

SANDY BARKER

# Shout Out to my Ex



The most romantic  
city on earth ...  
The last place you want  
to run into HIM.

# SHOUT OUT TO MY EX

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EVER AFTER AGENCY  
SERIES – BOOK TWO

**SANDY BARKER**

*For you, Mum.*

*Thank you for being my first reader, my champion and for  
encouraging me to write since I was little.*

*I love you.*

# CONTENTS

[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](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[More from Sandy Barker](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Sandy Barker](#)

[Love Notes](#)

[About Boldwood Books](#)

# 1

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ELLE

I burst through the front door of our flat, fling my clutch onto the hallstand, and head straight to the sofa, where I fall onto it backwards. Covering my face with my forearm, I shout, ‘Gah!’ into the crook of my elbow.

My sister, Cassie, chuckles at me. ‘More than two hours. That’s a new record.’

I lift my arm and glare at her across the pouffe that moonlights as our coffee table. ‘Were you timing me?’

‘Always do,’ she says, darting a glance my way, then returning to her laptop.

I toe off my (extremely uncomfortable) heels, then rub my feet against each other. Why do we torture ourselves with these bloody things? I eye the abandoned heels where they lie skew-whiff on the rug.

*Oh, that’s right, I think, because they’re bloody gorgeous.*

‘So, what was wrong with this one?’ Cass murmurs, distracted.

I sit up. ‘Are you working?’ I ask, ignoring her question.

Her eyes dart my way again. ‘Aren’t I always?’

‘It’s Saturday night.’

She shrugs.

‘If you put that away, I’ll give you all the juicy details.’

She snaps the laptop shut. ‘Go on. Actually, wait. I want wine for this.’ She leaps up and goes to the kitchen and I flop back onto the sofa and stare at our incredibly high ceiling, a favourite feature of living in a converted fabric factory. She opens the fridge door. ‘Rosé or Chardonnay?’

‘Have we got any fizz?’ I ask, too lazy to get up and look for myself.

‘Consolation prize?’

‘Exactly.’ A yawn sneaks up on me and I succumb to it, stretching my arms in one direction and my legs in the other. Cass reappears with a bottle of cheap fizz we bought a dozen of from Aldi and two mismatched glasses. ‘We need new—’

‘Glasses,’ she finishes. ‘I know. You say that every time.’

‘I only think of it when we’re about to pour.’

‘Me too.’ Rip-twist-pop and she pours. I swear she could crack a bottle of fizz with her eyes closed. Cass is the master of celebrating even the smallest of wins, one of the things I love most about her.

‘Here you are.’ She holds out a glass and I sit up and squint at it. ‘They’re even pours, I promise.’ This is an age-old argument, dating back to when I was four and Cass was seven and she’d give me the smallest ‘half’ of the Mars bar.

I take the glass, holding it up to give a toast. ‘To Marcus, a boring prat who ordered the banquet before I arrived so I couldn’t ditch him until after dessert.’

Cass chokes on her fizz, spluttering as she says, ‘Wowser, that’s an advanced dating manoeuvre.’ She bangs on her chest and coughs some more.

‘I know. Part of me was impressed – a *teeny* part.’

‘Where did you meet this one?’

‘On Flutter.’

‘Flutter? You’re making that up.’

‘Nope.’ I cross my heart with two fingers. ‘Latest dating app for under-thirty-fives.’



‘That leaves me out then,’ she says, which makes me laugh – even if she were under thirty-five, Cass is not much of a dater. ‘What? I *date*,’ she says, her voice edged with defensiveness.

‘The last time you went on a date, Harry Styles was still in One Direction,’ I retort.

She shrugs, which for Cass is an acknowledgement that I’m right.

I sip more fizz. It’s not *terrible* but it’s not good. Cass has us economising – just until we find the perfect partner for Bliss Designs and expand. Cass is all about ‘expanding’, as long as it’s our fashion house, not our household budget.

She’s the brains (i.e. the smart one) and I’m the creative (i.e. the talented one). According to those in the world of fashion, I am everything from a ‘wunderkind’ (at the ripe age of thirty-two – hah!) to a ‘fashion savant’ to the ‘next big thing’. One fashion journalist even described me as ‘Karan meets Chanel’, which I’ve taken as a compliment, even if they intended it to mean ‘derivative’.

Overall, flattering characterisations, but monikers touting my (supposed) brilliance have yet to translate into proper monetary success. To date, our achievements include making enough in sales to hire a team of three and rent a space for our fashion house, maintaining a steady (albeit small) clientele, and the odd celebrity endorsement. But our long-term goals are much loftier. This is where Cass’s wizardry with money, marketing, and distribution channels comes in. We are ‘building the label’ and ‘solidifying our place in the market’ and other business-y jargon.

Cass is also great at handling the imposter syndrome that pops up intermittently – mine, not hers. I doubt Cass has ever doubted herself in her entire life. She was bossing about our Sindy dolls before she could even read.

I still can’t believe she abandoned a thriving career as a marketing exec to ‘take Bliss Designs to the next level’. Whatever that looks like. It’s all rather nebulous in my mind, other than the twin goals of showing at Fashion Week (any of

the big four would do – Milan, Paris, New York, London) and having my collection sold exclusively in a top-tier department store. Although, I'd swap the latter for my own high street shop in Central London.

