexuality, and you have every right to be upset.' She threw him a severe look. 'He has a very inappropriate sense of humour at times.'

Lady Buchanan turned to her son with disbelief. 'You weren't serious about being gay?'

'No,' he admitted, and had the grace to look contrite.

Before Lady Buchanan could work up her indignation at this admission, Ela went on quickly: 'And you also have every right to want to know more about me.'

'He was kissing you, if you can call it that,' sniffed Lady Buchanan. 'A mother likes to know these things. How else can I protect him from making another catastrophic mistake? His track record when it comes to women is far from exemplary!'

'I would be happy to answer any of your questions,' said Ela. 'But since you have had a shock, would you like something to drink first? Some tea, perhaps?'

‘Whisky,’ said Lady Buchanan without hesitation.

‘Oh . . . of course. Murdoch, can you please get your mother a whisky?’

Murdoch didn’t move, uncertain how to deal with this turn of events.

While Ela escorted Lady Buchanan to an armchair and cleared it of painting paraphernalia, Lesley sent her brother a meaningful look and nodded for him to leave the room.

He resisted.

Lesley persevered, becoming more exuberant with her gesturing, until finally, sighing, he uncrossed his arms and followed her out of the conservatory.

‘Best to leave them alone for a bit,’ said Lesley as they walked towards the kitchen.

‘I don’t like leaving Ela in there defenceless.’

‘I’ve suspected for a while that your “defenceless” Ela has a spine of steel. What’s more, I predict she’ll soon have our mother eating out of her hand. That girl could charm the skin off a cobra if she sets her mind to it!’

‘She is amazing, isn’t she?’ he said with pride.

Lesley smiled indulgently. ‘Yes, she is.’

‘Did you know she’s a world-class concert pianist?’

‘Pardon?’

He grinned. The look of astonishment on his sister’s face was priceless.

Chapter 31

The next morning, Lesley was woken by the awful effects of one too many Pimm's followed by one too many whiskies and sincerely wished she hadn't imbibed so freely.

Between the news of Ela and Murdoch's *affaire du cœur* (finally!), Ela's secret identity (delightfully unexpected), and her mother's insistence on joining the party (what the?), she had indulged in liquid refreshment more than she should have.

Matters hadn't been helped by the fact that she'd had to introduce her mother to her poor, unsuspecting boyfriend, and then had been saddled with the sole responsibility of looking after her when her brother had absconded.

Murdoch and Ela had disappeared upstairs early in the evening and were not heard of again, apart from the occasional crash or shriek coming from Murdoch's bedroom, suggesting either someone was finally enjoying some long overdue adult activities, or they were being murdered.

Either way, Lesley had had no intention of interrupting, and she had expressly forbidden anyone else from going in search of them.

She now stumbled downstairs to the kitchen and spotted Murdoch standing at the French doors, demonstrably alive and reading the paper.

'Morning,' she croaked.

He didn't appear to hear her.

She was in no state for small talk and accepted his silence gratefully as she set about making her go-to hangover cure; a mixture of celery juice, tomato juice, a raw egg, Worcestershire sauce, and a large pinch of salt.

She put the ingredients into a blender, cringing at the noise when she turned it on, then poured out the concoction into a tall glass and drank the whole thing in one go.

‘Oh dear lord, I needed that,’ she gasped, then dropped down into a chair, closing her eyes.

After several minutes of stillness, she began to revive sufficiently to open them again and look about her. It occurred to her that it was odd for her brother not to have teased her by now.

He was staring out the window, lost in thought. And not good thought, by the look of him. There was tightness about his jaw and his brow was deeply furrowed.

‘Everything okay, pet?’

He flinched at the sound of her voice, then turned and threw the paper onto the kitchen table, making her jump.

‘For goodness sake,’ she complained. ‘Don’t throw things at me! I’m barely functioning as it is . . .’ Her eyes landed on the front-page headline. ‘Oh dear.’

Disgraced Earl Tangled with Star

The accompanying photos were of the outside of Lesley’s conservatory, and through the glass, past leaning canvases, the photographer had managed to zoom in on Murdoch and Ela.

Embracing.

Kissing.

Against a wall.

Ela with her legs around Murdoch’s waist.

‘Gracious!’ exclaimed Lesley softly. ‘Who could possibly have taken these?’

‘One of your guests, obviously,’ said Murdoch, his voice oddly detached.

Lesley nodded, dumbfounded, and began to read.

The Earl of Buchanan's taste in women appears to have improved over the years. He was seen yesterday in a clinch with talented Australian concert pianist and shining star of the classical music world Gabriela Baxtor-Huntington.

Before he inherited the Scottish earldom from his father, Lord Murdoch Buchanan was known to have a penchant for hard partying and high-class call girls. His involvement with Mary Warren, one such call girl, led to a scandal that threatened to besmirch the reputation of his late father, Lord Douglas Buchanan, a prominent Tory politician in the House of Lords.

Ms Warren was found guilty of having stolen classified government documents from the elder Lord Buchanan's office at his London home in Grosvenor Square, which she then attempted to sell . . .

Lesley stopped reading.

‘Oh, pet. I’m so sorry! Such a horrid story to wake up to. But they’re simply dredging up solacious gossip to sell papers. It will last one news cycle and then disappear. Don’t take it too hard.’

‘Read the last paragraphs.’

She observed his blank expression uneasily before returning her attention to the paper.

Ms Baxtor-Huntington, who has been in the international spotlight since she was a teenager, is much loved by her traditional fan

base, not only for her virtuosity but also for her sweet nature and friendly disposition.

Her sold-out tour of Asia – a markedly conservative part of the world – begins next month. A source close to the star has revealed that her management team has concerns about the damage to her reputation as a result of her relationship with Lord Buchanan, whose scandalous past, physical altercations with journalists, and proclivity for smashing cameras are by now well documented.

For the romantics out there, hope will no doubt spring eternal that Ms Baxtor-Huntington will be able to tame the ill-tempered earl. But at what cost?

Lesley looked up and found her brother watching her. He appeared to be curiously devoid of emotion.

‘Well, they certainly do like to make a mountain out of a molehill!’ She forced a laugh. ‘I hope you are not taking this nonsense seriously? Ela would be the first to brush it off.’

‘I know. And that’s the problem.’

‘Why is that a problem?’

‘She’ll refuse to see sense. I won’t allow my past to jeopardise her career.’

‘Don’t be absurd!’

‘Do you know how many years it takes to become a concert pianist at her level?’

‘No, but—’

‘Fifteen to twenty.’ Do you have any idea of the sacrifices she’s had to make to get to where she is? Twenty years’ worth

of sacrifices.’

Lesley looked at him helplessly.

His face contorted into a caricature of a smile. ‘I asked her once if she still enjoyed playing the piano. Do you know what she said? She said she *lived* for it . . . I’m not going to be the one who takes that away from her.’

He started to walk out of the kitchen, stopped, and looked back at his sister.

‘This conversation stays between us.’

‘Why?’ she asked.

He stared at her implacably. ‘I’m going to need your word on it.’

‘Oh, alright!’ she grumbled. ‘You have my word. But, for the record, I think you’re overreacting. What are you going to tell Ela?’

‘The only thing she’ll believe.’

Lesley thought that sounded depressingly ominous. ‘I hope you mean to allow her to make her own choice?’

‘It’s my choice,’ he said in a hard voice. ‘I don’t want press interference in my life. I’ve been down that road before, and I refuse to do it again. With her profile and my notoriety, I’d never be free of it if we stayed together. Nothing can overcome my aversion to that sort of existence . . . and *that* you can tell her.’

‘Tell her yourself!’ retorted his sister, out of all patience with him.

‘She’s sleeping.’ He checked his watch. ‘The helicopter is picking me up in less than an hour. I have to go.’

‘You’re leaving for Scotland *now*? Without even saying goodbye to her?’ exclaimed Lesley, dismayed.

He left the room without another word.

Chapter 32

The euphoric feeling Ela felt on waking up in Murdoch's bed, memories of last night jostling in her head, lasted less than five minutes – the time it took for her to find Murdoch's note on the pillow beside her.

She rushed downstairs, unable to believe that he had actually left, and found Lesley waiting for her, a newspaper in her hand.

It had taken another hour for all hope to die.

Despite Lesley's insistence that he would come to his senses, Ela didn't believe her. Murdoch seemed to have an almost pathological dislike of press attention, and the fact that she hadn't even considered how her profile might be seen as a liability by him only showed how far she had sunk into fairy-tale delusions.

She was angry with herself, even more so than she was angry with him. With him, hurt warred with anger. He had left without even saying goodbye.

They had been friends for much longer than they had been lovers, and he didn't think he owed her a proper goodbye? She could have followed him to Scotland just for the pleasure of strangling him!

There was no point in sharing any of this with Lesley, however. The poor woman needed to be comforted more than Ela herself. She couldn't seem to sit still and fidgeted about the room, alternating between raging at Murdoch and telling Ela she was better off without him, and insisting that everything would work out in the end.

It was driving Ela crazy.

In the end, after all her assurances that she understood and accepted Murdoch's decision went unheeded, she announced that she was going to walk to the high road to pick up some sushi for their lunch.

Her composure lasted until she stepped out the front door. Then the pain in her chest became so debilitating that she had to lean against the low garden wall and take deep breaths.

After a few minutes, she forced herself to stand and walk, concentrating on placing one foot in front of the other.

She returned to the house several hours later, without the sushi and without a clear memory of where she had been all that time. As she passed the front sitting room, she saw the piano from the corner of her eye. It beckoned her, like an old friend offering comfort, and she walked over to it and sat down.

She closed her eyes and her fingers landed in position, finding their own way home.

The melancholy opening chords of Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2 floated up into the air, even before she became conscious that she was playing . . .

. . . and then her fingers were tumbling over the notes . . .

. . . flowing, undulating . . .

. . . wave upon wave; sumptuous, potent.

In her head, she could hear the strings join in, achingly beautiful . . .

. . . then the piano, louder, faster, more tortured . . .

In the conservatory, Lesley paused in her task of mixing paint and listened with growing amazement.

An elderly couple, who were passing by outside, stopped and watched Ela through the bay window. A woman out walking her dog came to stand beside them, and they exchanged looks of wonder.

Ela allowed the emotions to wash over her, blending with the notes . . .

. . . soft, opulent, almost hopeful . . .

. . . the pleasurable ache of melancholy . . .

. . . the fluidity of musical poetry.

As the end of the first movement approached, her fingers sped up, flying across the keys . . .

. . . frenetic little swirls . . .

. . . the crescendo building . . .

. . . dark, passionate chords ending abruptly.

The group of ten or so people gathered outside the bay window burst into enthusiastic clapping.

Ela didn't hear them.

A part of her brain told her that she had never before played Rachmaninoff with such intuitive understanding. The drama and emotion of the music made sense to her in a way that had eluded her in the past.

She felt someone sit down on the piano stool beside her.

'They're clapping for you,' Lesley said gently, brushing away the tears on Ela's cheek.

Ela brought her into focus. 'The C and D are too sharp. You need a piano tuner.'

Lesley's eyes were filled with compassion as she put an arm around her. 'I'll be sure do that.'

Ela's face crumbled, and she fell against Lesley's shoulder, sobbing softly.

'You go ahead and cry as much as you like, dear. There's nothing like a good cry to make the dimms go away. And you'll see! Tomorrow really is another day.'

Chapter 33

There are only so many tears a girl can cry before she comes to her senses and decides there are better ways to spend her time.

By the evening of the second day after Murdoch's defection, Ela had had enough.

She had a career; she had people that depended on her, loved her. She had spent two days mourning a man who didn't want her, like some pathetic, lovelorn fool, and she was done.

Angrily brushing away the last of her tears, she picked up her phone and dialled.

'Hi, Roger . . . Yes, it's me. I know, I'm sorry . . .'

She held the phone away from her ear while her manager yelled at her.

She let him go on for a few minutes until he ran out of steam.

'Are you finished?' she asked calmly. 'Good, because I didn't call you to justify myself. I'll be staying at Claridge's, and I would appreciate it if you would bring me up to speed on the plans for Asia . . . You don't need to fly over; a conference call will do . . . Whatever you think is best. And Roger, I know you have a right to be angry, but try to understand that I wouldn't have had to disappear if you had actually listened to what I wanted. And one more thing . . . please let me finish . . . I hope you know how deeply I appreciate all you have done for me over the years, but if you ever use that tone with me again, we're going to have to part company. I won't stand for it anymore. Things are going to be different from now on, and I hope you can come to terms with that quickly. I'll see you in London.'

She hung up before he could respond.

That had felt good.

She would always have a soft spot for Roger, however, that didn't give him the right to walk all over her. *Friendly* and *nice* did not have to mean *pushover*.

She dialled Susan's number next.

'Su, it's me.'

'Hello?' said a sleepy voice. 'Who is this?'

Ela heard fumbling on the other line, as if Susan had dropped the phone.

She felt a smile coming on. 'Susan Buchanan, you're a disgrace. Wake up! It's gone nine.'

'Mother?' exclaimed Susan, snapping to attention.

Ela couldn't help laughing. 'It's Ela, you dolt. I don't know why you all live in such fear of your mother. I met her the other day, and she was perfectly nice . . . in the end.'

'You didn't grow up with her trying to rule every aspect of your life,' grumbled Susan. 'Why are you calling at this ungodly hour?'

Ela felt a pang; for a moment, Susan had sounded just like another grumpy Buchanan Ela didn't want to think about.

'Ela? . . . Is everything okay?'

Ela pushed away her unprofitable memories. 'Nine o'clock in the morning is not an ungodly hour. I'm usually up and about for two hours by then.'

Susan scoffed. 'Since when? You're worse than me in the mornings.'

'Not anymore. I start my yoga and qigong practice at seven.'

'Good lord, where's my Ela, and what have you done with her?'

'Your Ela is still here . . . She's got a few new experiences under her belt, and a few extra bruises, but she's still alive and kicking.'

‘Bruises?’

‘When are you flying to London?’ asked Ela, changing the subject abruptly.

‘Not for another two weeks.’

‘Could you please book a flight for this week? I’m coming back to work.’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘And I should warn you, Roger wants to come as well. I just spoke to him.’

‘Why did you do that, you wally? You’ve still got another two weeks of freedom before we need to begin prepping.’

‘I’ve had enough of freedom.’

‘Are you okay? You really do sound different . . . Has my beastly brother done anything to upset you?’

‘No!’ Ela replied sharply. ‘He did all you asked of him . . .’

She wondered if she should make a point of condemning the highhanded way Susan had forced her on Murdoch against his will, but then decided against raising the subject. It would only lead to more discussion about him, and quite frankly, she couldn’t handle thinking about him, let alone talking about him.

‘I just want to get back to work, Su. Could you please book the usual Grand Piano Suite at Claridge’s – from tomorrow, if possible – and organise a piano tuner to do a fine tune. I need to get back into my practice regime as quickly as possible.’

‘I’ll get on it.’

‘And for goodness sake tell them no yellow roses in the room! I can’t stand them.’

‘Seriously?’

‘I’ve never been more serious in my life! Oh, and I’ll be back to using my old phone from now on . . . If anyone should ask for the number, please don’t give it out. To *anyone*.’

‘Of course not,’ replied Susan, sounding perplexed. ‘I would never do that.’

Chapter 34

Susan watched as Roger stomped out of the living room of Ela's suite, muttering to himself.

The front door slammed a moment later.

'He's not a happy-chappy,' she said to Ela, who was sitting opposite her at the antique table by the windows, having breakfast. 'You two have been at loggerheads the entire time he's been here.'

Ela made no response as she ate her fruit salad.

Susan bit into her toast and let out a sigh of pleasure.

'God, I've missed marmite!' Shaking off her momentary distraction, she speared Ela with a look. 'The balance of power has shifted between the two of you, and I don't think Roger's the man to accept that.'

'No . . . he's not,' agreed Ela, thoughtful but unfazed.

'I certainly don't want to be the one advocating for stroking his ego, but the next month is going to be terribly difficult for you if you can't find a way to make him feel in control.'

'He's not in control . . . at least, not of me. Don't worry, I can handle him for a few more weeks. But after the tour, what do you think about setting up a meeting with Intermusica? They've been chasing me for years.'

'I've always thought it a good idea to meet with them, but you never wanted to upset Roger. And he's always thought he and his team could handle all your management needs.'

'Roger won't be around to object this time.'

Susan's eyebrows went up. 'Seriously?'

Ela nodded. 'I'm afraid so.'

'I see . . . In that case, I'll set up the meeting. But you do realise, don't you, that even though Intermusica is excellent at

worldwide general management, you will also need a personal manager?’

‘I know.’ A faint smile appeared on Ela’s lips. ‘I already have someone in mind.’

Susan stared at her, incredulous. ‘And you didn’t tell me? You always tell me everything!’

‘It’s a recent thing,’ Ela said apologetically.

Susan huffed, not ready to be mollified. ‘So, who is he?’

‘Not *he*.’

‘A woman? Well, there’s not many to choose from. Is it Dora Anderson? I hate to admit it, since I didn’t think of it myself, but she’d be a great fit for you.’

‘No, not Dora.’

‘Amalie Dubois?’