Cassie says my goals are achievable but to me they remain waiflike, just out of reach. Meanwhile, we never quite break even, continuing to drain our combined savings and a generous gift from our maternal grandmother. 'I can't take it with me, girls,' she says anytime we bring it up.

And while Cassie loves spreadsheets and sales projections (truly – she'd tell you the same), I love front-row seats at fashion shows and goodie bags. And clothes. I love, love, *love* clothes. I love designing them. I love styling them. I love wearing them. Clothes can make or break a day, a week, or a lifetime. Since I started playing dress-up from Mum's wardrobe (around the same time I was wrestling my big sister for the bigger 'half' of a chocolate bar), I've known I would be a fashion designer. My career is the fulfilling aspect of my life, making my love life pale even more in comparison.

I'm staring into space and when I 'come to', Cass is back on her laptop. 'Hey, you said you'd put that away.'

'I did and then you disappeared on me.'

'I'm back now.'

She closes her laptop again, gently this time, and sets it on the pouffe. 'I'm all ears. So, on a scale of one to ten – one being a politician and ten a potato – how boring was Marcus?'

I shake with laughter, barely managing to say, 'At least a six. And the cheek of ordering the banquet, holding me hostage like that.'

'So, what did he talk about?'

'I'll give you three guesses and the first two don't count,' I quip.

'Ahh, so himself.'

'Yup.' I start listing off his traits on the fingers of my free hand. 'Public school... King's College—'

‘Oh god! Say no more,’ Cass interjects.

‘Oh, but there *is* more. So. Much. More.’

‘Skip ahead. I don’t need the life story of someone you’ll never see again. Oh, unless...?’

‘Oh, no! I am *definitely* not seeing him again.’

‘So, unattractive as well, huh?’ she asks with a knowing smile.

Sometimes, I’ll endure a little boredom for some ‘physical activity’ – but only sometimes and only if he’s super-hot. A woman has needs, after all, and not all of them are intellectual.

I shrug. ‘Not unattractive, just not my type. He’s one of those blokes who spends half his time in the gym and the other half talking about it to his date. Rather, *at* his date. I don’t care how much you can deadlift, Marcus!’

‘I suspect you underrated him before,’ she says with a smirk.

‘*Underrated* or over?’

‘Whichever means he’s closer to a potato than a six.’

I gulp the rest of my fizz and hold out my empty glass. ‘More please.’ Cass tuts at me before obliging – her not-so-subtle way of telling me to ‘sip and savour’, another cost-cutting measure. Ignoring her, I take a large pull then cradle the glass in my lap. ‘I just wish...’

‘I know. You want someone like Leo,’ she says, completing my sentence by rote. This *may* not be the first time I’ve mentioned it.

Leo. My first and only love. Bright, talented, hilarious, kind, loving, generous, and (oh so) sexy Leo. The benchmark against which every man since has been measured, each one falling woefully short. I just wish I knew where he was or how to get in touch with him.

We met on our first day at Kingston School of Art. He appeared to be lost and I stopped to offer directions. I told myself at the time it was because I was a good person and had

attended Orientation Day, so I knew my way around. But really it was because he was heart-stoppingly gorgeous. The words, ‘Are you lost?’ popped out before I could second-guess approaching someone *that* good-looking.

He smiled gratefully and my heart thudded so loudly, I was sure he could hear it. We then discovered we were both studying fashion design and were heading to the same lecture hall. We were inseparable from that day on, our relationship making the leap from friendship to romance by the end of week two when he kissed me mid-laugh – he’d said something hilarious that I can’t for the life of me remember – and that was that. We were a couple.

But after four years together, Leo moved back to Texas, breaking the news the night before he flew out and obliterating my heart into a zillion pieces. After that, we lost touch – or rather, he ignored all my attempts to contact him and I eventually gave up. We didn’t have a word for it back then, but now I’d call it ‘ghosting’.

A few years ago, after a particularly dire first date, I started looking for him in earnest, but despite many extensive online searches, I cannot, for the life of me, find him.

I’ve wandered off again – my mind does that – and I ‘return’ to the flat. Not surprisingly, Cass is back on her laptop. I don’t blame her. She’s heard more about Leo than about all the men I’ve dated since put together.

‘So, what are you working on?’ I ask, returning my focus to her.

‘Oh, just a little side project,’ she says cryptically. ‘I’m not sure if anything will come of it yet, but I’ll let you know if it does.’ She sends me a dimpled smile. Cass got the dimples and the height and the chestnut waves. I got Mum’s petite (short), boyish (flat-chested) frame, mousy hair that I dye honey-blonde and wear in a choppy bob, and no dimples. Other than that, we look enough alike in the face that people can tell we’re sisters.

Another yawn takes hold. ‘Right,’ I say, standing and draining my glass. ‘Bed.’

‘Really? Because you’re such sparkling company.’

‘Says the woman with her nose in her laptop.’ I take the empty glasses and the half-full bottle to the kitchen, then swing past Cass on the way to the bathroom. I wrap an arm around her shoulders and squeeze, smacking a kiss onto her cheek. ‘Night.’

‘Goodnight, Bean,’ she says, calling me the childhood nickname I either love or loathe, depending on how and why she says it.

‘Good morning, Anita,’ I say cheerfully as I sail past reception into our open-plan office.

‘Welcome back,’ she says with a smile and a wave.

‘Thank you,’ I sing-song.

‘Hi, everyone,’ I call out. Several heads lift at once and my fellow agents rush to greet me.

‘Poppy! We missed you,’ says Freya, throwing her slender arms around my neck. I return the hug one-armed.

‘Welcome back, Poppy,’ says George, leaning in for a cheek kiss. ‘There’s an invite in your inbox. Drinks after work.’

‘I—’

‘Nope, not taking no for an answer. You’ve been away two weeks—’

‘Ten days,’ I interject.

‘And we have loads of gossip to catch up on,’ he says, disregarding my correction.

‘What George really means is he wants all the honeymoon gossip,’ says Freya playfully.

George swats at her. ‘I do not. That’s private business between Poppy and her smoking-hot husband. Besides, they’ve been married for months now. Surely that side of

things has died down by now?’ He eyes me intently, the nosy bugger.

‘I am not answering that,’ I tell him firmly.

He blinks at me and purses his lips with reluctant concession.

‘Anyway,’ says Nasrin, ‘welcome back to real life. You look...’ She scrutinises me and I half expect her to blurt out something like ‘thoroughly shagged’ – George isn’t the only member of my work family who oversteps – but instead, she says, ‘Hot.’

‘Oh, thank you,’ I reply, basking in the compliment.

‘No, I meant you look overheated. Are you sunburnt?’ She peers at me even more closely and I step around her.

‘Just a little pink,’ I say, miffed. ‘It was overcast on our last day, and I didn’t realise I’d been in the sun too long.’ It was a rookie mistake for an Aussie who grew up sun-smart, slip, slop, and slapping her way through childhood – but I don’t mention that.

At my desk, I relieve myself of my handbag and retrieve my laptop from the locked bottom drawer. Thankfully, someone had the presence of mind to water my peace lily and its waxy leaves greet me cheerily.

‘Poppy?’

‘Yes, George?’

‘Drinks at five.’ He punctuates this mandate with a wagging finger, then wanders towards the kitchen.

‘Yes, George, got it. Five o’clock. And put the kettle on?’ I call after him. He lifts a thumb up into the air. I start every workday with a pot-for-one of perfectly brewed tea.

Freya squeezes my arm. ‘So good to have you back,’ she says before heading back to her desk.

Nasrin sidles over and perches on the edge of mine.

‘What can I do for you?’ I ask, giving her at least half of my attention as I boot up my laptop for the first time in nearly

a fortnight. I can't believe that only two days ago I was in the Maldives. On honeymoon! With Tristan!

It was our first proper holiday together, as I'm not counting our quick visit to Tasmania to spend Christmas with Mum and Dad. That was a whirlwind trip so Tristan could meet my parents, and I spent half of it enduring the cringey stories Mum told about my childhood – *with* photographic evidence – and the other half rescuing Tristan from Dad's deep dive into the minutiae of farming apples. It was fun and lovely but very much *not* a holiday – especially as any time Tristan attempted to seduce me, I shooed him off. I was not having sex with my parents in the next room!

'You're lost in thought,' says Nasrin, bang on. 'I'll come back in five.'

Left to my own devices, my mind wanders further. Even now, months later, it still feels surreal when I consider the magnitude of marrying the client I was supposed match with a fake wife.

With three potential wives – one man-eating disaster, one desperate-to-be-a-mother near-miss, and one Goldilocks-style just-right match – it turned out that Tristan had fallen in love with me! And despite striving for professional distance (and failing) and with every nerve in my body telling me to steer clear (while simultaneously yearning for him), I fell in love right back.

And why wouldn't I? Tristan is caring, brilliant, funny, *and* ridiculously handsome. Just picturing him walking about our waterfront bungalow naked, which he did at least once a day while we were on honeymoon, elicits a sigh.

'Are you finished faffing yet?' Nasrin asks, returning to her perch on my desk.

I abandon the not-suitable-for-work thoughts of my husband, lean back in my office chair, and smile benevolently. 'Go for it.' Nas may be impatient (and at times, mildly irritating), but I am still riding a post-honeymoon high, and nothing can faze me today.



‘I have something for you – a case,’ she says.

Oh. I had hoped to take a day or two to get back into the rhythm of work, but there’s something in her tone that captures my interest.

‘What is it?’

‘Long-lost love – can’t forget him, can’t get over him, can’t find him.’

‘Ooh, that sounds interesting,’ I say, leaning forward. ‘Go on.’

‘Client’s coming in tomorrow and—’

‘Wait, are you asking for a second or...’

She huffs out a frustrated sigh. ‘No, I wish. But I’m knee-deep in my parent-trap case and I need you to take the lead on this one. She’s a referral from a friend, so I don’t want to turn her down.’

‘Ahh.’

‘Please,’ she adds as an afterthought.

‘I’ll happily consider taking the case.’

She nods. ‘Brill. Thanks, Poppy.’

Nasrin seems to be ignoring the ‘consider’ part of my offer, as she’s acting like I’ve already said yes. I choose my next words carefully. ‘And if I do take the case, how about you’re *my* second?’

‘Oh! You sure? Our styles are a little... uh...’