Ela shook her head and leaned forward, elbows on the table. ‘Someone closer to home. A woman with great people skills, who knows the business inside out and has spent years building up networks while touring with a top international artist.’ She paused. ‘And she always tells me the truth, even if I don’t want to hear it . . . And she already happens to know how to boss me around and make my life better.’

Susan’s hands flew to her mouth. ‘Oh my god . . . *me*?’

‘If you want the job?’

‘Of course I want the job!’ screamed Susan.

Ela laughed. ‘Then I think we should order up some champagne and celebrate.’

Susan poured out the last of the Cristal into their glasses and returned the empty bottle to the ice bucket. They had spent

the last hour making plans over the breakfast table.

‘You know, you’ve grown balls, and I love it!’ said Susan, toasting Ela with her champagne glass.

Ela gave her a mischievous look. ‘Perhaps I always had them and they just needed to drop into place.’

Susan laughed. ‘Perhaps. But something has definitely happened to help the process along.’

They lapsed into silence.

Susan watched Ela mechanically pick at the remainder of her fruit salad as she became lost in her own thoughts. This had been occurring with unprecedented regularity over the last few days.

‘Do you mind me asking what happened?’ Susan said lightly.

Ela looked up.

‘Hmm? Oh, with Roger . . . I just realised that I want to be the one in control of my own life, making my own decisions. And he’ll never be able to let go of how things used to be between us. Which is a shame, because I’ll miss him. But I can’t blame him. Most people aren’t good at dealing with change.’

‘True, but that’s not what I was asking. What happened between you and Murdoch?’

Ela’s expression went blank. ‘I . . . I don’t want to talk about it.’

‘I know you kissed,’ prompted Susan.

‘Everyone knows we kissed! It was splashed all over several newspapers.’

‘What happened after?’

Ela turned her attention to her plate and started to hack at a piece of melon with her knife.

‘Nothing. As you can see, Murdoch isn’t here, so clearly nothing that meant anything to him.’

‘I think there’s more to the story . . . Perhaps you should try talking to him.’

Ela’s eyes snapped back to hers. ‘Talk to him? I never want to see him again!’

Susan reached over and removed the knife from Ela’s grip.

‘Don’t stab the messenger, but I suspect he cares about you rather more than you realise.’

Ela laughed, an edge of bitterness creeping in. ‘He made it perfectly clear that he doesn’t.’

‘You’re wrong.’

‘If he cared about me, he wouldn’t have run off the moment things became difficult. *He* was the one who told *me* that you need to fight for anything worth having . . . It’s my own fault for believing him! I knew he hated the press. I should have been able to figure out that my fame would be a problem for him.’ Ela pushed her plate away and stood up. ‘Can we please stop talking about your brother?’

‘You’re both being terribly stubborn,’ bemoaned Susan. ‘I can tell you’re crazy about each other.’

‘That’s not true!’

‘Oh, please! I’m neither dim-witted nor blind. It’s patently obvious, between your moping . . .’

‘I am not moping!’

‘. . . and Murdoch’s sudden, unprecedented interest in calling me to “check in”.’

‘He called you?’ Ela could have kicked herself for asking.

‘Yesterday.’

Ela refused to show any further interest and stayed resolutely silent.

Susan went on, undeterred. ‘It was a strange call. It’s not like him to call out of the blue for no reason.’

‘He’s probably missing you.’

‘He’s had over five years to miss me. I’m not deluding myself that this show of brotherly devotion has anything to do with me. If it had, the call would have been two minutes – you know he’s curt to the point of rudeness! But he kept me on the phone for twenty minutes and asked me torturously veiled questions about you. It would have been annoying if I wasn’t having so much fun playing with him.’

Ela could feel her resolution crumbling. ‘What did he ask?’

‘In a roundabout way, he was trying to find out if you were okay.’

‘I hope you told him I’ve never been better!’

Susan gave her an unconvinced look. ‘Also, he was trying to find out if your reputation had been damaged by that beastly article.’

Ela frowned. ‘My reputation?’

‘Remember, the ass who wrote the article hinted that your management team was worried.’

‘That was clearly lie. You didn’t say anything to the press, and Roger swears that neither he nor his team would dream of talking to them about gossip.’

‘I know that, and you know that. But Murdoch doesn’t.’

‘What are you trying to tell me, Su? Please, just spit it out. I don’t want to try and guess . . . I’ve been wrong about so much recently, I don’t even want to try,’ she added, a catch in her voice.

‘Oh, honey,’ sighed Susan, her face twisting with sympathy. ‘I’m just pointing out that, from Murdoch’s perspective, his tarnished reputation could damage yours. And, by extension, your career.’

‘That’s ridiculous. My career is built on more substance than the reputation of whom I’m dating!’

‘I think so too. But it’s not unheard of for a woman’s choice of partner to have an impact on her career.’

Ela turned agitatedly and walked over to the clothing rack that held a dozen or so couture gowns, sent over for her from her usual high-end designers. She had to pick her Asia tour wardrobe from the selection, and her outfit for the charity gala tomorrow night.

She flicked through the gowns – long, sumptuous, traditional – not really seeing them.

‘Even if you have a point,’ she said grudgingly, ‘does he think all I care about is my career?’

‘You apparently told him you *live* for playing the piano.’

Ela looked over her shoulder at Susan in surprise. ‘He told you that?’

‘Actually, Les told me.’

‘When?’

‘Yesterday. You were busy showing Meredith and Sienna around the suite and she pulled me to one side. She wanted to make sure you were alright . . . and to vent about Murdoch. She’s very cross with him! Kept hinting at something she couldn’t tell me outright because he’d made her promise to keep it to herself, which is rather ironic.’ She sniggered. ‘But she did reveal that your comment made an awfully strong impression on him.’

‘It was an offhanded comment. I mean, it’s true to an extent, but it’s not the entirety of my reason for being. Other things are just as important . . . More important, even.’

‘You need to tell him that.’

‘He walked away, Su. He didn’t even say goodbye – he left a note. Imagine waking up, thinking your life finally

makes sense, and then learning from a *note* that you were living in a fantasy of your own making?’

‘Do you know about his scandal?’ Susan asked abruptly, changing tact.

‘Only what I read in that article. His girlfriend stole some documents from your father’s office and tried to sell them to the press.’

‘She wasn’t his girlfriend.’

‘Okay. She was a call girl.’

‘She was. But she wasn’t *his* call girl.’ Susan took a deep breath and exhaled loudly. ‘Oh god, he’s going to kill me for this! He made me promise to keep it a secret, but I can’t do it anymore! It’s ruining his life.’

Ela frowned and came to sit back down opposite her.

Susan was silent for so long, warring with herself, that Ela had to prompt her.

‘What are you trying to tell me?’

‘My father was the one having an affair with her, not Murdoch,’ Susan said in a rush. ‘Then she stole from him and got caught, and he didn’t want the scandal to damage his reputation, so he convinced Murdoch to take the blame and say that she was *his* girlfriend.’ She exhaled with relief. ‘There! I’ve said it.’

‘What . . . ? But . . . how could he do that to his own son?’

Susan laughed cynically. ‘Bloody self-preservation above all else!’

‘I don’t know what to say . . . That’s appalling. Your father sounds horrible.’

Susan sighed, clearly torn. ‘I wish it was that black and white. He wasn’t ghastly all the time. He had his moments; he could be kind and funny, charming, even. But at the same time, he was deeply selfish and arrogant. He truly believed it was better for the family if the young, hard-partying son took

the blame, rather than the earl and elder statesman himself. He thought Murdoch had time to redeem himself . . . which I suppose was technically correct. What he never appreciated was that Murdoch would never court that sort of validation.'

'He has too much pride,' Ela said quietly.

'Exactly! He simply retreated to Scotland to get away from the attention and refused to play the game. But the experience changed him. He stopped drinking and partying – which in a way was good, but he took it too far. He became too serious and closed off. His whole life became about work.'

Ela fell silent, taking it all in.

'How do you know what your father did?' she asked after a while. 'Did Murdoch tell you?'

'God no! He gave my father his word he wouldn't tell anyone. He's such a stickler for doing the honourable thing. They thought they had the house to themselves, but I'd come home early and was reading in the next room. Afterwards, I tried to convince Murdoch not to do it, I begged him to see he was being manipulated. But he already knew that. He thought he was saving the family from greater scandal, and he wanted to spare our mother from public humiliation.'

'Of course he would,' Ela agreed, her face softening.

'But despite Murdoch offering himself up as the sacrificial lamb, the press attention was still off the scale. Some of the stolen documents had to do with a plan, supported by certain factions of the government, to limit EU power in the UK. Even to leave the EU if necessary. And the press tried to turn the whole incident into another Profumo affair.'

'It sounds awful.'

'It was bloody awful! For years, I had nightmares about the photographers camped outside the house in Grosvenor Square. I still hate going back there. So does Murdoch. Every time we tried to leave or come home, they swarmed – pushing, yelling, shoving cameras in our faces. I came to understand the horror of what Princess Diana must have lived through, the

utter heartlessness of it! The dregs of humanity picking at the carcass of others' misery. On a couple of occasions I was properly scared, and Murdoch flew into a rage trying to protect me. He punched a guy, smashed some cameras.'

'I'm so sorry you had to go through that,' Ela said softly.

Susan waved away her sympathy. 'I was fine. Murdoch had it the worst. He refused to leave London while I was still studying here. He thought he could shield me to some extent by keeping the focus on him. But as soon as I went overseas, he moved to Caeverlock Castle. He only started spending time in London again three or four years ago.'

'Is that why he started a private members' club? A type of refuge in London?'

'That's probably part of it. But he's always been a patron of the arts. He's got a First Class Honours in History of Art from Cambridge,' Susan said proudly.

'And Land Economy,' Ela replied with a smile. 'Meredith mentioned it.'

They fell silent, each wrapped in her own thoughts.

After a few minutes, Ela said out of nowhere: 'The idiot is saving my reputation by sacrificing himself! Again.'

Susan nodded. 'I'm afraid he is.'

'But he's sacrificing my happiness too!'

'He probably doesn't realise to what extent. You need to call him.'

'I can't tell him what I need to tell him over the phone,' said Ela, drumming her fingers on the table. 'He's stubborn enough to hang up on me. It needs to be face to face.'

'We've run out of time. We fly to Hong Kong to start rehearsals the morning after the gala. It will have to wait until after the tour.'

'No! I can't wait that long. I've got no illusions about Murdoch's ability to shut me out if he thinks he's doing the

right thing. Is there any way we could get him to the gala tomorrow night?’

Susan frowned in thought. ‘I’m not sure. Logistically, it’s possible. His helicopter could fly him down last minute – it’s only a two-and-a-half-hour journey from Caeverlock Castle. But how am I going to convince him to come? If I’m doing the asking, he’ll assume it has to do with you.’

‘Your mother might be willing to help.’

Susan regarded her with surprise. ‘My mother?’

‘She may have been a little impressed to find out who I am.’ Ela smiled with embarrassment. ‘I went from *persona non grata* to “dear Gabriela” within minutes.’

‘That I can believe,’ Susan said dryly. ‘She has a fixation with status. And now that I think of it, Lesley did say she’s been making a nuisance of herself over you. She’s been calling her to complain about how Murdoch let you slip through his fingers.’ Susan picked up her phone. ‘I think you might be onto something. I’ll call her.’

While Susan spoke with her mother, Ela walked back to the rack of couture gowns. If Murdoch was going to be there tomorrow night, then she’d need to wear something special.

She spent some minutes taking out each gown and holding it against her as she critically viewed herself in the full-length mirror at one end of the rack.

They were all lovely. Elegant, conventional . . . boring.

‘You don’t like any of them, do you?’ said Susan, walking over.

‘No,’ sighed Ela.

‘I thought you loved classic styles.’

‘I used to . . . What did your mother say?’

‘She’s agreed to help! She’s going to tell Murdoch that she donated something to the charity auction but has had

second thoughts, and she needs him to help her bid for it and win it back.'

Ela smiled, impressed. 'Devious. Do you think it will work?'

'Murdoch is putty when it comes to our mother. I think we can safely assume she'll get Prince Charming to the ball. But we have a more pressing concern – we need to find you something ravishing to wear!'

Ela looked despairingly back at the rack of gowns.

'I want something more eye-catching than these, but I don't know what exactly.' After a few moments of staring at the rack, her face lit up. 'But I do know someone who can steer me in the right direction! I only hope she's back in the country.'

A couple of hours later, Kat walked into Ela's suite at Claridge's, her motorcycle boots striking the marble tiles of the entrance hall with a distinctive thump.

Ela showed her into the living room, and she let out a whistle, impressed.

'Mighty fancy, sunshine. You've done well for yourself.'

'It's my favourite place to stay in London,' admitted Ela. 'Apart from Les's, of course.'

'Speaking of Les, she's been catching me up on all the fun and games I've missed. She tells me you've been hiding your light under a bushel?'

'Not hiding it so much as taking a break from it,' Ela replied, with a sheepish smile. She indicated to Susan, who had risen from the couch. 'I'm sure you know Murdoch's sister, Susan . . . You did date him, after all,' she added a little tartly.

‘He told you?’ chuckled Kat.

‘It came out.’

‘God knows why! It was a lifetime ago,’ said Kat dismissively. She moved towards Susan, hand outstretched. ‘We’ve never had the chance to meet. I’m Kat.’

Susan shook hands with her, her smile guarded. She would ordinarily have been impressed by Kat’s beauty and manner (and she would have killed to be able to pull off her fierce style!), but instead, she felt miffed.

She was Ela’s guardian at the gate, so to speak, and Kat had been admitted into the inner circle without first being vetted by her.

‘Thanks for coming, Kat,’ said Ela. ‘I know you’re probably still exhausted from your trip.’

‘Everyday life exhausts me. Three weeks touring Scandinavia with a band and listening to metal every night recharges my batteries. That said, I’m rather sorry I missed all the shenanigans between you and Murdoch. I saw the photos, by the way – looked like you had fun!’

Ela resisted the urge to blush; that affectation belonged to the old Ela.

‘I take it Les filled you in on all the details?’

‘With great relish. So tell me, sunshine, what exactly am I doing here?’

‘I’ve got a plan brewing – a couple, actually,’ said Ela, becoming businesslike. ‘But first, I need to sort out my wardrobe. We’re working on getting Murdoch to a charity gala I’m attending tomorrow night. I need to wear something that will shatter his misconception that I’m a delicate flower who needs a knight in shining armour to save her reputation.’

‘Ah . . . It’s starting to make sense now. He’s such a numpty,’ said Kat with affectionate scorn.

‘Tell me about it!’ exclaimed Ela. She pointed to the rack of gowns. ‘At the moment, these are my only options.’

Kat pulled a face. ‘I see the problem.’

Susan bristled. She had chosen the gowns herself out of the collections the designers had shown her.

‘They’re gorgeous!’ Ela said quickly, seeing her friend tense. ‘And perfect for what my style used to be. But my image is evolving, and I want a visual representation of the new me. Something that will speak for itself without me having to say a word.’ She threw Susan an apologetic look.

‘You don’t have to explain yourself to me,’ said Susan, giving her a reassuring smile. ‘I’m a proud mama to finally see my caterpillar spreading her wings.’

‘Good, because this butterfly is sick to death of her good-girl image! It’s become a straitjacket. I’m being forced to conform to some idealised version of how people see me.’

‘Do you have a particular image in mind?’ asked Kat.

‘Edgier, more avant-garde . . . I want to look like a woman in control of her own life. Someone who doesn’t give a damn about what others think of her choice of boyfriends.’

Susan smiled faintly at Ela’s uncharacteristic cursing.

‘Got it,’ said Kat, nodding. ‘As it happens, I know just the woman to help. You need Viv. She knows a hell of a lot about edgy clothes that speak louder than words. She dressed the Sex Pistols.’

‘You know *Vivienne Westwood*?’ exclaimed Susan, trying desperately not to be impressed.

Kat shrugged nonchalantly. ‘She’s my godmother.’

‘Oh god,’ groaned Susan. ‘I’m so hideously jealous of you.’

Chapter 35

Upwards of five hundred people milled around the cathedral-like hall of the Natural History Museum, where the PETA gala was being held. Under the Romanesque stone columns and arches and intricate carvings and paintings, they were all there to raise money to save animals from human cruelty, in a building constructed to celebrate and preserve them.

‘They’re talking Ela strategy again,’ Sienna complained to Meredith, looking over to where Susan and Kat had their heads together, a few feet away. ‘Utterly annoying of them to be discussing work at a party.’

‘Let them be,’ said Meredith as she took a sip of her wine. ‘Ela needs all the help she can get if she’s going to change Murdoch’s mind.’

‘You’re not wrong! Okay then, since I’ve got you to myself for a few minutes, you can finally tell me what happened when you and Richie went to my tantric guy.’

Meredith looked heavenward and shook her head. ‘I can’t even think about it without cringing.’

‘Come on! Spill.’

‘I’ll give you a quick snapshot so you can understand the depths of my embarrassment, but then I never want to talk about it again!’

‘Deal.’

Meredith took another fortifying drink of her wine. ‘Okay. So, your tantric masseur – who, by the way, really does look like Gandhi! – sat us on the floor cross-legged and started to tell us a story about a beautiful flower in the garden of a busy gardener.’