‘Different,’ I finish. ‘I know, but you *love* these,’ I say, alluding to her fondness for ‘lost love’ cases. I’m guessing that Nasrin has her own lurking in the past.

‘I do but...’ She pauses, internal conflict blaring from her face. Nasrin is either on the precipice of a gigantic moan about the unfairness of the universe or... well, not. She reins it in. ‘That would be fab, Poppy. I’ll send through the invite.’ She gets up from my desk and immediately turns back around.

‘Oh, and our client, the one who’s coming in – she’s actually our *real* client’s sister.’

‘Oh. So, a secret behind-the-scenes match?’

‘Exactly,’ she says with a lift of her brows.

Ooh, this case already appeals to me.

\* \* \*

‘Tris, is that you?’ I call from my nook in the guest bedroom.

I’m sat at my beloved antique secretary, catching up on work emails and aiming to get my inbox down to zero before dinner. And even though I went for a quick after-work drink, as mandated by George, I still beat Tristan home by an hour.

‘No, darling, it’s your lover, Raoul.’

A grin spreads across my face. It was only weeks into our marriage when we began this playful exchange for post-work sexy time. ‘Well, you’d better get in here and ravish me. My husband will be home any minute now.’

Tristan appears at the doorway, rumplessly handsome after a long workday moving money across the globe in complicated multi-million-pound transactions.

‘Hello, wife,’ he says, his whisky-coloured eyes boring into mine. Not too long ago, I considered the word ‘wife’ to be a perfunctory, unsexy word. From Tristan’s lips, it has superpowers and my body floods with heat.

Without a second thought, I abandon my work and fling myself into his arms. His mouth finds mine and he kisses me hungrily. I tug at his silk tie, loosening it, then carelessly drop it to the floor. And so begins our rushed disrobing, buttons taking too long to come free and zippers annoyingly stubborn. Since making love for the first time, on our wedding night, we cannot keep our hands off each other.

‘Here or—’

‘Here,’ I say against his lips, as our bedroom seems a mile away even though it’s just on the other side of the lounge room. Tristan backs me up to the bed, then performs the (very

smooth) manoeuvre of lowering me onto it with one arm while hovering over me with the other. He pulls back, regarding me intensely, and a grin breaks across his face. ‘I missed you today.’

‘I missed you too,’ I say, my voice raspy with lust. I grab him, impatient, and the feeling of his skin against mine almost sends me over the edge – *almost*.

But my newish husband knows exactly how to tease me, leading me up to the brink, then bringing me back in an excruciatingly exquisite dance.

Sometime later, I surrender to sensation and cry out. We still, lying side by side, our skin glistening and both out of breath. Well, I am. Tristan is so fit, he could probably run a marathon at a moment’s notice.

‘How was your first day back?’ he asks.

I prop myself onto one elbow and trail my other hand lazily over his (deliciously sexy) chest. ‘It was good – nice to see everyone. Oh! The Carruthers case has finally come to a close.’

Last year, the now-former Mrs Carruthers discovered that her love match was one-sided and threatened to expose the agency, *and* some of our high-profile clients. Quite a terrifying time for a matchmaking agency that prides itself on discretion and confidentiality. Five months on, after some next-level matchmaking by my colleague, Ursula, and she’s on her way to the altar with a real love match.

‘Oh, that’s wonderful news,’ he says.

‘Yep. Everyone’s relieved to close the door on that one, especially Saskia and Ursula.’

Saskia Featherstone: former solicitor, founder of the agency, and one of my mentors. We secretly call her ‘The Swan’ for her unwavering cool-headedness, and even *she* was fazed by the Carruthers case. As was Ursula, senior agent and my other mentor. It was one of Ursula’s rare ‘failings’ as a matchmaker.

‘Understandable,’ says Tristan. He knows exactly how close the agency was to imploding (and me losing my much-loved job), as he showed up to propose to me the same day Mrs Carruthers barged into the office and caused a massive scene.

I lift my hand from his chest and run a finger gently over the ridge of his right cheekbone. Tristan really is *so* handsome. I once described him to my best friend, Shaz, as the love child of Henry Cavill and Theo James.

‘And any prospective cases on the horizon?’ he asks after a few moments. He must have been lost in thought too – probably musing about how beautiful I am. Hah! I’m not, but he says I am – and often.

‘Actually, yes,’ I reply. ‘A referral from Nas – long-lost love. We’re meeting with the client’s sister tomorrow and I’ll decide then.’

‘You really get to pick and choose your cases?’ he asks, a reminder that even months into our marriage, we’re still learning about each other.

I nod. ‘Mmm-hmm. I have to be all-in to be an effective agent.’

‘And what if it’s the only case on offer?’

‘Hah!’ I laugh. He frowns, slightly stung. ‘Sorry, Tris, I didn’t mean to be condescending. I just thought you were joking.’ He shrugs and I land a conciliatory kiss on his lips. ‘Do you remember our first meeting?’

He nods, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

‘And do you remember being rude and impossible?’

He barks out a laugh, scrubbing his face with one hand as if to erase the memory.

‘So, that’s a yes,’ I continue. ‘Well, you might also recall that I mentioned a waitlist.’

He drops his hand from his face and meets my eye. ‘Vaguely. I may have been a little inside my own head.’

I plant a kiss on his cheek. ‘Just a little, darling.’

We regard each other a moment and he lifts his head to kiss me.

‘Anyway,’ I say, resuming the conversation, ‘I have several prospective clients in my inbox – and I haven’t even cleared it yet – so I’ll meet with the sister tomorrow, then decide whether to take the case.’

He’s quiet for a moment, contemplative. ‘Why did you take *my* case?’ he asks softly, the question – *and* how he’s asked it – a glimpse into his huge and vulnerable heart.

I run my forefinger along his jawline. ‘Because I like a challenge,’ I reply.

He sniggers and wraps me up in his arms. ‘And thank god for that,’ he says, his mouth against my hair.

‘This is coming along brilliantly,’ I say to Zara, my assistant designer. I circle the dress form and admire the single-breasted linen jacket.

‘I’m just not sure about this,’ she replies, running her forefinger along the raw edge at the neckline.

I step back to better scrutinise it, squinting slightly. ‘Mmm.’

‘What if we...’ She tucks the edge under on one side of the ‘V’, pins it, then stands beside me to get a better look.

We’re both staring at it when Cassie bursts in. ‘You are never going to believe this! Wait, what are you looking at?’ She glances between us and the dress form.

‘The neckline,’ I say.

Cassie joins us and angles her head. ‘Hemmed,’ she says right as I say, ‘Raw.’

Zara sniggers softly. ‘So, a raw edge then?’ she asks cheekily, removing the pins.

I give Cassie my attention just in time to catch her eye roll. ‘Don’t be like that.’

‘You never take my suggestions,’ she says with a (faux) pout.

‘Me, genius fashion designer,’ I say, pressing a finger to my chest. ‘You—’

She cuts me off. ‘Yes, yes, all right. Anyway, I have news,’ she adds, brightening up in an instant.

‘I’m all ears but walk with me – I need to check the fabric bolts that came in overnight.’

We head towards the other end of the workroom, which bustles with activity. The autumn/winter collection will launch in just under a month and we’re all hands on deck, the entire team busy cutting, sewing, and fitting.

‘Three words,’ says Cass. ‘Paris. Fashion. Week.’

I stop short. ‘Sorry?’

‘You heard me.’

‘Yes, but what does that mean?’

‘I, my dear sister, have managed to work some magic and Bliss Designs is going to Paris Fashion Week!’

A hush descends over the workroom, and I can feel all eyes locked on us.

‘I... you... *what?*’

‘I know it’s late notice, but an Icelandic designer had to pull out and I snagged us their spot.’

‘But that’s only a few weeks away... and we’re just a small...’

Doubt rushes through me, shouting, ‘Imposter, imposter, imposter!’ inside my head.

‘Hey.’ Cass’s voice drops an octave and many decibels. She glances around. ‘Come.’ She grabs my hand and drags me towards our office. Once we’re inside, she closes the door and eyes me closely. ‘You all right?’

‘I’m not sure. Did you just announce in front of the entire team that we’re showing at Paris Fashion Week?’

‘Yes.’

I expel a breath, nodding slowly, trying to absorb what this means. I have a thought.

‘This isn’t like that time you said we were going to be sold in shops and I thought Harvey Nicks but you meant Primark, is it?’

‘That was good exposure.’

‘We were asked to design a T-shirt,’ I retort, blinking at her pointedly.

‘For *charity*,’ she lobs back.

‘All right, fine,’ I concede. It *was* a good cause, as well as good exposure. ‘But when you say Paris Fashion Week—’

‘I mean your autumn/winter collection. In Paris. During Fashion Week.’

‘And not in some back alley in the fifteenth arrondissement?’

‘Nope. In the Carrousel du Louvre.’

Her words send a jolt of adrenaline through my veins – buoying and terrifying me in equal measure.

‘And you’re not playing?’

She grabs me by both shoulders and pins me with a big-sister-slash-business-manager look. ‘Listen, as fun as this is – convincing you that I’m serious – I need you to believe me and I need you to believe me *right now*, because we have less than three weeks until we’re showing in Paris. And not in some back alley. All right?’

A grin breaks across my face, quashing the internal cries of imposter. ‘We’re showing in Paris,’ I say.

‘We’re showing in Paris.’

I grab both her forearms and start jumping up and down. ‘We’re showing in Paris,’ I chant. To her credit, Cass plays along and there we are, two thirty-somethings bouncing up and down, giddy and ridiculous.

‘Right,’ she says after indulging me for a good thirty seconds, ‘shall we tell them the good news?’ She nods towards the workroom and when I look past her, our small but



formidable team is standing still, eyes trained on us through the glass walls.

I scoot past Cass and fling open the door.

‘Is it true?’ asks Zara, the most senior of the team.

‘It’s true!’ I sing out, wiggling my bum and shimmying my shoulders – my happy dance. Delighted exclamations ripple around the room and Zara and Gaz join in on the dancing. Prue, who at twenty-two is the youngest, watches us, clearly amused by what the ‘old people’ are doing.

‘Which *means*,’ says Cassie, talking over the excitement, ‘we have exactly eighteen days to finish the collection.’

‘Fuck,’ says Gaz candidly. They slap a hand over their mouth. ‘Oops, sorry,’ they say through their fingers.