‘That’s weird. He didn’t do that for me.’

‘Horses for courses, I guess . . . The gardener initially tended her beautiful flower,’ Meredith continued in a sing-

song voice, ‘and it blossomed, and she received great enjoyment from her flower. But there were many demands on her time and she had to direct her attention elsewhere. Youthful energy sustained the beautiful flower at first, but the neglect continued and it began to wither.’

‘What the hell?’

‘Actually, I was sort of getting into what he meant,’ chuckled Meredith. ‘He went on about how the flower found ways to guard itself; its stalk grew prickles to ward off the predators, blah, blah. And it retreated into itself. But it wasn’t dead, just dormant. And so – and he’s looking at me as he says this – it’s now up to the gardener to return and nurture her beautiful flower.’

Sienna covered her mouth to stop herself laughing.

‘You think that’s funny? Wait for it! He then turns to Richie and tells him that the gardener will need assistance in this important task. And that only through selflessness and resistance to the dark side of the ego can the full potential of the beautiful flower be realised.’

‘What did Richie think about that?’

‘Not much, as it turns out. He looked bewildered and came out with the immortal line, “I’m not very good with plants, mate. Never owned one since uni. And it didn’t last long after we smoked the leaves”.’

Sienna burst out laughing. ‘Oh my god, he said that? Classic Richie! Sorry, Meri-Berry, it sounds like the whole experience was a fail.’

‘I wouldn’t say that,’ Meredith replied with a coy smile. ‘He showed us some interesting massage techniques and we went home and practised. Until . . . you know.’

‘Really?’ cried Sienna, clapping. ‘Oh, bravo! Finally!’

‘Shush! Not another word.’

Sienna made a gesture to zip her lips. ‘I’ll say no more. My work is done.’

Meredith looked back towards Susan and Kat. ‘I do love Kat’s tux jacket and cigar pants.’

‘She looks hot,’ agreed Sienna, picking up a couple of vegan hors d’oeuvres from the tray of a passing waiter.

‘You don’t look too bad yourself. I’ve always liked pink on you. But I can’t believe you wore leather shoes to a PETA event! You seriously need to learn to read the room.’

‘No one is going to know they’re not fake leather. They look the same as everyone else’s.’

‘Exactly!’ said Meredith. ‘You should have gone out and bought yourself a non-leather pair.’

‘I had enough trouble finding a swanky dress on short notice. Besides, don’t think you can stand there lecturing me. I still haven’t forgiven you for lying to me all these years about Murdoch being a bloody earl.’

‘I keep telling you, he didn’t want anyone to know. I barely saw him after the scandal broke, and when he did finally come back to London, he insisted on using the name Barclay.’

‘All I’m saying is, you could have given me a *hint*,’ complained Sienna. ‘It would have spared me from acting like a complete idiot over that bastard press-whore at Lesley’s party. I could’ve picked up on the warning signals and raised the alarm when he started asking questions about *Murdoch Buchanan*.’

‘What a disaster!’ sighed Meredith. ‘I just hope Lesley and her mother manage to get Murdoch here.’

‘Actually . . . your wish has been granted,’ said Sienna through a mouthful of food, her gaze on the entrance. ‘They’ve just walked in.’

Ela couldn't believe their plan had worked. Murdoch had just walked in with his mother and Lesley.

For the last hour, the president of PETA had been introducing her around from group to group, but though she had smiled politely and answered the questions put to her, her eyes had regularly flitted towards the entrance.

As soon as she registered his arrival, she adjusted her position so that her back was to him. She was feeling surprisingly nervous.

She looked towards the massive *Diplodocus* cast in the centre of the room, where Susan, Kat, Meredith and Sienna – the EBH posse, as Sienna had dubbed them – were waiting to offer her moral support.

They must have also seen Murdoch, as they were smiling and giving her the thumbs up.

Excusing herself to the PETA president and the group, she started towards her friends. It was time for the moral supporting to begin.

She had almost reached them when a man's voice called out her name.

She turned with surprise. 'Sergei?'

A blonde, loose-limbed man with the exotic features of the Slavic race approached her.

Taking hold of her upper arms, he kissed her exuberantly on both cheeks.

'Hello, beautiful Gabriela!'

Ela couldn't help smiling. Her ex-boyfriend was a charming flirt. 'What are you doing here?'

'I am in London. I want to see you. So, I am here.'

She gave him a sceptical look. 'Tickets for tonight sold out weeks ago. I had to pull some serious strings to get my friends in, and I'm the guest of honour.'

‘But I am Sergei Vassiliev,’ he said with a florid shrug.

She laughed at his arrogance. It might have made him a terrible boyfriend, but it was firmly grounded in reality. Sergei was a violin prodigy.

They had met in their early twenties, when they had performed at the same classical music festival in Prague, and had had a brief, passionate relationship followed by a long, torturous year of break-up, make-up yo-yoing.

Sergei was world-class in many areas, but he was abysmal at monogamy.

He stepped closer and took hold of both her hands – an entirely continental gesture that had thrilled her years ago. Now, she simply found it amusing. It meant he was about to try and beguile her into a flirtation.

‘You look more sublimely gorgeous every time I see you.’ He raised her hands to his lips. ‘I adore your shorter hair – it is sexy. And that dress . . .’ He pulled her hands out to the sides to better inspect her.

Had her hands been free, she would have self-consciously tugged up the strapless corset of her dress, which was showing more cleavage than anyone, including herself, was used to seeing on her.

The dress was a stunning creation from the Vivienne Westwood Fall collection, made of a copper-gold material shot through with different colours that were picked up depending on the angle of the light. The top half was a double-peaked corset, and the bottom a loosely draped pencil skirt, short at the front and longer at the back. She was also wearing thigh-high boots made from the same material.

It was eye-catching and avant-garde.

Exactly what she’d wanted.

She was so happy with the look that she had cajoled Vivienne and her designer husband, Andreas Kronthaler, to

agree to whip up a tour wardrobe for her. There were some perks to fame, after all.

‘You are ravishing, Gabriela,’ said Sergei. ‘Have pity on my heart!’

‘You always come up with the most beautiful compliments, Sergei,’ she said with a smile, ‘but I really don’t have time for them at the moment. The auction will start soon, and I need to prepare myself. I’m one of the prizes, if you haven’t heard.’

‘That is why I am here!’

‘To bid for me?’ She laughed uncertainly.

‘It is the only way I can get you to have dinner with me.’

‘I’m thrilled for PETA’s sake, of course. But it’s only fair to tell you that I’ve never had a problem with having dinner with you. The problem only arises later, when you want to end the evening in your bed.’

The sound of someone clearing their throat had Ela’s eyes darting to the side.

‘Hello, dear,’ said Lesley, her mother and Murdoch beside her. ‘I hope we’re not interrupting?’

For a second, Ela’s startled eyes met Murdoch’s cool ones.

She pulled her hands out of Sergei’s hold and forced a smile.

‘Not at all. I’m so happy you could make it! Lady Buchanan, Lesley . . . Murdoch, may I introduce you to Sergei? An old friend of mine.’

‘Sergei Vassiliev,’ clarified Sergei with a faint bow of the head, confident this should mean something to them.

Lesley returned his greeting in her usual warm way, while her mother, feeling proprietorial over Ela, chilled him with a frosty glare.

Murdoch didn't even bother to look in his direction. His eyes were on Ela, his gaze shuttered.

She felt pinned to the spot, and a blush started to creep from the neckline of her corset up her neck.

Damn it, she was supposed to be done with blushing!

Sergei did not miss their preoccupation with each other.

'This is your boyfriend?' he asked Ela, not mincing words.

'No!' Murdoch said sharply, his voice like a shotgun going off.

Ela flinched.

'Forgive me,' said Sergei. 'That was a crude assumption . . . If anyone should know Gabriela's tastes run in a different direction, it is I.'

He managed to infuse the words with enough insolence to make Ela want to kick him.

Murdoch finally looked at him, all the hauteur of the Earls of Buchanan who had come before him seeping into his gaze. Seeming to find nothing worthwhile to hold his attention, he turned away, leaving Sergei privately seething.

'I see Susan,' Murdoch told his mother. 'We should go and talk to her, seeing as that's why we're here.'

'And to bid in the auction!' added Lady Buchanan, ignoring his implied criticism. 'Dear Gabriela, I look forward to seeing a good deal more of you very soon.'

'For chrissake, Mother . . .'

Murdoch said under his breath as he took her by the elbow and led her away.

'Don't pay him any attention, dear,' Lesley told Ela. 'He's been like a bear with a sore head for weeks! Feeling sorry for himself, no doubt. It's a good sign.'

'Is it?' Ela asked doubtfully. She watched Murdoch walk over to greet his youngest sister.

‘Should I be concerned that I have competition?’ asked Sergei, watching her.

‘There is no competition,’ she replied distractedly.

‘That is true,’ he agreed, entirely missing her point.

‘Well, this has been nice, hasn’t it?’ declared Lesley. ‘Old friends catching up! Always delightful . . . And then one remembers why they are *old* friends.’ She laughed lightly. ‘And now, do please excuse us, young man. We are expected elsewhere.’

Linking her arm with Ela’s, she steered her away, leaving Sergei somewhat nonplussed to find himself deserted.

‘That was unusually rude for you, Les,’ observed Ela with a half-smile.

‘I hardly think he’ll notice, dear.’

‘No. His ego is bulletproof.’

‘How nice for him.’

Ela’s smile widened and she allowed herself to be propelled towards her friends . . . and Murdoch.

But as they drew nearer, her courage faltered.

‘I’m not sure about this, Les,’ she said, coming to a sudden halt. ‘He seems to want nothing to do with me. What if he really has moved on?’

Lesley snorted. ‘Not a chance, dear. The boy all but declared – to our mother, no less – that you were the next Countess of Buchanan, which makes him either masochistic or in love. And I know he’s not masochistic! Chin up. You’ve decided to fight for him, haven’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘So fight!’

Chapter 36

‘Ah! There you are, Gabriela,’ said Lady Buchanan as Ela and Lesley approached. ‘I was just telling everyone that I shall be bidding in the auction for the prize of a private performance by you.’

‘You intend to bid for me?’ asked Ela, surprised.

‘Certainly.’

Ela hadn’t known this was part of the dowager countess’s plan. And judging by Murdoch’s dark expression, he hadn’t realised it either.

‘I had no idea you were a lover of classical music,’ he remarked dryly.

‘Not many people do,’ returned Lady Buchanan. ‘And rather fortuitously my particular fondness is for piano.’

Ela smiled wanly. ‘Thank you, Lady Buchanan. I’m certain the charity committee would be grateful to have you participate in the auction.’

‘I don’t doubt it. Lesley-Ann, Susan, I need your assistance with something before the auction begins. Would you come with me, please?’

As her daughters moved to follow her, she added: ‘And I shall have a need of you too, Meredith . . . and you young ladies – Sienna and . . .?’

‘Kat.’

Lady Buchanan frowned. ‘Kat? I take it you mean *Katherine*?’

Kat chose to be amused. ‘If you’re asking if Katherine is my given name, then yes.’

‘Of course I am asking for your given name. I would hardly be requiring your colloquial one. Sienna, Katherine, follow me please.’

‘Mother . . .!’ Murdoch said softly.

‘I shan’t have a need for you, Murdoch. This is women’s business. You may stay and keep Gabriela company until we return.’

As Lady Buchanan walked off, surrounded by her entourage, Ela thought to herself that though Lady Buchanan was as subtle as a brick, she certainly got the job done. Seeing that Murdoch was not amused by his mother’s antics, she refrained from smiling.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, his eyes sliding to her. ‘Her determination to pair me off continues.’

Ela’s smile peeked out. ‘If that was a sample of what you’ve had to endure, then I can totally understand why you told her you were gay.’

She felt rather than saw his amusement.

A polite blandness suffused his expression as his eyes travelled fleetingly over her outfit and then rose to meet hers.

‘Murdoch, I’d like us to talk. About the article. You need to understand that my reputation means little to me if I can’t —’

‘Excuse me,’ he cut her off. ‘I must register my mother for the auction before it begins.’

He started to walk away.

‘Won’t you even listen to me?’ she exclaimed.

He paused and turned his head slightly, not quite bringing her into focus.

‘There’s no point, Ela. I already know what you’re going to say, and it won’t change my mind.’ For a moment, it looked as if he would say more, but instead, he carried on walking, purposefully making his way through the crowd.

Away from her.

The master of ceremonies looked down into the crowd from his position on the landing of the main staircase of the great hall. He was a well-known cricket celebrity and seasoned public speaker, and knew how to read a room.

‘And last but by no means least . . .’ He allowed his pause to drag on, building excitement. ‘. . . The final lot of the evening . . . the prize you have all been waiting for . . . a private piano recital to be held at your home . . . anywhere in the United Kingdom . . . and *not* by me, as I’ve no doubt you’ll be happy to hear . . .’

He waited for the laughter in the room to die down.

‘. . . but by world-renowned concert pianist, Ms Gabriela Baxtor-Huntington!’

A buzz erupted.

The MC smiled. ‘I know, I know! Who wouldn’t want to have Ms Baxtor-Huntington’s undivided attention for an evening?’

Ela, waiting at the bottom of the staircase, kept her polite smile in place. As innuendos went, she’d had a lot worse.

‘The winner will also have the pleasure of leading Ms Baxtor-Huntington onto the dance floor tonight, for the first dance of the evening . . . And now, if Ms Baxtor-Huntington would care to join me, we can begin the bidding.’

To the sound of clapping, Ela walked up the stairs to the landing, heart thumping in her ribs. She had performed in front of thousands, but this was by far the worst stage fright she had ever suffered.

Was he watching?

Her hands shook, and she clasped them together and looked out into the crowd with a serene expression, purposefully not allowing her eyes to focus.

‘May I start the bidding at five thousand pounds?’ asked the MC.

Several hands went up immediately.

From five thousand, the bidding rose to thirty within the space of a few minutes.

Ela was delighted, and a little surprised, to have secured as much for PETA and her smile stopped being forced.

The bidding seemed to have reached its peak at thirty thousand pounds. But just as the MC was counting down to the fall of the hammer, a woman’s voice called out: ‘Thirty-one!’

Ela’s smile wavered.

Lady Buchanan.

‘Mother, what are you doing?’ demanded Murdoch, frowning at her.

‘I came to bid, and so I am!’ she replied.

They were standing near the front of the large crowd that had gathered at the foot of the staircase.

‘You told me we were here to bid for something of yours you wanted back.’

‘That is correct. Gabriela is my future daughter-in-law, and I want her back.’

She put up her numbered paddle again to bid thirty-three thousand, countering another offer.

‘I thought you wanted me to marry Louise,’ Murdoch reminded her with exasperation.

‘Louise is a very worthy young woman,’ she replied loftily, ‘and I would have been delighted had you shown an

interest in her. But you assured me that was never going to happen. And since Gabriela was *your* choice – need I remind you, I caught you kissing the girl as if your very life depended on it! – then you have no right to pretend you don't want her.'

She put up her paddle again to bid thirty-five thousand.

'Mother, put your hand down!'

'No,' she retorted. 'I don't know what went wrong between you two, but you can damn well work it out! Do you realise if I died tomorrow, I would never have had a chance to meet my grandchildren?'

Murdoch sighed with frustration and crossed his arms, his posture rigid. 'Do what you want – you always do – just don't expect Ela and me to get back together. It will never happen.'

His mother ignored him and bid thirty-seven thousand.

Her thirty-nine thousand bid remained standing for almost a minute, but just before the hammer went down, a man to their right bid forty.

Lady Buchanan let out a cry of vexation.

She had already exceeded her limit. If it hadn't been unladylike, she would have stomped her foot. Deeply disappointed, she shook her head when the MC looked to her for another bid.

Murdoch's satisfaction at her capitulations only lasted until he saw who had outbid her.

Sergei Vassiliev, his paddle still raised, was looking up at Ela and smiling with a cocky self-confidence that made Murdoch want to punch him.

As the MC began his countdown, Murdoch growled, goaded beyond endurance. Unwrapping his arms, he grabbed the paddle out of his mother's hands and thrust it into the air.

'We have forty-one!' cried the MC, delighted. 'Can we reach forty-two?' He looked to Sergei.

Sergei returned Murdoch's gaze, and though he was still smiling, Murdoch had the satisfaction of seeing his expression become more pinched.

Sergei bid forty-two.

Murdoch instantly raised to forty-three . . . and kept his paddle up.

Sergei bid forty-four.

Murdoch glared at him and, since his paddle was still up in the air, automatically raised to forty-five.

Sergei laughed good-naturedly for the benefit of the crowd, which had picked up on their animosity and was watching them with avid interest.

He bid forty-six.

Murdoch's patience ran out.

'A hundred!' he shouted.

There was a moment of utter stillness before the rumble of excitement started to hum through the hall.

The MC was ecstatic and whipped up the crowd into a frenzy of clapping. He spared Sergei a cursory look, already anticipating the shake of his head.

'No more bids? . . . Anyone? . . . Okay then, one hundred thousand pounds . . . going once . . . going twice . . . and *gone!* To the gentleman holding paddle number seventy-eight. Thank you, sir! You are the winner . . .'