Eighteen days to finish this collection does warrant at least one ‘fuck’ but as their fearless leader, I need to spin that into ‘hell, yes’.

I stop dancing and address the team.

‘Okay, sure, that’s nine less days than we thought we’d have, but you are one of the most talented, clever, hard-working teams there is or ever has been and—’

‘Nice way to butter us up,’ Prue says with a laugh.

‘Okay, you’ve caught me,’ I say. ‘Doesn’t make it any less true, though.’

I look at each of them in turn. ‘But we can only accomplish this as a team and it will be even longer hours and harder work for the next few weeks.’

Murmurs and looks pass amongst them, the excitement building even more.

‘So, what do you think?’ I ask.

Zara looks to Gaz and Prue, who nod enthusiastically, then back to me and Cassie. ‘We’re in!’

‘Brilliant!’ I reply, turning to grin at Cass with another little shoulder shimmy.

She steps around me, all business again. ‘All right, everyone. Back to work, please. Elle will come around to each of you for a status check.’

The team dissembles, the bustle of the workroom resuming.

‘And what about you?’ I ask Cass quietly.

‘You can catch me up at home. I’ve got to be somewhere.’ She crosses to her desk and collects her handbag.

‘Where?’ I ask.

‘Um, just that side project I mentioned last night. I’ll tell you more if it eventuates.’

‘Wait, wasn’t Fashion Week the side project?’

‘Er, nope.’ She gives me a smile-and-nose-crinkle combo, then rushes past me, leaving me confounded.

\* \* \*

*Poppy*

‘Hiya, Cassie. I’m Nasrin and this is my colleague, Poppy.’

Cassie is a tallish woman with a mane of glossy brown hair, a warm smile, and dimples. As we enter the meeting room, she stands and leans across the table to shake our hands in turn. We exchange hellos then sit.

‘Thank you for seeing me,’ she says to Nas.

‘Course. Toves and me go way back. We’ve been mates since school days.’

‘We’ll always meet with a referral from a friend,’ I chime in.

‘Brilliant.’ That dimpled smile appears again. ‘Tova says this is one of the best agencies in London.’

‘It’s *the* best, actually,’ teases Nasrin, her eyebrows lifted.

This clearly catches Cassie off-guard and for a moment, it seems as if she’s going to backpedal. That is until Nasrin flaps her hand and breaks into a grin.

‘Just having a laugh. I mean, it’s definitely a top-tier agency, and one of the things that makes us special in cases like this is our investigator. She’s a gun.’

‘Excellent.’ Cassie is visibly relieved and sits back against her chair.

‘But just to let you know,’ Nas continues, ‘I’m currently chest-deep in another case, so I’ve asked Poppy here to consider taking yours.’

‘Oh,’ says Cassie.

‘I’d be her second, her lieutenant, so to speak, but it’s Poppy’s decision as to whether we’ll take you on.’

‘Right. Sorry, I thought this meeting was to get started.’

‘On that,’ I say, leaping in before Cassie deflates any further – she’s gone from cheery to gloomy in mere moments. ‘Could you tell us about your sister and her previous partner?’

The question seems to appease her, at least for now, and she directs her response to me. ‘Well...’ She sighs, then chuckles softly. ‘Actually, now I’m stuck on where to start.’

‘How about telling us why you want to find’ – I check the case notes on my tablet – ‘Leo.’

‘That’s an easy one. Because Elle is not just my sister, she’s my closest friend and she’s never been happier than when she was with Leo. They were together for four years when he left suddenly to move back to Texas. And Elle was devastated. Understandably, as they were... You know when you meet a couple and they are completely besotted and complement each other perfectly?’

Nasrin’s head swings in my direction and when I look over, her mouth is quirking. ‘Oh, yeah, I know that type of couple.’ At least she doesn’t go so far as to name me and Tristan outright, but we’re getting off track.

‘It sounds like theirs was a great love,’ I say to Cassie.

‘That’s exactly how I’d put it,’ she says with a slight smile.

‘And I’m guessing she hasn’t been with anyone who’s measured up since?’

‘No. And not for want of trying. Elle’s dating history could be made into a Netflix series. Only the episodes would be about three minutes long. She’s been on more first dates than I’ve had hot dinners.’

Nas and I chuckle at that.

‘But honestly,’ says Cassie, her demeanour becoming earnest, ‘you should have seen them together. It was the real deal, their love. Even though they were young, it felt like they’d be together forever. And I *know* there must have been a good reason – one we can’t yet fathom – for him leaving out of the blue like that and breaking off all contact. But we can’t find him to ask. And believe me, I’ve helped Elle search for him for *years*. I’d all but given up, but then I was chatting with Tova about it recently and she mentioned your agency.’ She turns to Nasrin. ‘She said you matched her with Arty.’

‘Yep, unofficially, but I got it right on the first go,’ says Nasrin without a skerrick of modesty.

‘Getting back to your sister...’ I say, redirecting the conversation.

‘Right. Look, Elle is one of the best people I know – bright, talented, caring – but she’s never been quite herself since Leo left and I...’ Cassie’s voice hitches and she clears her throat. ‘Sorry...’