Murdoch swore under his breath.

A hundred thousand? What was he thinking!

'Well!' declared his mother, opening her eyes wide. 'You certainly know how to make a gesture when it suits you. I can't say I'm comfortable with such excessive expenditure, but I suppose one hundred thousand is a small price to pay for a daughter-in-law. And at least we all now know where you stand.'

‘It’s for charity,’ he reminded her. ‘I’ll get a tax rebate.’

But even as he justified the insanity of his actions, he knew deep down that he would have paid double that – anything – to keep Ela away from that smarmy, pompous degenerate who already seemed to know her too well for his liking.

‘If you would come up, sir,’ the MC was saying to Murdoch, ‘and claim your prize, the first dance can begin.’

His mother had to elbow him and point towards the landing, where Ela was waiting, before he realised what needed to happen next. By the time his feet started to move, the ushers had already begun clearing an area for the dance floor at the foot of the staircase.

He slowly walked up to the landing and, urged on by the MC, held out his hand to Ela.

He saw at once that she was looking tense, and her smile was unnaturally rigid.

As she put her hand into his, he gave it a comforting squeeze, then led her down the stairs to the dance floor.

An orchestra, which had been set up to one side of the grand stone stairway, began to play a slow version of *She Will Be Loved*.

‘I would have been happy to dance with you for free,’ she said as he encircled her waist.

‘My mother insisted I bid,’ he replied, keeping as much distance between them as possible.

‘Liar,’ she murmured.

She’d had a perfect view from the landing of his antagonistic jousting with Sergei.

They danced in silence for a few minutes, their gazes averted from each other, both conscious they were putting on a show for the entire room.

When other couples started to join them and the dance floor began to fill up, Ela relaxed sufficiently to be able to look up into his face.

‘I never knew you danced so well,’ she said lightly.

‘There are many things you don’t about me,’ he replied in a distant voice.

‘Are you going to give me the chance to find out what they are?’

He sighed, relenting a little, though still keeping his eyes on a point above her head.

‘Ela . . . Don’t make this more difficult than it has to be.’

‘I’m hardly going to make it easy for you when I think you’re being unreasonable.’

‘We had fun while it lasted—’

She stomped on his foot.

‘Ow!’ He frowned down at her. ‘Why did you do that?’

‘I thought I’d better stop you before you said something stupid,’ she replied sweetly.

She thought she saw a spark of genuine emotion – Humour? Regret? – before he re-erected his mask of indifference.

‘Our lives will never work together,’ he said. ‘We need to move on . . . I need to move on.’

‘I don’t believe you.’ She was determined to break through the barrier he was erecting around himself before it could cure and become impenetrable.

‘What don’t you believe? I thought I was being crystal clear.’ His patronising tone made Ela suspect he was trying to repulse her.

‘I don’t believe that walking away from whatever is between us is what you want.’

‘What I *want*?’ His mask slipped a little. ‘What I want has nothing to do with it! It’s irrelevant.’

‘It’s not irrelevant! It means everything to me. What is it that you actually want?’

‘For chrissake, leave it,’ he said roughly.

‘I can’t leave it, it’s too important. Please, tell me what you want, Murdoch.’ There was a catch in her voice as she said his name.

He dropped his head, a spasm of pain contorting his face. When he met her gaze again, he looked brooding. Hostile.

She moved closer.

A tremor passed through her body at his nearness. He must have felt it, for his hands tightened their hold on her.

‘What do you want . . . ?’

He swore in frustration and pulled her against him, sealing her lips with his.

He seemed intent on devouring every inch of her mouth, and she could only hold on and offer herself up.

Sergei stood in the crowd of spectators watching them, his expression becoming more and more grim.

Beside him, a man in a Savile Row suit said with a smirk: ‘If I’d known she’d throw in a kiss like that, I’d have bid a hell of a lot higher.’

Sergei threw him a furious look and, turning to leave, bumped the man’s arm on purpose and spilled the wine he was holding all down the front of his expensive suit.

Ela lost track of time as she gave all of herself to the kiss. But it wasn't enough.

Without warning, Murdoch tore his lips from hers and stepped back.

His eyes glittered angrily. 'Damn you! *That's* what I want . . . what I can't have.'

'But that's what I want too!' she insisted fiercely, her voice vibrating with emotion.

She could see him withdrawing into himself, leaving her before her eyes.

'I'll end up damaging your career. And I won't do that, even for you.'

'It's my choice to make!'

'Ela . . . I can't do it.'

'I don't need you to save me, Murdoch.'

He shook his head. 'I can't.'

'My career is my responsibility; I'll deal with whatever happens. And there's more to me than my career! You should know that better than anyone.'

'I do . . . of course, I do.' His voice gentled. 'But it's not really a career, is it? It's a calling.'

She stared at him with frustration, unable to deny it.

A fatalistic smile appeared on his lips. 'I refuse to be the one to take that away from you . . . Goodbye, Ela.'

He turned and pushed his way through the couples slow-dancing around them, leaving her alone in the middle of the dance floor.

Her temper rose with every step he took away from her.

And then she was being surrounded; Susan, Kat, Meredith and Sienna forming a protective circle around her.

‘I take it he refused to listen to reason?’ said Susan.

‘He wouldn’t know reason if it hit him on the head!’ snapped Ela. ‘He insists on sacrificing himself to save my career.’

‘Are you okay?’ asked Meredith, putting an arm around her.

‘I will be.’ Ela had to push the words past the anger constricting her throat. ‘When I stop wanting to murder him!’

‘I don’t blame you,’ said Susan. ‘My brother is officially an ass.’

Ela frowned. ‘He’s not an ass . . . He’s being noble.’

‘A noble ass who can kiss like the very devil,’ remarked Sienna. ‘That kiss was blistering. At one point I thought he was going to throw you down on the floor and have his way with you there and then!’

Ela felt her anger drain away.

‘That kiss was . . . everything,’ she said slowly, touching her lips. As her anger receded, hope took root.

‘I take it you’re not giving up?’ said Kat.

‘Not a chance,’ replied Ela, a steely look coming into her eyes.

‘I don’t mean to be the voice of doom,’ said Meredith, ‘but I should warn you that Murdoch is *very* stubborn . . . Susan, am I right?’

Susan made a face and nodded.

‘Once he makes up his mind,’ continued Meredith, ‘it’s impossible to change it. Especially if he believes he’s doing the right thing.’

‘I won my first international piano competition at fourteen,’ Ela said with quiet confidence. ‘At seventeen, I was the youngest person to win the Frederic Chopin International. I’ve been touring and working with the world’s best orchestras

and conductors since I was nineteen. I know something about what it takes to achieve impossible goals, and if he thinks I'm going to let him sacrifice our happiness without a fight, he's in for the shock of his life.'

'What are you going to do?' asked Sienna.

Ela looked at Kat. 'Plan B?'

Kat smiled lightly. 'I'm game if you are.'

'No!' Susan cried as if in pain. 'Not plan B! As your almost-manager, I'm not at all on board with plan B.'

'Oh, do tell,' said Sienna, leaning in conspiratorially. 'What's plan B?'

The beginnings of a smile tugged at Ela's lips. 'I'm going to take away Murdoch's reason for keeping us apart.'

'She's going to destroy her reputation!' lamented Susan.

'Only the pristine, unrealistic part,' Ela corrected.

'It's madness to dismantle a reputation you've spent years building.'

'I'm just going to rough it up a little. Don't worry, Su! If it's not strong enough to take a few knocks, then I don't deserve it.'

'But plan B is so . . . permanent.'

'I'm not going to wait around for something, or someone, to shatter my public image. It's so idealised, it's bound to happen sooner or later.' Ela looked back at Kat. 'I'm going to take control and shape the narrative I want. And I know just the journalist to help me do it.'

'Don't take this as cold feet on my part,' said Kat, 'but I feel I should point out, again, that my expertise is in heavy metal and rock.'

'Which makes you perfect for the job,' said Ela. 'Who better to tell me what all those bad-boy rockers do on tour to make themselves notorious?'

‘I don’t like it,’ muttered Susan. ‘I don’t like it at all.’
Ela grinned. ‘Why? This is going to be fun.’

Chapter 37

‘Congratulations! You’ve made the papers again,’ remarked Susan, dripping sarcasm as she walked into the living room of Ela’s suite at The Fullerton Hotel in Singapore. ‘And this article is not one tightly controlled by Kat!’

‘Have you always worried so much?’ asked Ela, her voice strained from holding her downward dog position.

Yoga and qigong had kept her sane over the last eight weeks, and she did her practice every morning without fail.

Susan dropped the newspaper down on the yoga mat.

Ela read the headline upside down.

Classical Star Goes Off the Rails

The accompanying photo was of her being escorted into a police car, hair dishevelled, wearing a silver minidress barely reaching the top of her thighs and chunky black Doc Martin boots.

She wasn’t entirely comfortable with the look (although the Doc Martins did make her legs look incredibly long and toned!), but Kat was in charge of styling now, and the image had a Chrissie Hynde vibe to it on purpose.

Swinging herself out of her pose, she sat cross-legged and started to read out loud.

The classical world is in shock today as renowned concert pianist Gabriela Baxtor-Huntington was taken into police custody in Singapore for questioning. A source has revealed that the star purportedly ‘trashed’ her own luxury suite at The Fullerton Hotel, and though no charges were ultimately laid, she

spent close to two hours being interviewed by police.

When asked about the incident, a top employee of the hotel, who wishes to remain anonymous, would not comment on the extent of the damage or who was responsible. However, they have informed The Straits Times that Ms Baxtor-Huntington has compensated the hotel for all damages. The employee also revealed that it was not the staff who called the police . . .

Ela glanced up. ‘Thanks, Su!’

Susan made a face.

. . . It seems management would have preferred to handle the matter privately, as Ms Baxtor-Huntington is considered a valued guest and they look forward to welcoming her back to The Fullerton Hotel in the future.

This latest incident involving Ms Baxtor-Huntington follows several weeks of ‘bad behaviour’ more in line with the sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll antics of Ozzy Osbourne or Johnny Depp than those of an esteemed classical star. Some critics have condemned her behaviour as being difficult and unprofessional . . .

‘Oh, please!’ scoffed Ela. ‘Unprofessional? Hardly! All my “bad behaviour” has been outside of work.’

‘Just playing devil’s advocate,’ said Susan, unable to contain a smile, ‘but you did slap that VIP in Kuala Lumpur before you went on stage.’

‘He slipped a hand under my dress while we were having our photo taken! I’m not putting up with that, not anymore.’

‘And I’ve never been prouder! But you were also seen arguing with your conductor in Japan. And you’ve been making some terribly diva-like demands at each venue.’

‘We agreed I’d go all Mariah Carey on purpose, but that’s not *unprofessional*. And I wasn’t arguing with Adachihara. I was putting forward my opinion, which he happened to disagree with. I’ve always respected him, and I enjoy working with him, but he has become too used to getting his own way when it comes to me.’

‘He certainly realises his mistake now,’ Susan said with dry amusement. ‘But surely you can understand why people are talking? The last two months have been out of character for you.’

‘The plan was to get them talking. It just annoys me when they throw around words like “unprofessional” and “difficult”. If I were a man, they’d be using language like “creative temperament”, “knows his own mind”, “authoritative”, “doesn’t suffer fools”. You know how it goes.’

‘I know. That’s the world we live in. Just remember, no matter how tightly you and Kat think you’re controlling the narrative, you’re feeding a monster, and it could easily turn and devour you. Just look what happened in China! We were almost thrown out of the country after that memorable press conference.’

Ela scrunched up her face, a cheeky smile appearing. ‘We did have a tricky time afterwards, didn’t we? But what was I supposed to say when they asked me what I thought of China’s anti-secession law to stop Taiwan declaring independence? I refuse to prevaricate. The new Ela speaks her mind.’

‘They were baiting you! And there’s a world of possibility between not prevaricating and replying as bold as brass “the words *barn door*, *horse* and *bolted* come to mind”.’

Ela laughed. She couldn't help it. 'In retrospect, I should have been more subtle. I certainly didn't enjoy being hauled up before the local administrator to explain myself, or being followed by the secret police for the rest of our stay.'

She returned her attention to the article and read on.

. . . Some have condemned her behaviour as being difficult and unprofessional, while others have shown compassion by voicing concern over her punishing tour schedule and the unsurprising deterioration of her mental health.

'That's good, at least,' she said, looking up again. 'They've picked up Kat's narrative from her last article that I'm overworked and heading towards a breakdown. It sets the scene nicely for me to disappear for a while, then be resurrected and redeemed at some point in the future. The perfect hero story arc!'

Susan threw her hands up. 'I don't know whether to be in awe of your machinations or to knock some sense into you. What you're doing is a gamble! I just hope to god my beastly brother is worth it.'

A whimsical smile appeared on Ela's lips. 'I think he is.'

She continued to read.

Ms Baxtor-Huntington has been playing at sold-out venues across Asia. However, her professional success has been overshadowed by a string of incidents that have raised eyebrows in some circles. A steady stream of gentleman callers has been seen entering and leaving her suites . . .

‘Thank goodness Kat is such a night owl! She’s doing wonders for trashing my pure, innocent persona,’ said Ela delightedly.

Susan looked towards the closed door of the second bedroom in Ela’s suite. ‘Is she sleeping?’

‘Of course. You know we won’t see her before lunchtime.’

‘Is she alone?’

‘Yes! Don’t worry, she kicks them out before I wake up.’

‘I’m surprised you’re so understanding about strange men invading your space.’

‘It’s fine; it’s for the good of the plan. They’re reasonably quiet, and I put in ear plugs. But I’d love to know how she manages to find all these good-looking guys – no matter where we are! – to play poker with her all night.’

‘I don’t think they just play poker,’ said Susan with a droll look.

Ela grinned. ‘Probably not. But she needs some consolation for uprooting her life for me. Only . . . I’m a little worried Murdoch will get the wrong impression when he reads about all the men.’

‘Wrong or right, it’s the impression you and Kat wanted to create,’ Susan reminded her. ‘And it’s working. Take a look at the photo of you on the inside page. I think it’s telling *that’s* the photo they chose to print.’

Ela flicked through to where the article continued.

Oh!

The photo was one of several Kat had staged and disseminated through her press channels. It showed Ela walking out of a nightclub in Hong Kong.

She was wearing incredibly low-waisted jeans that partially revealed a red thong, and her favourite T-shirt (the Fuller’s Brewery one she and Murdoch had won) knotted just

below her breasts. And she was swigging from a champagne bottle while giving the camera the finger.

She had been reticent about using the finger, but Kat had insisted. *A picture is worth a thousand words* had become their motto.

Susan was right. It was a gamble.

But one thing was certain: no one would ever again be able to imply that Gabriela Baxtor-Huntington was too good for Murdoch Buchanan.

‘Has Murdoch seen this?’ she asked Susan.

‘I don’t know. I’m emailing my mother photos of every newspaper article on you, as we agreed, but I’m not sure how she brings them to his attention.’ Susan’s face turned serious, and she sat down on the couch near Ela. ‘Actually . . . I wanted to talk to you about that. She’s been terribly cagey with me the last few weeks. She evades any questions to do with Murdoch.’

Ela felt a flicker of unease. Getting up off the floor, she went to sit beside Susan. ‘Is that bad?’

‘I’m not sure . . . but it can’t be good.’

‘Su, why didn’t you tell me sooner?’

‘Honestly? I didn’t want you to be distracted from the tour . . . and before you tell me that you don’t care about the tour – which is bollocks! – I must point out that since Roger walked out after the China incident, your career is *my* responsibility. You’re paying me to care. And though as your friend, I support your plan to win back my brother, as your manager, I’m going to prioritise your career.’

Ela exhaled deeply. ‘I know. And I’m sorry I’ve put you in such a difficult position.’

Susan grinned. ‘It’s all part of the job. Not a single talent manager in my network has an easy time of it – all artists are a nightmare! Besides, we’ve succeeded in getting to the end of an eight-week tour without being thrown in jail or killing each

other, so I see that as a win! You just have to do your final performance tomorrow night and then we can go home.'

Home.

Ela no longer knew where home was for her . . . or rather, she knew; she just wasn't certain she would be welcome.

'Can we call your mother now?' she asked. 'Perhaps if I talk to her directly, she'll give me more information on Murdoch.'

'It's the middle of the night. We'll have to wait until this evening.'

The day stretched out interminably for Ela. She didn't have a performance that night, so she spent most of the time practising on the piano in her suite and relaxing by the pool with Kat and Susan, although *relaxing* was a misnomer.

By the time they were able to get through to Lady Buchanan that evening, she was a bundle of nerves.

Susan exchanged a few words with her mother and handed Ela the phone.

'Lady Buchanan, how is he?' Ela asked at once.

'Dear Gabriela . . . I wish I could say!' Lady Buchanan sighed heavily. 'I haven't seen or heard from him in a while, and his phone is turned off. I was hoping he would be back by now and I wouldn't need to worry you needlessly, but he's still gone.'

'Where is he?'

'I don't know! He said he was going off by himself for a while and not to worry if I couldn't reach him. But it's been weeks! He's never disappeared like this before. I don't know what to do. I considered calling the police, but Angus, his

factor, assures me that he is still receiving regular emails from him, so I don't think the police will take his disappearance seriously . . . will they?' she asked hesitantly.

'No, probably not. It sounds like he wants to be alone for a while,' replied Ela, trying to sound reassuring. 'Please, don't worry. I'm sure he's fine.'

'I had hoped that he would be here for your recital, but now I just don't know.'

'Oh . . . I suppose I can't expect everyone to like my playing!' said Ela, trying to make light of it. 'But no matter what, Susan and I will be in Scotland in time for Christmas.'

It had been decided that after her tour, Ela would spend a few days in Sydney to see her parents, then fly to Scotland and fulfil the conditions of the PETA prize by playing a recital for Lady Buchanan, her family and friends at Caeverlock Castle on Christmas Eve.

They had all expected Murdoch to be there.

'Thank you, Gabriela. We are all greatly looking forward to your recital.'

'I'm looking forward to it too, Lady Buchanan.'

'I think we are now sufficiently acquainted to be on a first name basis, don't you?'

'I . . . yes, Agatha, I do,' replied Ela, with a poignant smile.

Chapter 38

The helicopter flight from Edinburgh was spectacular, and thankfully uneventful. It was Ela's first time in one, and she experienced a surge of adrenaline when they first lifted off, the nose dipping towards the ground.

They ascended to a height of around one thousand feet and could see the surrounding landscape for miles in every direction, yet they were still close enough to the ground to discern the details of the villages, fields, lochs and hills they flew over. It was a more visceral, all-encompassing experience than flying in a plane, and once Ela's nerves settled down, she was able to enjoy the panoramic view with childlike wonder.

They headed north, and after half an hour or so started to descend.

'Is that Caeverlock Castle?' Ela yelled above the noise of the blades, leaning across Susan to see out her side.

'Yes,' replied Susan, amused by her excitement. 'But you don't have to shout. The headset microphone in your ear defenders works perfectly well.'

Ela gave her a sheepish smile.

They landed on the front lawn near a large brown stone castle that looked like something out of a medieval romance novel. Two large wings were connected by a six-storey central building that had an odd collection of turrets attached to it, as if they were architectural afterthoughts. The wings themselves were lower, only three storeys, with battlements on top and circular towers at each end.

Apart from the battlements, an assortment of steeples, chimneys and domes adorned the entire rooftop and gave the place it's fairy-tale feel.

The castle was located beside a beautiful loch with inky waters that currently provided contrast for the dusting of snow that covered the ground and building. At one end of the loch, a

low mountain presided over the castle and surrounding farmland, stretching like a spine through the landscape.

The whole outlook was so breathtaking Ela could understand why Murdoch spent a large portion of his time here.

The thought of Murdoch brought on a spasm of anxiety.

They still didn't know where he was. And even if they did manage to track him down, how would he act towards her?

They thanked the pilot and jumped out of the helicopter, keeping low until they cleared the slowly moving blades, and then headed towards the entrance of the castle at the foot of the central tower. They only had their carry-on bags from the flight from Sydney; Susan had organised for the rest of the luggage to be delivered by courier later that day.

Lady Buchanan was waiting for them on the gravel carriage drive, wearing her tweed skirt, twinset and pearls. The only concession she had made to the bitterly cold weather was to fling a woollen tartan cape over the whole ensemble.

Susan walked over and hugged her.

Lady Buchanan seemed to accept the treatment under sufferance and patted her arm.

Then, as quickly as she could, she disengaged herself and exclaimed ominously: 'Thank the lord you're both here!'

Ela and Susan looked at her uneasily.

'What's wrong?' demanded Susan.

'He's back!'

'Murdoch? But surely that's a good thing?'

'Wait until you've seen him and then tell me it's a good thing!'

Ela's face leached of colour. 'Is he hurt?'

'He must be hurting – why else would he have got himself into such a state?' replied Lady Buchanan cryptically, holding

her gaze.

Ela's mind conjured up all sorts of dire images with which to torment her. 'Please . . . I must see him.'

'By all means try. Since Angus escorted him home a couple of days ago – he could barely walk! – Mrs Flockhart and I have repeatedly attempted to enter to try and help him. But he refuses! Only Angus has managed it, and then only a couple of times to leave him a tray of food. But even *he* was ejected after a few minutes.'

'Ejected from where?' asked Susan.

'The library. He retreated there as soon as Angus helped him into the house and hasn't left since . . . and he's *forbidden* us from entering,' she added with a mixture of dismay and indignation.

Ela still had no idea what was wrong with Murdoch, but neither wild horses, nor the four horsemen of the apocalypse, nor his royal grumpiness himself could keep her from him.

'Do we know where the numbskull has been all this time?' Susan asked with enough amusement to make Ela think poorly of her sisterly concern.

'Up in the mountains at his hunting lodge, or so Angus tells me.'

'Where's Angus now? I'll go talk to him and try to find out more details.'

'He's in the office. *Someone* has to continue to look after estate business while Murdoch is indisposed.'

'Well, he is the factor, Mother. It's his job.'

'Perhaps we could talk and walk?' suggested Ela, trying to hide her impatience. 'Agatha, would you please take me to him?'

Lady Buchanan nodded and hurried into the house, leaving Ela and Susan to follow.

As they passed through a chilly but impressively proportioned double-height entrance hall decorated with tapestries and weaponry, and headed towards the back of the ground floor, it spoke volumes for Lady Buchanan's state of mind that she forgot all about pointing out the architectural and historical details of her home, which she normally took great pride in showing to visitors.

'Don't look so worried, honey,' Susan said to Ela as they trailed behind her mother. 'It sounds like he's just blotto. He'll live!'

Ela looked at her in confusion. 'Blotto?'

'Absolutely stinking drunk. Am I correct, Mother?'

Lady Buchanan's face became pinched with displeasure. 'Indeed.'

'But he doesn't drink!' exclaimed Ela.

Lady Buchanan came to a stop in front of a tall, closed walnut door.

'He didn't *used* to drink. And then a month ago Susan sent me the first batch of newspaper articles about you, through that . . . that computer mail service. . . what is it called . . .?'

'Email,' Susan offered up.

'Yes! That email and hotmailings service you all forced on me. But I didn't know how to print the articles, and I wanted to leave them lying around for Murdoch to come across. So I went to Angus's office to ask for his help. And while he was showing me what to do, Murdoch came in and, before I knew it, read your email over my shoulder.'

Susan pulled a pained expression. 'Let me guess, he realised what we were up to?'

'Yes!' said Lady Buchanan tragically. 'He was very quiet, *too* quiet. At least, at first. Then he demanded we print off the articles so he could read them, but in such a cold tone I almost didn't recognise my own son! And then partway through

reading them. . . well, there's no other way to describe it, he became *unhinged*. He actually yelled at me and blamed me for encouraging you both – as if I had anything to do with the matter! And he demolished poor Susan's character in the most improper, blasphemous language . . .'

'He cursed me, did he?' said Susan, grinning.

' . . . which I didn't think fair in the slightest!'

'Thank you, Mother.'

'He also yelled at poor Angus, who had only been helping me and was an entirely innocent party. And then he declared he wanted to "wring her pretty neck" . . .'

'That would be you,' Susan informed Ela helpfully.

' . . . But then he seemed to change his mind, for he said something about preferring to kiss it . . .'

Susan grinned at Ela. 'I told you.'

' . . . Then he muttered about having no right, she'd moved on – or some such thing. And he looked so disconsolate as he said it, it almost broke my heart! And after *that* the drinking started.'

A puzzled frown entered Ela's eyes. That all sounded promising, but why was he disconsolate?

'Naturally,' continued Lady Buchanan, 'I pointed out that it was unbecoming of the Earl of Buchanan to drink excessively. And the next thing I knew, he had packed his bags and left.' Lady Buchanan sniffed and took out a handkerchief from her pocket to dab at her nose. 'I almost preferred him as he was those first weeks after the charity gala – withdrawn and unemotional. At the time, it put me out of all patience with him, but *this* is so much worse.'

Ela put an arm around her and gave her a quick hug.

'It sounds like he's been beastly,' said Ela, unconsciously adopting Susan's vernacular. 'I'll do my best to get him out of

his sulks. And if he refuses to see sense, I can always whack him over the head with a blunt object until he comes round.'

Lady Buchanan looked at her with momentary alarm, but then noticed the humorous glint in her eyes.

'Gabriela, I hope you don't mind me saying, I find your sense of humour very odd. But you're my best chance at grandchildren, so you have my full support. Do whatever you think is best.'

Ela blinked. 'I . . . Thank you.'

'But whatever you do, do it quickly and put my poor boy out of his misery! You've got him so overwrought he doesn't know up from down and has lost all sense of proportionality.'

Chapter 39

‘Get out!’ barked Murdoch, not bothering to look towards the door as it opened.

He was sprawled low in a wing chair beside a marble fireplace, staring moodily at the fire in the grate. A heavy-bottomed whisky glass was in one hand, and the other was hanging negligently over the arm of the chair.

His unruly, tawny hair fell over part of his face, and his beard had grown long and scruffy. He wore a cream cable-knit jumper with black jeans, his long legs splayed out wide, his bare feet on the rug, and his shoes and socks were carelessly thrown onto the stone hearth in front of the fire.

The door closed again.

Silence descended.

Sensing movement, he groggily turned his head and brought into focus a figure standing by the door, smiling at him with a mixture of shyness and longing.

‘Christ, no!’ He groaned with revulsion and rubbed his hand over his eyes.

Ela was momentarily nonplussed at such a greeting.

But when he violently shook his head, took a gulp of whisky and turned back to stare at the fire, she realised with amusement that he thought she was a figment of his imagination.

‘Honestly, Murdoch! Must you be so drunk *now*. I’ve travelled halfway across the world to see you.’

Murdoch’s head snapped around.

He stared at her with growing incredulity . . . and then he was on his feet and striding unsteadily towards her.

She was seized in a fierce embrace and ruthlessly kissed, his hands moving over her desperately, as if he couldn’t believe she was real.

Then he kissed her temple, her eyelids, her forehead, murmuring incoherently: 'It *is* you . . . you came . . . I didn't think . . . sweetheart, I . . .'

'What, my gorgeous man?'

He half groaned, half laughed. 'I must reek of whisky.'

'Yes,' she agreed, smiling. 'You've got yourself into a bit of a state, haven't you? And you've lost weight, which I'm not happy about. Did you miss me?'

'More than life,' he said hoarsely.

'Good! I'd hate to think I was the only one suffering. And I have suffered, let me tell you! Two hideous months without you, pretending to be a party girl.' She wrinkled her nose and shuddered. 'If you ever make me go through that again, I'll never forgive you.'

'Why?' he asked bleakly. 'Why did you do it? Your reputation . . .'

'Will survive, in one form or another. And if you really don't know why I did it, then the alcohol must have addled your brain.'

'You're crazy . . .'

'No. Just in love. Aren't you even a little bit happy that I've done such an amazing job of destroying my good-girl image? Or will you turn me away now that I've fallen so far beneath your touch?'

'Don't joke!' he said angrily, his arms wrapping around her more tightly, pressing her head against his chest. 'Never about that . . . You're priceless. *Glorious*.' He rubbed his face against her hair.

'Oh dear,' she said, happily nestling closer. 'Adjectives? And extravagant ones at that! You really are properly smashed, aren't you?'

He seemed to recollect himself and, letting her go, took a shaky step away.

‘What are you doing here?’ he demanded, managing to look indignant and bemused in one. ‘. . . shouldn’t be here.’

‘This is exactly where I should be! Not only is *here* where the love of my life happens to be, but I also have a commitment to play the piano recital he so unselfishly won for his mother.’

‘Did it for myself . . . selfish.’

‘It makes me ridiculously happy to know that,’ she said with a small smile. ‘So I must be selfish too.’

His brow creased. ‘You’re going through with it?’

‘The recital? Of course. I don’t renege on my promises. And your mother has already invited half of Scotland, from what I can tell . . . Speaking of your mother,’ she said severely, ‘she tells me you’ve been in a horrible temper and taking it out on everyone.’

‘That’s why I left,’ he mumbled sulkily.

‘In that case, it was probably for the best. Even though your poor mother has been so worried.’

‘I know . . . need to apologise,’ he said, swaying a little. He scrubbed his hands over his face, trying to revive himself. ‘Damn, I’m wasted.’

Ela took pity on him and, taking his hand, led him back to his chair and gently pushed him into it.

She leaned down and kissed him lightly.

‘Are you going to make a habit of drinking so much? Because if you are, I’m going to have to learn the recipe for Lesley’s secret hangover cure.’

‘Ela . . . you can’t stay!’ He looked up at her as if trying to bring her into focus. ‘Had time to think . . . lot of time.’

‘Have you?’ She brushed back a long lock of hair that had fallen over his eyes. ‘You need a haircut.’

‘Never work, you and me.’

‘And why is that?’

‘What will you do? Obs . . . *obscure* corner of Scotland . . . middle of nowhere . . . you’re used to travelling whole planet.’

‘Not the whole planet,’ she said with a smile, ‘but I’ve seen enough of it to last me a lifetime. At some point in the future, I might consider doing the occasional short tour, but for now, I want to focus on my composing. And do some recording – do you happen to know anyone with a recording studio?’

‘Don’t want to live in London,’ he muttered.

‘I know. We can spend part of the year there, just like you’re doing now. The rest of the time we can live here.’

‘. . . Your parents . . .’

‘Do you have a problem with them visiting us? Or us visiting them?’

‘Course not . . . but they’ll miss you.’

‘They hardly see me now! It will be a nice change for them to have me in one place so they can visit. And I suspect my mother will be thrilled to camp out here part of the year and explore her roots.’

‘Your career is ruined . . .’

‘It’s not.’

‘. . . don’t want to ruin your life.’

‘You idiot,’ she said lovingly. ‘You are my life. At least, the only part I can’t live without.’ She ran her fingers through his hair. ‘If you have any more terrible reasons why we should be apart, you can tell them to me when you’re sober – okay?’

He tried to scowl at her, but only ended up looking endearingly muddled.

She kissed him again.

‘You’re beard still tickles,’ she said, smiling.

‘You don’t like it?’ he asked huskily.

‘I like everything about you.’

‘I can shave it off.’

She kissed his forehead and breathed him in. She’d missed his scent.

‘I’ll go get you some coffee. I won’t be long.’ She straightened and walked back to the door.

Stepping out into the corridor, she saw that only Lady Buchanan was waiting for her.

‘I didn’t hear yelling,’ she said tensely.

‘He grumbled a bit but didn’t try to kick me out,’ replied Ela. ‘But he’s drunk and still seems to believe he knows what’s best for me – which is annoying! I suspect he’s going to be difficult about it when he sobers up. I’m half-inclined to keep him drunk and pliable, but I suppose that would soon grow old,’ she said with amusement.

Lady Buchanan gave her one of the tolerant looks she reserved for her alone.

Ela suppressed a smile and asked to be directed to the kitchen so she could make Murdoch coffee and grab him some food.

The kitchen turned out to be several large rooms below ground, ruled over by Mrs Flockhart, a diminutive Scottish senior with cropped grey hair. One of the rooms was fitted out as an office, and this appeared to be her base for ruling over all household matters below and above stairs, assisted (from what Ela could see) by two local women, one of their husbands, and a youth in his late teens, all of whom she ordered about like a general.

Mrs Flockhart was stiff and suspicious when Ela explained her reason for being there, but once Ela had answered her quick-fire questions, an aha moment flickered in the housekeeper’s eyes.

‘Och, you’re the lassie who’s been leading my Murdoch on a merry dance!’ she declared in a stern voice, throwing Ela into confusion.

Ela’s blush appeared to please her and she chuckled, thawing a little. She softened even further when Ela showed herself willing to bow to her superior knowledge of Murdoch and be instructed on how to make coffee just the way he liked it; from grinding the beans by hand, to the appropriate amount of time needed to percolate the brew, to the type and exact quantity of milk.

By the time Ela returned to the library, the tray she carried was not only loaded with a tall pot of coffee, but also with two doorstep-sized sandwiches and a jug of white currant cordial (Murdoch’s favourite since childhood, according to Mrs Flockhart).

As soon as Ela entered the room, even before her eyes confirmed her suspicion, she sensed that Murdoch was no longer there.

She let out a loud exclamation of annoyance. He’d run away from her.

Again!

As she stood wondering whether or not to go in search of him, Susan walked into the library. She was with a man around her own age who Ela had never seen before.

‘This is Angus . . . Angus, Ela. I brought him in case you needed saving from my brother.’

Angus greeted Ela with a smile and came over to relieve her of the heavy tray.

‘He’s bolted, has he?’ he asked, seemingly unperturbed.

He had a soft Scottish accent, a rangy build, and his attractive light brown eyes sparkled with humour. Ela like him immediately.

‘Yes!’ she replied with an exasperated smile. ‘He’s such a bugger.’

‘You’ve got him running scared. He’s probably realised that he’s in no state to deal with you at the moment. He’ll be upstairs in his rooms marshalling his defences. I’ll take this up to him.’

‘Has he been drunk often?’ Ela asked bluntly.