I intuit that Cassie doesn’t typically display her emotions, particularly to strangers. If I were her psychologist – my profession before I joined the agency – I might delve into that further. But Cassie isn’t my patient.

I pour a glass of water from the jug on the table and pass it to her.

‘Thank you.’ She sips, composing herself, then looks me in the eye. ‘Please help my sister.’

How could I possibly turn her down after that? I’ve taken on cases with far less romantic objectives. These two sound like Westley and Buttercup – destined to be together but torn

apart by some mystery circumstance. If I do my job, we'll have them reunited – and possibly even 'maweed' – before they can say 'Humperdinck'.

That is, if Leo isn't already loved up. We are not in the business of breaking up relationships to form new ones.

'We'll take your case,' I say, eliciting a grateful sigh coupled with a dimpled grin.

'Excellent. But just so you know, we may have to hold off a bit.'

'Oh?' Nas and I say together. We exchange a glance.

'Well, it's just that our fashion label – Bliss Designs – we've got a spot at Paris Fashion Week, which was very last-minute and means the previous deadline for our next collection has been bumped up.'

'Right,' says Nas, and I can tell she's peeved. To be fair, this is the first time a client has begged us to take a case and then told us to hold off.

'How about this?' I ask. 'We start looking for Leo – you give us every bit of personal information you have on him and we'll pass it on to our investigator – and you and Elle get ready for Paris. From there, we can play it by ear. How does that sound?'

'I can make that work.'

'Oh good,' says Nasrin sarcastically. I flick her leg under the table. 'Oww.'

I should have known she'd react like that. Nasrin is an excellent agent – her clients love her no-nonsense, call-it-like-she-sees-it approach – but sometimes she has the maturity of a toddler.

Cassie shifts in her seat. 'Sorry. I know this is all a bit "please help but not just yet".'

'Not at all,' I say, feeling Nasrin's eyes on me. I ignore her.

'I really do appreciate you taking the case. And I'll send over everything I have on Leo.'

There's an unspoken agreement that the meeting has concluded and the three of us stand in unison.

'Before you head out,' I say, 'if you could stop by reception, Anita will give you our contract and non-disclosure agreement to review. We can get started once they're both signed.'

'Of course.'

'And as I said on the phone, we're waiving our fee,' says Nasrin.

'I appreciate that,' she replies, colour flooding her cheeks. It indicates at least slight discomfort at receiving our services pro bono, something I appreciate. Nothing worse than a pro bono client who takes advantage. It has only happened a couple of times since I started here nearly five years ago – but no one wants to 'fire' a client.

'Oh, and one last thing,' says Cassie. 'Elle can never know I came to you. If we do find him and we are able to reunite them, she's got to believe it was...' She seems to search for the right word.

'Kismet?' I supply.

'Exactly. Kismet.'

Finding a long-lost love and staging a reunion that seems like a coincidence? This case just gets more and more intriguing.

‘Eloise! Come on. We need to go!’ calls Cassie.

She swings open my bedroom door to find me on the floor, kneeling amid three plastic crates and surrounded by mementos from the past thirty-two years: photos, cards, school reports, merit awards, and every sketchbook from childhood through to my teenage years. I even found the one my parents got me for my sixth birthday, which I filled with triangle-shaped dresses of various lengths and ‘fabric’ designs, using all 120 Crayola crayons, including the flesh tones.

Cass blinks at me in confusion.

‘Hi. Sorry, I know we’re supposed to have left by now.’

I scan the detritus of my fruitless search. Where the hell *is* it?

‘What are you doing? You’re not even dressed.’

I sit back on my heels. ‘I know, but I’m invested now and I just want to find it.’

‘Find what?’

‘A list.’

‘You’re making us late so you can find a list?’

‘Well, it’s not just “a list”.’ She hovers in the doorway emanating impatience, so I get to the point. ‘The first week at uni, one of our lecturers had us write down our career goals – as in pie-in-the-sky, dream big, pinnacle-of-our-career type goals.’

‘And you wrote “Show at Paris Fashion Week”?’ she asks, clearly wanting to hurry me up.

‘Well, yes, and Milan and London and New York, obv—’

‘Obvs. Elle, we really need to go. The staff meeting starts in twenty minutes.’

‘We can be a *little* late,’ I say, resuming the search. I pop open the lid on the final crate. ‘We didn’t get home till after midnight.’

‘Yes, but it’s not a good look if the rest of the team arrives before we do. We’re the last to leave and the first to arrive. That’s the way we’ve al—’

‘Can’t you just text Zara and ask her to open up? I want to find the list so I can show the team,’ I say, rifling through the final crate. ‘For motivation,’ I add for good measure.

Cass sighs, then leans against the doorframe and takes out her phone.

‘Why now?’ she asks. ‘You’ve never mentioned it before.’

‘I dreamt about it last night. I was accepting an award and I talked about it in my speech.’

‘Which award?’

‘A completely made-up, I-was-dreaming award.’

I close my eyes, trying to picture myself writing the list. A memory comes to me and I start searching again, this time with something specific in mind.

‘Yes!’

At the bottom of the third crate, I find four study planners – one from each year of uni. I take out the planner from first year and start thumbing through the pages. Cassie leaves her post in the doorway and stands behind me, looking over my shoulder.

‘Is it in there?’ she asks.