‘Not every day, but often enough.’ He hesitated. ‘I’m glad you’re here. I’ve been worried about him. Not only the drinking – he’s also been snapping my nose off for no good reason and has lost all interest in estate business. I’ve known him since we were kids and I’ve never seen him like this.’

‘Thank you for telling me. I’ll see what I can do about it,’ she replied, an understanding passing between them.

Murdoch’s unguarded reaction to her arrival had blown away all her doubts. She wasn’t going anywhere. She would stay in Scotland for as long as it took to convince him they belonged together.

When Angus had left with the tray, Susan led Ela back to the grand entrance hall and up the main staircase.

The staircase was an imposing structure carved from oak, which split left and right at a landing overlooked by beautiful stained-glass windows. It was carpeted with tartan and presided over by paintings of bewigged Buchanan ancestors and stag heads.

After briefly staring into the glassy eyes of the stag heads, appalled, Ela assiduously avoided looking at them. She knew they were probably as old as the paintings, but they still sickened her. She didn’t know how anyone could put the decapitated head of a poor animal on the wall for decoration.

‘My mother’s rooms are at the end,’ said Susan as they walked along the first-floor corridor. ‘I’m in this bedroom . . .’ She pointed to a door. ‘. . . the next one is Lesley’s, and you’re in the one after.’

‘Do we share a bathroom?’ asked Ela, thinking that the plumbing in a castle over four hundred years old was probably primitive.

Susan laughed. 'Not since the 1900s. Don't worry, you've got your own en suite.'

Susan opened the door to Ela's room and they walked in.

'Oh wow!' exclaimed Ela.

It was a stunning room; original wood panelling on the walls and ceiling, a large four-poster bed with a rose silk canopy, deep-pile rugs, and a view of the loch.

Ela was also relieved to discover that it had central heating, as well as its own fireplace where someone had thoughtfully lit a welcoming fire.

'I'm in love!' she gushed. 'I may never want to leave.'

'I think that's the idea,' observed Susan, smiling. 'You don't think my mother gives out rooms in the family wing to anyone?'

'Is Murdoch in this wing too?'

'He has the whole floor above us.' Susan turned a sympathetic look on her. 'It seems your plans have had a different effect to what you were hoping.'

Ela smiled wryly. 'I should have known that nothing is ever straightforward when it comes to your brother.'

'I hope he didn't maul you in the library?'

'No!' But then a private smile bloomed. 'Well . . . nothing I didn't enjoy.'

Chapter 40

Lady Buchanan's annual Christmas Eve champagne reception was a permanent fixture on the locals' social calendar and was always well attended. This year, however, the added draw of a world-class concert pianist had made invitations to the event the most coveted of the season.

Lady Buchanan was flattered to not receive a single reply of regret and, on the night, was delighted to welcome over fifty of her friends and acquaintances into the wainscoted drawing room of Caeverlock Castle.

Susan was also there to lend her support, as was Lesley, who had arrived in the helicopter that afternoon (lamenting the fact that, due to her mother's unreasonable aversion to snakes, she'd had to leave Amanda behind with only Kat for company).

Murdoch was noticeably absent.

Lady Buchanan confided in Ela that he had been holed up in his rooms since yesterday and only Angus had been allowed to see him.

Ela was more disappointed than she cared to admit, but reminded herself to be patient. He probably had an epic hangover, and she mustn't read any more into it than that.

She hadn't felt great herself all day.

Weeks of suppressed anxiety over what type of welcome she would receive, after not seeing Murdoch for over two months, had finally caught up with her – as had the jetlag – and she had been up half the night, reading a trashy novel in front of the fire in her room. And then, today, she had spent most of the time dozing and trying to recover in time for the recital.

Before the guests had started to arrive, Ela, dressed in Dolce&Gabbana black lace, had acquainted herself with the

Bösendorfer grand piano at one end of the drawing room, and had run through her practice regime.

And then the drawing room had started to fill, and the reception got underway.

Ela remained at Lady Buchanan's side and submitted to being shown off to the guests. It seemed to make Lady Buchanan happy, and Ela wanted her to enjoy herself.

When everyone had been sufficiently plied with champagne, Lady Buchanan invited them to take their seats in the rows of banquet chairs placed in front of the piano, and then, with unmistakable pride, introduced Ela and recounted an edited version of the story of how Murdoch had won her as a prize.

Ela smiled and tried not to be embarrassed. And when the laughter and clapping had died down, she took her place at the piano and began to play the repertoire she and Lady Buchanan had selected.

Her performance was very well received.

Ela didn't know if it was the champagne or the Scottish temperament, but everyone was surprisingly rowdy. They didn't hold back in showing their appreciation, and although she wasn't used to such an interactive, vocal audience, she enjoyed herself, and at one point even started to banter with them.

The recital was nearing its end and she had just begun her last piece – Mozart's whimsical and romantic Fantasia in D minor K. 397 – when she suddenly sensed Murdoch's presence.

She looked up, searching for him, and found him leaning against the wainscoting near the door, arms folded across his broad chest.

Her fingers almost stumbled over the notes . . .

He had shaved off his beard!

Without it, there was nothing to distract from his striking good looks – his square jaw, the sharp angles of his cheekbones, the sensual curve of his lips.

He really was a Viking.

The genetic makeup of his long-ago ancestors who had raided and settled in Scotland over the centuries was now obvious.

Her fingers continued to play from muscle memory as she tried to decipher the thoughts behind his impassive expression.

She couldn't. But she felt his absolute focus.

He was absorbed by her.

She realised this was the first time he had heard her play, and, without breaking eye contact, she put all of her herself into crafting musical beauty . . . just for him.

As the last piano string ceased to reverberate through the room, she continued holding his gaze, deaf to the applause that erupted.

Only his love and adulation mattered.

He pushed away from the wall and slowly clapped, as if in awe of her.

She felt overwhelmed, and tears stung her eyes.

And then she was surrounded by people offering their congratulations, and her attention was dragged away from him.

It took her a while to disengage herself, and then only with help from Susan, who had to step into her well-practised role and shield Ela from everyone's eager interests.

By the time Ela was free to go in search of Murdoch, he was no longer standing by the door. She couldn't see him anywhere.

Her stomach dipped in disappointment.

‘He left a little while ago, dear,’ said Lesley, coming to stand beside her. ‘He told me he was going to bed, which can only be a good thing! He still looks wrecked from his *indulgence*, as Mother calls it. But he’s so much better than earlier when I popped in to see him.’

‘He let you in?’ Ela asked with surprise.

‘I was quite shameless. I let myself in without invitation. But I knew I’d be relatively safe since I’d made a batch of his favourite scones and took along an extra bowl of cream for Madge.’

Ela smiled, feeling nostalgic. ‘I didn’t realise he’d brought Madge with him.’

‘He takes her everywhere! He adores that cat, although he’d never admit it.’

‘I don’t suppose he mentioned me?’

‘No, dear. But the fact that he avoided bringing you up speaks for itself.’

‘I just wish I knew exactly what it speaks of,’ said Ela frustratedly. ‘Does he even realise I’m staying for Christmas and Hogmanay?’

‘I did mention it to him.’

‘How did he take it?’ Lesley’s subtle pause made Ela say wryly: ‘Not well, I gather?’

‘He didn’t really give me much of a reaction, to be honest. But it’s Christmas Day tomorrow!’ Lesley went on bracingly. ‘Whether or not he wants to avoid you, he won’t be able to do it.’

Ela didn’t find much comfort in this.

How could he act as if their reunion in the library had never happened?

As long as it takes, she reminded herself.

‘You’re right,’ she said with greater optimism.

‘Just be prepared for his stubbornness,’ warned Lesley. ‘Do you have a plan for if he proves difficult?’

‘I’ll “*Make me a willow cabin at his gate, and call upon my soul within the house*”,’ Ela quoted, a smile in her eyes.

‘Gracious!’ grimaced Lesley. ‘That sounds suspiciously like Shakespeare, and I have to tell you, dear, I’m not a fan. The man had an unerring sense of complicating a perfectly straightforward sentence and making it quite unintelligible. Give me Eminem over him any day!’

Ela burst out laughing.

Chapter 41

Despite Lesley's prediction that Murdoch wouldn't be able to avoid Ela over Christmas, he made a good try of it.

As there were no kids in the house, everyone slept in on Christmas Day, and the opening of presents didn't start until midday, when Lady Buchanan, her children, and Ela, as well as Angus and Mrs Flockhart (Ela discovered they were treated as part of the family and had rooms in the castle), gathered in the drawing room.

Unlike the chill of the enormous entrance hall through which they passed, the drawing room was warm and welcoming. A large fire crackled cheerfully in a stone fireplace at the opposite end of the room to the piano. And that morning, Susan, Lesley and Ela had gone for a forage around the castle and returned with pine tree cuttings, cones and green foliage, and these were now charmingly arranged around the place.

Lady Buchanan's special whisky egnogs and Mrs Flockhart's blackberry cranachan and still-warm shortbread were passed around.

Armchairs, footstools, and even a Victorian loveseat were carried and arranged around a Christmas tree decorated with baubles and tinsel, and with presents underneath. Even Madge had her own spot around the tree; a tartan-covered cushion-bed beside Murdoch's footstool.

Since he had placed his stool as far away from Ela's armchair as possible, Madge was torn between staying with him or going to sit with her girl crush. She settled the matter by every so often flitting between the two of them and enjoying both their attentions.

Ela felt almost jealous of her. She longed for Murdoch's attention.

He barely looked at her.

If he hadn't ruthlessly kissed her in the library and told her he'd missed her more than life, she would have thought he no longer had any interest in her whatsoever.

But nothing could ever wipe the memory of that moment from her mind. So she took his behaviour in her stride and didn't allow her exasperation with him to dampen her mood.

Gifts were exchanged with a great deal of laughter. When it came to Christmas presents, the Buchanans had a theme of 'cheap, cheerful and cheeky'.

Since Murdoch hadn't realised Ela was coming (or had been too drunk to remember), she wasn't expecting a gift from him, but she had brought one for him.

'I know you're a huge fan,' she said coyly as she stood and held out a flat square package covered in gold paper.

She enjoyed his unsettled look. It was a step up from the blank, polite expression he had been treating her to.

Their fingers connected as he took the package from her and a spark of awareness shot up her arm, his eyes betraying that he felt it too.

'I don't have one for you,' he said, frowning.

'You can make it up to me next Christmas,' she quipped brazenly.

He regarded her with an undecipherable expression, his eyes dropping to where she bit down on her bottom lip – a tell of her own.

Everyone waited, watching them.

Murdoch made a noncommittal sound at the back of his throat and tore off the wrapping paper.

Dimples briefly appeared in his clean-shaven cheeks. With a droll look he held up Shania Twain's *Come On Over* album for everyone to see.

'Didn't know you were into girl-power ballads, Buchanan,' deadpanned Angus.

Murdoch shot him an unimpressed look as everyone laughed.

Ela had learnt that the two of them and Susan had gone to the local primary school together, which probably explained why Angus had no problem mocking his boss.

Once the presents had been given out and the egg-nogs and cranachan polished off, Ela, Susan and Lesley followed Mrs Flockhart to the kitchen to help her with the Christmas dinner preparations (her usual helpers having their own family celebrations to attend).

But she insisted she didn't need them, and soon managed to kick them out and send them off to set and decorate the table.

In the afternoon, they all went for a lovely long walk around the loch, apart from Murdoch, who (apparently) had to check on his horses at the local stables and drove off as they were heading out.

It was a perfect winter's day, cold but sunny, with air so pure and frosty there was a feeling of pleasure as it cut through your lungs.

The beauty of the landscape helped to soothe Ela's misgivings. A certain Scotsman was proving to be as stubborn as she had been warned he would be. The interlude in the library had meant everything to her, and yet he acted as if it had never happened.

How was she to deal with that?

Did she throw herself at him?

She had basically done just that at the gala and been rejected. She would do it again if she thought it would work, only she feared it wouldn't, and she cringed as she imagined how that particular scene might play out.

That night, they came together again in the grand-sounding State Dining Room.

This was, in essence, a nicely proportioned room with windows down one side, a fireplace in the opposite wall, and in the middle, a long dining table with tapestry chairs. It was elevated above the common way by extravagant decorative plasterwork, murals from the French school, antique furniture, and fixtures – including a large Murano crystal chandelier over the table – and dozens of candles that cast a soft, flickering light over the whole scene.

It was beautiful, but Ela couldn't spare a thought on the room when Murdoch was looking magnificent in blue-green tartan trews and a green velvet jacket.

Angus also cut a fine figure in tartan trousers and velvet, and the ladies were all looking lovely in their finery. Lady Buchanan had even abandoned her usual uniform and was in a plum taffeta dress with marabou feathers.

Ela, having been forewarned that the family dressed up for Christmas dinner, had packed a figure-hugging cashmere dress in fire-engine red, which draped off one shoulder and had a black velvet ribbon tied in a bow around the waist.

She thought it looked nice on her.

Observing her from the other end of the table, Murdoch thought she looked like the best Christmas present ever, just waiting to be unwrapped.

His fingers ached to run through her hair. It had been pinned up last night, and he hadn't noticed until now that it had grown, hanging past her shoulders in natural, glossy waves (owing a great deal to a hairdresser to the stars in Hong Kong, who had recut Ela's hair with the type of perfect layering women could kill for). The candles on the table picked up its tones of red and provided a dazzling frame for her face . . . and those large, dark eyes.

Murdoch watched her hungrily when she wasn't looking, and avoided her gaze when she turned in his direction. His sisters found this vastly amusing and thought it about time someone put him through his paces.

When the Christmas feast was laid out and everyone had taken their seats, Ela noticed there was a lot of meat on the table – turkey, beef, venison, lamb. She accepted it philosophically. She was used to being the only vegetarian amongst meat-eaters and could make do with the vegetable side dishes. But Mrs Flockhart, seated beside her, had other ideas.

‘Those there are a nut roast and a vegetable haggis,’ she told Ela, pointing to two dishes near them. ‘I made them for you.’

‘Just for me?’ asked Ela, taken aback.

‘Aye. I found a recipe for the haggis with oats, barley, mushroom and spices. Wouldn't have thought it, but it's tasty, if I do say.’

‘Thank you! I really didn't expect you to go to so much trouble.’

‘Och, it was no trouble! Murdoch gave me plenty of warning.’

Murdoch?

Ela looked across at him just as his eyes moved off her. He was sitting at the other end of the table, and she couldn't thank him without drawing everyone's attention.

She would have to corner him later.

Chapter 42

The jetlag woke Ela up just after four a.m. She knew there was no point trying to get back to sleep, and she had no intention of trekking all the way to the kitchen in search of food.

She put on the light and tried reading in bed for a while, but she was restless and couldn't focus on her book. Thoughts of last night kept intruding.

After they had done justice to Mrs Flockhart's delicious Christmas dinner, they had sat around the fireplace in the drawing room talking for hours and drinking Loch Buchanan Special Reserve (Murdoch had notably stuck to one glass and been mercilessly teased for it by Angus). At one point, they had embarked on an uproariously funny game of charades and discovered that Lady Buchanan was an innate actress – Sarah Bernhardt had nothing on her!

It had been a wonderful night amongst friends.

Ela's only regret was that she hadn't been able to speak privately with Murdoch. She suspected that was the way he had orchestrated it.

She had caught him looking at her once or twice with such open longing that it took her breath away. But then his gaze would shutter, and he would revert to being polite, aloof . . . unavailable.

She found it frustrating beyond words.

She threw down her book as soon as the sky began to lighten on the horizon, unable to stay still for a moment longer, and decided to go for a swim.

Susan had showed her the castle's impressive heated pool yesterday, when they had popped down before dinner to use the sauna, next door. It was large – at least twenty-five metres – and housed in a beautiful glass pavilion that connected with

the central tower building, and had views of the loch and mountain.

She put on the bikini she had borrowed from Susan for the sauna, threw on several layers of clothing on top, and slipped her feet into her trusty granddad slippers. After grabbing a plush bath towel from the en suite, she headed out the door.

As she started down the main staircase, she automatically turned her head to avoid looking at the stag heads on the . . .

She stopped.

Where were the stag heads?

She stood, staring up at the faint outlines on the plaster where they had hung. She was almost certain they had been there last night.

When had they been taken down?

The temperature in this part of the house was cold enough for Ela to see her breath, so she didn't linger. Tripping down the stairs, she jogged the rest of the way to the pavilion to keep warm. Even so, it took her a few minutes, as she got lost a couple of times; the castle was like a rabbit warren.

The pavilion was heated to a balmy 28°C and she was able to take off her clothes without getting hypothermia. She silently thanked Murdoch for installing geothermal energy production on the estate. (Lady Buchanan had proudly informed her over dinner that it had been a pet project of his, and now the whole castle was powered by clean, cheap energy.)

She didn't bother turning on the lights, preferring the cloaking semi-darkness, and lowered herself into the warm water.

She swam a few laps to get her blood pumping through her tired muscles, then floated on her back, arms and legs wide, watching the dawn display through the condensation on the pitched glass roof. Streamers of pink snaked across the muted sky, becoming gradually more vibrant.

With her ears below the surface of the water, she had the feeling of being in the womb, an all-enveloping sense of peace and stillness surrounding her. She closed her eyes and allowed her mind to drain of thoughts.

She didn't know how long she floated in the silence.

It was blissful.

Then, suddenly, a violent splash disturbed the water near her and she went under.

Strong hands grabbed her around the ribcage and lifted her up, her head coming out of the water as she spluttered and coughed.

'What the hell are you doing?' Murdoch shouted, pulling her against his bare chest and wrapping his arms tightly around her. 'You scared me witless!'

Ela coughed again. 'Can't breathe,' she rasped.

He relaxed his grip.

She took a few deep breaths. Then, reviving, she pushed against his shoulders, bending backwards over his arms so she could glare at him.

'Why are you yelling at me?' she yelled back. 'I was floating peacefully, minding my own business, when some great big hulk decided to drown me!'

'I thought you'd lost consciousness! I came in, found you floating in the dark . . . You were so still . . .' He pulled her close again and pressed his forehead against hers, trying to slow his breathing. 'Christ, woman, you're going to be the death of me.'

Ela realised she had properly scared him.

She stroked his back. The muscles were contracted with tension.

'It's okay. . . I'm fine. I couldn't sleep, so I came for a swim. It was so peaceful I was enjoying simply floating.'

Her hand moved to his cheek, gently caressing it with the back of her fingers. It was strange not to feel his beard. His skin felt so soft, and yet at the same time prickly with stubble.

He let out a shuddering breath.

‘Why did you shave off your beard?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know,’ he muttered. ‘It just felt like the right time to do it.’

‘. . . I like it.’

He pulled back reluctantly, making sure her feet could touch the bottom, and let go of her.

Dawn was banishing the darkness and she saw rivulets run down the hard planes of his body. Resolutely looking away, she found his eyes had snagged on her bikini top.

He was scowling.

‘Is that piece of string meant to be a swimming costume?’

She bit back a smile, enjoying how his eyes roamed over her possessively.

‘Take it up with your sister! She likes her Brazilian bikinis, and I didn’t bring any swimmers.’

He grunted and started to move away.

Was he running away from her again?

‘Did you take down the stag heads?’ she asked in a rush, wanting to keep him with her as long as possible.

She thought he was going to play dumb when he didn’t reply immediately.

‘Yes,’ he said grudgingly.

‘Why?’

‘I knew you wouldn’t appreciate them. I couldn’t sleep anyway, needed something to do.’ He shrugged as if it was no big deal.

‘Thank you.’

He made a dismissive sound. 'My mother will probably want them back up when you're gone.'

'When I'm gone?' His words disconcerted her.

'When you return home to Australia.'

Was he sending her away? The possibility made her chest constrict painfully.

But as she studied him, she caught an underlying bleakness in his eyes, as if he was devastated by the idea of her leaving.

'Please tell me you're not avoiding me because you've somehow come to the inane conclusion that I'm leaving?' she said with incredulity.

'Aren't you?' he returned, guarded.

'For goodness sake, how can you ask me that? Don't you remember anything that happened in the library?'

'Should I?'

'It would certainly be helpful!' she all but snapped, feeling an urge to laugh hysterically.

He regarded her with a faintly mystified expression.

She let out a pained sigh. 'Oh, wow . . . You really don't remember anything, do you?'

'It's a blur.'

A surge of embarrassment hit her. If he couldn't remember their discussion, then it was as if it had never happened . . . which meant their last proper conversation was the night of the gala.

Great!

'Don't you remember giving me the impression you were happy to see me? Very happy?'

'I wasn't myself,' he replied cagily.

‘I rather liked whoever that version of you was,’ she said, with a twisted smile. ‘No one has ever made me feel so cherished before . . . but I suppose that was only the whisky talking.’

‘Ela . . .’ He moved towards her, then stopped.

The water he disturbed lapped at her skin.

Heavy moments of silence stretched out, the words that stood between them hovering near the surface.

‘How could you destroy your reputation like that?’ he demanded. ‘You have a gift to share with the world – an incredible, hard-earned talent! – how can you throw it away?’

‘I’m not,’ she replied firmly. ‘Over the last few months, something happened to me . . .’ She paused, wanting to find the right words. ‘I’ve grown – evolved – as an artist, and I’m getting the best reviews of my career. My musical reputation has never been better.’

‘Those articles painted a different picture.’

‘Do you usually believe everything you read in the papers? They’re written as salaciously as possible to increase sales! I used that to my advantage, played up to it, and I’m happy to say my squeaky-clean, good-girl image has been obliterated.’

‘Yes . . . you certainly had a lot of help in that department.’ Desolation shaded his remark.

She frowned. ‘I couldn’t have done it without Kat or Susan, but I don’t see why you should find that upsetting.’

‘I was referring to your *dates*.’ He spat out the word.

‘My dates? *Oh* . . . you mean all the guys?’

He gave her a cool look.

‘I *knew* you’d get the wrong idea,’ she tutted, discomposed.

‘Christ, I was ready to commit murder when I read—’ A growl rose from deep in his chest, and he ran his hands over his face. ‘But it’s none of my damn business.’

‘It *is* your business, but you’ve got the wrong end of the stick. They weren’t *my* dates.’

He stared at her intently. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I was never with any of those men. It was all for show.’

The uncertainty in his eyes almost broke her heart.

‘. . . No men at all?’

‘Not a single one! Wait . . . is that why you’ve been so distant?’ she asked.

‘I thought you’d moved on.’

She momentarily closed her eyes, relief flooding through her. ‘That explains a lot.’ She looked back at him. ‘Murdoch, the men were just part of the plan to tarnish my image. Kat found them and brought them back to my rooms so it would look like they were there for me, but she did all the entertaining. I went to bed. Alone!’

If she thought this clarification would appease him, she was mistaken.

‘What?’ he snapped, his brow clouding over. ‘You allowed Kat to bring strange men back to your room?’

‘Suite, actually. I had my own room in each suite we stayed in.’

‘And you thought that would keep you safe?’ His tone was incredulous, furious. ‘Kat has the worst possible taste in men! For all you knew, she was bringing back psychopaths who could have murdered you while you slept!’

‘Okay . . . that’s a little dramatic.’

‘How could you take such a risk? Bloody hell, Ela, I could wring your neck!’

‘So I hear . . . would you like to try?’ Her eyes were teasing as she moved her wet hair out of the way and presented her neck to him.

‘This is no joke! What you did is dangerous – how can you not see that? Ergh . . .’ His hands slicked back his hair and clutched his head. ‘You’re *infuriating!*’

‘*I’m* infuriating?’ she returned, getting riled. ‘You’re the one who tried to assume control over *my* life. Even after I told you it wasn’t what I wanted! I’ve let people get away with doing that to me for as long as I can remember, and I’m not putting up with it anymore. You need to get it through that thick, gorgeous skull of yours that I’m the only one who decides how I live my life. Or pursue my career. And even – if that’s what I want! – how I destroy my reputation.’ Her hands carved the water, punctuating. ‘You don’t get to decide what’s best for me like I’m a feeble-minded child – I’m in control of my life, not you!’

He stayed silent, watching her.

She would have given anything to know what was going on in that busy mind of his.

The water around them stilled.

Time ticked by.

‘You’re right,’ he said at last.

All the bluster left her. ‘I am?’

‘Yes. That doesn’t mean I like it, or that I won’t try to take control again in the future.’

‘Okay . . . as long as you realise I’m not going to put up with your highhandedness if I think it’s unreasonable.’

‘Don’t worry, you’ve made that abundantly clear!’ he said dryly. ‘You’ve been fighting me every step of the bloody way, when all I’m trying to do is look out for you.’

‘Murdoch, you know why—’

‘I’m trying to do the right thing, damn it! To give you a chance to walk away and live the life you were meant to live. But I’m not a bloody saint! You only get *one* chance. That’s it.’

She gave him a baffled look. ‘But surely you know by now that I don’t want to walk away.’

‘Be careful,’ he said softly, dangerously. ‘You don’t realise what you’re saying.’

‘I do!’

‘No.’ He shook his head slowly. ‘You don’t. If you stay, you’re mine . . . *forever*. Not for a year or two. Forever.’

‘Oh . . .’ she breathed.

‘I let you go once and it almost killed me. I won’t do it again!’ he said fiercely. ‘So I need you to think hard about what you really want. If you can commit to forever. Do you understand?’

She nodded, speechless.

Another almost-proposal.

She moved towards him.

‘No!’ he snapped. ‘Don’t come near me . . . Against every fibre in my being, I’m giving you this chance to walk away. It’s taking everything I have right now to stop myself from hauling you upstairs and chaining you to my bed so you can never leave me . . . so run!’ he growled. ‘Get the hell out of here! I’ll give you until Hogmanay . . . and god help you if you decide to stay, because if you do, you’ll never be free of me.’

That sounded like a vow.

Ela stared at him unblinkingly, too stunned to move.

‘I said go!’ he barked.

‘Okay, I’m going!’ she muttered and started to wade through the water towards the steps. ‘But you should know,’ she threw over her shoulder, ‘if it wasn’t for the fact that I’m

finding you inexplicably endearing right now, I'd be doing some strangling of my own!'

On that parting shot, she climbed out of the pool, gathered up her towel and clothes, and headed for the exit. She snuck a final glance at him before she walked out.

He was already swimming laps, his powerful stroke cutting aggressively through the water as if he blamed it for his turmoil.

Chapter 43

‘I love a cèilidh!’ Susan panted laughingly, as she and Angus stumbled off the dance floor at the local village hall.

‘I’m so hot!’ Ela exclaimed behind them, fanning herself with her hands. ‘I’ve never danced so much in my life!’

‘I’ve got a stitch,’ complained Lesley, holding her side. ‘And I’m bruised black and blue! My partner had two left feet.’

‘I was your partner,’ said Ela.

‘I know, dear.’

‘Sorry,’ Ela replied, with a guilty giggle. ‘The caller was calling out the steps faster than my feet could move.’

‘I had a wonderful partner.’ Susan smiled up at Angus and comically fluttered her eyelashes. ‘The best dancer a girl could ever wish for! King of Strip the Willow!’

‘What do you want, Susan?’ he asked with a resigned smile.

‘Would you be a darling and get us all some punch? I’m parched!’

He sighed. ‘And there I was hoping you had a proposition of an entirely indecent kind for me. But whatever Lady Susan wants, Lady Susan shall have.’

‘Ha, if only!’ She didn’t mind him using her courtesy title since he only did it to poke fun at her. ‘Lady Susan wants all sorts of things she can’t have.’

Angus smiled and looked away. ‘Punch coming up, ladies!’

‘Lemonade for me, please, Angus,’ said Ela. ‘I don’t know what’s in that punch, but I’ve only had two glasses and I’m seeing double.’

‘Punch and lemonade it is.’ He bowed grandly and, with a grin, walked off.

Ela turned to Susan. ‘I like him!’

‘Do you? I think Murdoch may have something to say about that,’ Susan said dryly.

‘For *you*, not me! He looks at you as if you’re the best thing since sliced bread.’

‘Agreed!’ Lesley chimed in. ‘When are you going to put the boy out of his misery and let him take you out on a proper date? I’ve caught you two snogging behind the curtains often enough over the years.’

‘Speaking of misery,’ said Susan, sidestepping the question, ‘where’s Murdoch? I saw him chatting to some friends before we started the last set, but I haven’t seen him since. He’s promised me a dance, and I’m not letting him squirm out of it.’

‘He’s probably avoiding me,’ remarked Ela, her bottom lip jutting out sulkily. ‘My entrance into a room seems to be his signal to exit.’

‘Only two more days to Hogmanay, yay!’ said Lesley.

Ela had told her and Susan about Murdoch’s ultimatum-cum-almost-proposal. And since they had showed themselves willing to listen, she had also spent quite a bit of time airing her grievances and frustrations with their brother.

‘Two wasted days!’ she grouched. The punch had loosened her inhibitions, and she was feeling feisty. ‘I could’ve told him my answer in the pool that morning if he’d only let me get a word in edgewise rather than yelling at me to go away! The man basically proposes – although the words “Will you marry me?” seem to be a foreign concept to him – and then he acts as if I’m a *pariah*.’

‘He doesn’t trust himself around you,’ said Susan. ‘And he doesn’t want to interfere with your choice.’ At Ela’s fed-up

look, she laughed and put up a hand. 'I know, honey! He's always been a sucker for a noble gesture.'

Angus returned with their drinks.

Ela thanked him as she took her lemonade. 'I think I'll go outside for a bit to cool down.'

'Well, don't be too long, dear,' chuckled Lesley. 'We're dancing The Gay Gordons next, and we all know how you love a gay Scot!'

Ela gave her a pained, droll look as she walked off. She was never going to live that down.

She made her way through the packed village hall to the main doors and stepped outside. The freezing night air hit her like it was a solid object. It was just the dousing she needed to clear her head, and she took a few deep, cleansing breaths.

A crowd of people had gathered on the landing and steps leading down to the street. Ela thought they were rather boisterous for a family-friendly event, heckling and egging on someone below. And then she realised that a fight was about to break out.

She peered around the people standing in front of her to get a better look and caught a glimpse of three young men, barely out of their teens, surrounding a man on the footpath and taunting him with drunken bravado.

Was that Murdoch?

It was! She would recognise that tawny hair and those broad shoulders anywhere.

He turned his head as he said something to the trio, and from his profile, she could see that he was looking mildly bored, his arms crossed over his chest in a relaxed pose that only seemed to rile up the younger men.

Ela felt a stab of uneasiness. The youths might be of smaller build than Murdoch, but there were three of them, and they appeared drunk enough to turn mean.

She started to make her way through the crowd, and had just reached the top of the stairs when she saw one of the young men draw back his fist and land a punch on Murdoch's face.

An enraged cry was torn from her.

The lemonade went flying, bystanders were forced aside as she cleaved a path through them, and before she even reached the bottom step, she had launched herself at Murdoch's assailant.

She connected with him side-on and knocked him to the ground, then, straddling him, started slapping him and yelling aspersions on his character.

He raised his arms to protect his face and looked up at her with a bewildered expression, uncertain how to respond.

Suddenly, she was pulled off him and lifted into the air.

'You're a vicious little thing, aren't you?' Murdoch grunted as the chunky heels of her boots connected with his shins.

Her back was to his chest, and he had an arm wrapped around her middle, easily holding her off the ground so that her feet dangled in the air.

She struggled to break free. 'Let me go!'

'I can't do that,' Murdoch's amused voice rumbled against her ear. 'Think about what your insurance company would say. We need to protect those hands.'

'But he's getting away!' she cried plaintively.

The young man had got himself off the ground and, with his two friends, was backing away from her.

'Come back here, you *coward!*' she yelled. 'You're all cowards! All three of you!'

'Leave them be,' chuckled Murdoch. 'I had to escort them out of the hall as they were getting rowdy, but they're good lads. Just had too much to drink and were raring for a fight.'

She turned her head at an awkward angle to look up at him. ‘He punched you . . . and he gave you a split lip!’ she exclaimed as she noted the damage, incensed.

‘I let him punch me. And it’s barely a scratch.’

‘You let him?’

‘I had to give the lad a go. It looked like his first fight; he needed seasoning.’

She looked so adorably bemused that he couldn’t help himself – he kissed the side of her mouth.

She regarded him with a startled expression. ‘Is kissing allowed now?’

‘Kissing is always allowed.’

She let out a disgruntled huff. ‘Yeh, right! The last few days you’ve barely looked at me, let alone wanted me to kiss you.’

‘You’ve got no idea, sweetheart.’

‘Kissing was definitely off the table!’ she insisted.

‘Now it’s back on the table.’

‘Why?’

‘I’m keeping you.’

She gave him a confused look. ‘You’re keeping me?’

‘I gave you a chance to escape, and you didn’t . . . and you can’t put on a show like that and expect to walk away without facing consequences.’

Before she realised what he was up to, he turned her around and slung her over his shoulder, placing a proprietorial hand on her bottom.

She squealed, thankful she had worn jeans.

Cheers and whistles followed them as he marched up the hall steps.

Ela pushed against his back, holding her upper body as upright as she could. ‘You gave me until Hogmanay,’ she reminded him. ‘I still have two days!’

‘I’ve changed my mind.’

‘You can’t change your mind.’

‘I can.’

‘This is kidnapping!’ she said severely, resisting the urge to giggle.

‘Just following tradition. The first Earl of Buchanan is said to have stolen his bride, and they went on to have a very successful marriage and eight children.’

‘Eight! Don’t get any ideas,’ she blustered.

‘Oh, I’ve already got plenty of ideas.’

As he walked back inside with his haul, the cheers and whistles that had started outside grew in volume and filled the room.

‘I thought you didn’t like to draw attention to yourself,’ she shot at him, twisting around so he could hear her above the revelry.

‘No need to keep myself hidden away anymore. I’m a taken man now.’

Ela couldn’t help laughing. ‘You had better remember that, Viking!’

As people started coming up to them, she heard Murdoch refer to her as his fiancée.

‘I haven’t said yes to anything yet!’ she exclaimed. ‘Do you ever mean to propose to me in a normal way?’

‘You made your choice.’ His voice reverberated with laughter.

She smiled, loving hearing him laugh.

‘Why is my brother carrying you like a sack of potatoes?’ asked Susan, coming to stand beside her head.

‘He’s keeping me, apparently,’ replied Ela in a long-suffering voice.

Lesley sidled up on her other side. ‘Comfortable, dear?’

‘Not that it matters to your brute of a brother, but actually, yes, I am.’

‘He’s keeping her,’ Susan told her sister with a grin.

‘Is he now?’ laughed Lesley, delighted.

‘About time!’ said Ela. ‘I’ve been throwing myself at him since I got here, and he’s only now realised I meant it.’

‘What changed his mind?’ asked Susan.

‘He got into a fight and I had to rescue him . . . ow!’ Ela cried out as Murdoch slapped her bottom.

‘I heard that,’ he said.

‘It’s hardly a secret!’ she countered, and this time, she couldn’t contain a giggle.

Murdoch slid her down the length of his body until she was facing him. There was raw emotion in his eyes as he pushed her hair out of her face and kissed her.

Pulling away a fraction, he asked softly: ‘Will you marry me, sweetheart?’

‘Do I have a choice?’

‘No.’

She smiled and rolled her eyes. ‘Great. Another bossy Buchanan in my life.’ She threw her arms around his neck. ‘Yes, I’ll marry you. You don’t think I came all the way to Scotland on a one-way ticket for nothing?’

‘You came for a marriage proposal?’

‘No,’ she replied, becoming serious. ‘I came for love . . . a leap of faith I was compelled to take, because if didn’t, if I couldn’t find a way to be with you, my world would have been greyer, the knocks harder to take, and my achievements would

have meant little.’ She smiled softly and replayed his words. ‘Love, not talent, is the greatest gift of all.’

‘Are you going to burst into a Whitney Houston song now? I know how much you like to serenade me.’

She poked him in the stomach.

He laughed and, leaning in, whispered against her lips: ‘I don’t know if it’s a gift or a curse, all I know is that I love you, Ela McIntosh, or Gabriela Baxtor-Huntington, or whoever else you want to be. You’re mine . . . forever.’

And on that promise, he dragged her mouth to his.

Hogmanay that year ended up being doubly special. Not only was one year ticking over into the next, but it also became an impromptu engagement party for Ela and Murdoch.

Upon their return home from the cèilidh, a phone call to Ela’s parents (who were already clued in as to why she had decamped to Scotland) had ended with Murdoch inviting them to come over and stay.

And in the remaining half-hour it took for them to end the call, Ela’s mother had found a flight leaving Sydney that day, paid for the tickets online, and started packing.

That phone call had been followed up by calls to their friends in London, and everyone had proven keen to drop their New Year’s plans and fly up to Scotland.

Lady Buchanan was so delighted to hear her prospects for grandchildren had just soared exponentially that she didn’t raise any objections to hosting a large house party with only two days’ warning, merely pointing out that they would need to hire extra help.

And so, on the evening of the 31st of December, a dozen of Ela and Murdoch’s closest family and friends, one cat, and

one snake (that had made the helicopter flight up in its travel box with Kat, then been snuck into Lesley's bedroom) gathered in Caeverlock Castle to celebrate with the newly engaged couple.

And on the stroke of midnight, they joined hands in a circle and sang Robert Burns's fitting Scottish poem 'Auld Lang Syne', each of them knowing they would always remember this time . . . and all the times ahead that celebrated family and good friends, and created shared memories to be looked back on with nostalgia over the years, for old times' sake.

Epilogue

Present Day

‘Where is Joshua?’ Ela asked her husband as he entered the busy artists’ greenroom – a luxurious marquee set up on the front lawn of Caeverlock Castle. ‘He was here half an hour ago and then he wandered off – probably trying his Irish charm on your mother again! We’re meant to be opening the music festival soon. The orchestra is already on stage!’

‘Don’t worry, sweetheart,’ replied Murdoch in his gruff voice, coming over to where she was pacing beside the catering tables. ‘He’s over eighty, he can’t have got far. Not to mention he hasn’t missed a single show in fourteen years. The Caeverlock Castle Classical Festival is his baby as much as yours.’

‘Yes, I was crazy enough to allow him to talk me into it!’ She rubbed a hand over her brow distractedly. ‘Do you realise that he’s managed to get Bono, Emmanuelle Haïm, and Andrea Bocelli to come along this year?’

‘He was a top music promoter for many years. He can still pull strings.’

‘But why did he have to bring such high-profile stars this year?’

‘Worried about your sonata?’ he asked, with a probing look.

‘Yes!’ she exclaimed, dropping her hand. ‘I’ve only just finished composing it, and you know how I like to introduce new work to a small audience first and gauge their reaction. I wasn’t planning on playing it for the very first time in front of twenty thousand people and a group of musical titans!’

‘Come here . . .’ He pulled her towards him and wrapped his arms around her.

She instantly felt her muscles relax. Something about his scent and his nearness always calmed her.

‘You go through this angst every time you compose a new work. And, every time, people love it,’ he said against her hair. ‘You’ll be phenomenal, as usual. And, also as usual, you’ll end up enjoying yourself so much that in a few days’ time you’ll have forgotten the stress that went into this year’s festival and you’ll start planning next year’s.’

Ela smiled and burrowed closer to him. ‘When did you become so wise and wonderful?’

‘Always was.’ He laughed as she tickled him.

‘Don’t get cocky!’

Holding her at arm’s length, he admired her outfit: a copper-gold dress with a double-peaked corset and asymmetrical pencil skirt.

‘You look . . . bloody breathtaking. I’ve always loved that dress.’

‘Really? It’s Vivienne Westwood – probably vintage by now! I can’t believe you remember it. I’ve only worn it once, and that was years ago.’

‘Of course I remember it. You wore it to the charity gala at the Natural History Museum.’

‘There’s no “of course” about it,’ she said, with an amused, cynical look. ‘You barely looked at me that whole evening, so I can be forgiven for thinking it didn’t make an impression on you.’

‘Oh, it made an impression,’ he assured her with a wicked look. ‘It kept me up at night for weeks after. I’ll never forget the first moment I saw you in it – I almost had heart failure. And that wanker you used to date had his hands all over you.’ He scowled at the memory. ‘I wanted to rearrange his face there and then.’

She let out a surprised laugh. ‘Really? You appeared utterly unaffected.’

‘I was the opposite of unaffected. Walking away from you that night was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. Absolute agony.’

She smiled softly. ‘You’re such a sucker for doing the right thing. It’s one of the reasons I adore you.’

‘I bet I know at least one other reason,’ he said with a grin. Cupping the back of her head, he drew her in for a kiss.

And just like that, she forgot all about the twenty thousand people waiting in a field a few hundred metres away, and the room full of classical stars milling around them (many of whom had made the Caeverlock Castle Classical Festival – or the CCC Festival, as it was affectionately known – a regular on their performance schedules).

‘Ahem!’ objected Susan, walking over. ‘I would have thought after sixteen years of marriage and three children that we’d all be safe from your disgusting displays of affection.’

‘Susan,’ said her brother, looking up at her, ‘go away.’

‘No can do! I’ve got my manager hat on, and I thought Ela might want to know that Joshua is getting ready to go onto the main stage to do the MC gig alone.’

‘He is?’ cried Ela, disengaging herself from Murdoch’s arms. ‘But he was meant to meet me here!’

‘It’s not the poor man’s fault. Your daughters have him so tightly wrapped around their sticky little fingers that he’s helpless against their wiles. They lured him away to film them performing some new dance so they could upload it to TikTok.’ Seeing Ela’s horrified expression, she said quickly: ‘Don’t worry! I got there in time. And I had to explain to Joshua that TikTok is not a breath-freshener sweet, and that the girls are forbidden from using the app . . . then we had to have a whole other conversation about what an app is!’

Murdoch’s expression softened at the mention of his daughters. Mary (thirteen), Elizabeth (eleven), and Lily (four) were not only the pride and joy of their mother and father, but also their whole extended family.

Mary was musical, like Ela, and tended to be too serious, something her parents were working on. As her father's heir, she was to inherit the earldom under Scottish law, as she had no brothers to take precedence, and she seemed to feel the weight of that responsibility. She was also the most mature and nurturing of the sisters, although a surge of teen hormones had recently turned her into a modern-day Carrie.

Elizabeth had a passion for robotics and already had grand plans to revolutionise the field by being the first person to create a real-life sentient android, like Data out of Star Trek, her all-time favourite TV character. She was also insatiably curious, and anyone in her presence was subjected to a string of questions that were more often than not unanswerable.

Lily, or Honey-Bee, as her Aunt Lesley had named her, was the unexpected and much-loved baby of the family. And an absolute terror. If it wasn't for her cute dimples (like her father's) or her large, doe-like eyes (like her mother's), she would have undoubtedly spent half her life on the naughty step.

'Where are the girls now?' asked Ela, smiling at Joshua's predicament.

'I handed them over to Meredith and Richard,' said Susan, 'and they've all gone off to find your parents.'

'I saw them earlier,' remarked Murdoch. 'They were already in their seats, next to Kat and Sienna.'

'I'm sure they'll find each other!'

'The kids will be gutted when they realise their cousins aren't there,' said Ela.

Susan sighed as she thought about her sick twin boys, currently stuck at home with their father.

'I still can't believe Angus was so tiresome as to catch chicken pox and infect the boys!' she said with a huff.

Murdoch laughed. It was a point of great amusement for him (over which he was mercilessly teasing Angus via text)

that his friend had caught a childhood illness and passed it on to his sons. Ever since Angus had quit as his factor, and he and Susan had bought a small estate close by, the two men had become almost as inseparable as Ela and Susan.

‘Okay, I’d better get going,’ said Ela, ‘before Joshua opens the festival by himself! One more kiss for luck?’ She went up on tiptoes to peck Murdoch’s lips.

He seemed to have other ideas and, grabbing her close, kissed her properly.

‘I’m coming with you,’ he said when they drew apart.

He hooked an arm around her waist and walked with her towards the entrance to the marquee.

‘Yes, you’d better stick close,’ she remarked teasingly. ‘I want every woman here to know you’re mine.’

Despite her preoccupation, she had noticed a great many women discreetly ogle Murdoch from the moment he had entered the marquee. If anything, he was getting better looking with age and still attracted female attention wherever he went.

At the moment, he was looking even more rugged and grunt-worthy than usual, as he was in the process of growing a beard. (He would occasionally grow it out for her, as it reminded her of when they had first met.)

‘How about if I do this . . .’ he said, taking off his jumper.

She burst out laughing as her eyes landed on his T-shirt underneath.

‘I found it in an old suitcase in the wardrobe,’ he added. ‘It was my favourite, before it went missing.’

‘I remember!’ She smiled as she scanned the image printed on the front of the T-shirt.

It was the photo of her leaving a Hong Kong nightclub, wearing low-waisted jeans (with a red thong showing) and a Fuller’s Brewery T-shirt knotted below her breasts, and she

was swigging from a bottle of champagne while giving the camera the finger.

Soon after they had got engaged, she had found a crumpled printout of that newspaper photo folded up in Murdoch's wallet. He'd admitted he had kept it with him when he had disappeared those few weeks to mourn the loss of her.

And so, on their wedding day, Ela had gifted him a black T-shirt with that photo printed on the front, and the words 'This Viking belongs to me!' in bold letters above.

'I should get a dozen of them made up,' she said, with a laugh. 'That way you'll always have one on hand to remind you of who you belong to.'

He propelled her out of the tent into the mild Scottish summer sun, and then, in front of everyone gathered outside and waiting for Ela to make her way to the main stage, he spun her into his arms.

'I don't need any reminders of who I belong to, sweetheart. Every time I look into your face and see your beautiful eyes, and the lines around them from all the laughter we've shared over the years, my heart knows where it belongs . . . Wherever you are.'

THE END

Dear Reader

I hope you had fun reading Earl Tangled With Star. If you have time, I would be very grateful if you would share the love and leave me a rating or a review on Amazon and Goodreads so that other readers can find my books. Thank you and happy reading, wherever you may go to next!

xDG

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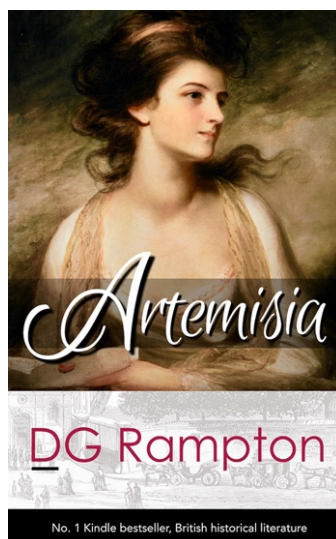
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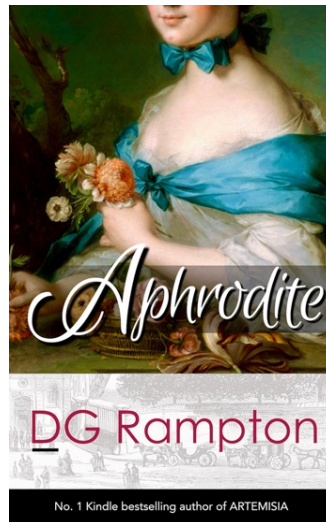
Dragonlady



‘You forget yourself, your lordship. You have no rights to allow or disallow anything I may choose to do. You have, in fact, no claim over me whatsoever – a circumstance for which I thank the Lord on a daily basis! I am not your ward, or your dependent, and I will not allow you to speak to me in that odiously overbearing fashion!’

High-spirited Artemisia Grantley, niece to the Duke of Wentworth, has never made any attempt to conform to the feminine ideal expected of a lady of quality; nor has she ever had the benefit of an unfavourable opinion formed against her. But when the Marquess of Chysm enters her life, it seems to her that his lordship is always at hand to witness her shortcomings and bring them to her attention.

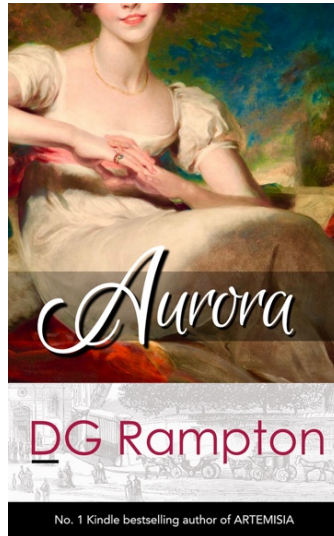
As she reluctantly embarks upon her first London Season, a scandalous family secret and a conspiracy that stretches all the way to Napoleonic France threaten to entangle her with the one person she could happily throttle.



“I fail to see why you expect me to put up with your acerbic charm? Others of your acquaintance might be inclined to do so, but I, strange creature that I am, will not!”

When the beautiful Miss April Hartwood arrives in London to be introduced to Regency high society, she hopes for some fun and frivolity after a life spent in rural obscurity in Cornwall. Unfortunately for her, her grandmother has other ideas...marriage. Lively and strong-willed, April does not appreciate being compelled to catch a husband. Yet, before long, she finds herself courting the affections of the Duke of Claredon, while struggling with a wholly inappropriate attraction to the insufferable Mr Royce.

In the lead up to Christmas, in the year 1820, a delightfully devious campaign is orchestrated to bring together two people destined for one another, regardless of the obstacles to be overcome and the inconvenient tendency on the part of the protagonists to resist their attraction...until they are finally brought to realise they cannot escape fate, or the meddling of one determined grandmother.

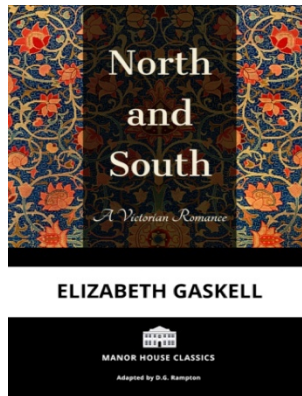


“I think the women of your acquaintance have done you a great disservice by allowing you to continue in your deceit. Perhaps next time you meet a lady you will not be so quick to think she is only interested in fortune and matrimony!”

Miss Aurora Wesley is a lady who never allows a seemingly insurmountable problem to overwhelm her. Blessed with irrepressible optimism and ingenuity, she knows how to set about achieving her goals without the burden of excessive scruples. Whether it is establishing a brother to his rightful place in society, rescuing a young heiress from the clutches of her guardian, or match-making for a reticent spinster, Aurora has her hands full sorting out other people’s lives, with little thought for her own.

Until, after one extraordinary encounter, she discovers an overmastering desire to amuse herself by provoking the formidable Duke of Rothworth and turning his well-ordered, respectable existence on its head.

An Adaptation of North and South



NORTH AND SOUTH – A Victorian Romance

Brought to you by Manor House Books, this classic novel has been adapted for a modern readership by bestselling historical romance author D.G. Rampton.

Set in Victorian England, *North and South* by Elizabeth Gaskell was first published in 1854. This adaptation stays true to the dramatic social commentary of the original, while bringing into greater prominence the love story at its core, which is reminiscent of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

Uprooted from her idyllic existence in the South of England, Margaret Hale moves with her family to an industrial town in the North, where she develops a passionate sense of social justice upon witnessing the hardships suffered by the local mill workers. Her views often bring her into conflict with wealthy mill-owner John Thornton, who befriends her family. But their turbulent relationship masks a deep attraction that cannot be subdued, and a bond that only strengthens when tested by the vagaries of fate.