‘I think so. I have a vague recollection of— Oh my god, look!’ There on the page for September 25th is my list.



‘You wanted to design a range for Topshop? That was your pie-in-the-sky goal?’

‘Hey! At eighteen, Topshop was aspirational – don’t be so snobby. Primark, remember!’

‘*Again*, that was for charity,’ she retorts.

I ignore her and read through the list.

1. *Branded range for Topshop*
2. *Special collection in collaboration with a shoe designer/accessories designer*
3. *Own fragrance*
4. *Red carpet look for Taylor Swift*
5. *Show at Paris/New York/London/Milan Fashion Week*
6. *Cover of Nouveau*

‘Taylor Swift?’ Cassie teases. ‘And what’s with this?’ she asks, pointing to number five. ‘Too lazy to write out your biggest dreams as separate items?’

I snap the planner shut and stand – or I try to, as I now have pins and needles in both feet. I hobble to the bed and sit on the edge. ‘Ow, ow, ow.’ I wince as I stretch my feet against the rug.

‘I hate that,’ says Cass, commiserating.

‘Yeah, worth it though. I found it,’ I say, both grimacing and smiling as I hold up the planner.

‘It’s a good list, Elle. And in a fortnight, you’ll be able to tick off number five – well, part of it.’

‘I might swap out Topshop for Harvey Nicks, though,’ I say, wiggling my toes as the last of the numbness finally recedes.

‘And Taylor Swift?’

‘Tay Tay stays.’

‘Could you at least add Florence Pugh or Elle Fanning?’

‘Fine. Now, I just need five minutes to shower and get dressed.’ When I look up, she’s smirking. ‘Fifteen minutes then.’

‘I’ll make you some Marmite toast for the walk.’

I stand and smack a kiss on her cheek. ‘You’re the best.’

‘And brush your teeth. Your breath stinks.’

Ahh, the joys of living with your sister.

\* \* \*

‘You should frame that,’ says Prue.

‘Definitely,’ Zara agrees.

‘Really?’ I ask. The five of us are crowded around one of the cutting tables, all eyes trained on my first-year study planner. ‘I’m not sure I want to tear out the page.’

‘Could just scan it,’ says Gaz, our pattern designer and resident techy. They reach past me and pick up the planner to examine it more closely. ‘Yeah, I reckon scan it, print it... Easy peasy.’

Just then, a Polaroid falls out of the planner and flutters to the ground. My stomach plummets as Gaz picks it up. I know exactly what that is, even though I’d forgotten it was there.

‘Ooh, who’s the cutie then?’ They hand the photo around to the rest of the team, eliciting a collective ‘aww’.

‘Elle, you’re just a baby!’ exclaims Prue. ‘How old are you? Sixteen?’

‘And who’s the bloke?’ asks Zara. ‘He’s proper fit, he is.’

I signal for Gaz to give me the photo, even though there’s no way I’m going to look at it.

‘All right, everyone,’ says Cass with a series of quick claps, ‘let’s get to work, shall we?’

I know she’s just protecting me, doing her best to diminish the blow, but there’s not enough cotton wool in the world to

make this discovery any less painful.

The team disassembles and I palm the Polaroid, heading straight to our office where I collapse into one of the chairs. I squeeze my eyes shut and take a deep breath, willing the tears to hold off.

‘Hey, are you all right?’ Cass asks, closing the door behind her. I feel her presence beside me and open my eyes. She’s holding my planner to her chest. In the rush to escape, I’d forgotten about it. ‘The one that got away, huh?’

‘What?! How can you be so flippant?’

‘No! Sorry. Not *him*. I meant the *photo*. Sorry, Elle.’

‘Oh, in that case, yes: the one that got away.’ She pats my shoulder soothingly.

Several years ago, right after my last serious attempt to find him, I did a massive purge of all things Leo. I gathered every ticket stub and pub coaster, every gift he ever gave me, including the charm bracelet for my twenty-first, the sketches we drew together, one of his T-shirts that I slept in for months after he left, and all the photos I’d (stupidly) printed that once adorned my fridge – *everything* that could possibly remind me of him. Or so I thought.

Cass talked me out of burning the lot, even though Bonfire Night was just around the corner, which would have made ‘the purge’ even more of an occasion. Instead, I packed everything into a cardboard box, taped it shut with half a roll of packing tape, and couriered it to Mum and Dad’s, not trusting myself to take it over the following weekend when we were due for our every-other-Sunday family lunch. Apparently, Dad moaned about not having anywhere to store it, but Mum told him to shush and put it up in the loft. It’s been there gathering dust ever since.

There *have* been times over the past few years when I’ve been tempted to catch the train to Mum and Dad’s, climb up to the loft, and poke around inside that box – much like tonguing a mouth ulcer, I suppose. Fortunately, Cass has talked me out of it every time. And when we *are* at Mum and Dad’s, she

keeps a sharp eye on me. One time, she walked in on me sitting on the toilet, just to make sure I hadn't been lying about needing a wee.

Back in the present, the crisp edges of the Polaroid feel sharp against my palm. I could close my fist and crumple it, then toss it in the bin, but I can't bring myself to do that.

I shove it at Cass. 'Can you just...?'

'Sure.' She takes it from me and crosses to her desk, where she puts the photo and the planner in the top drawer. 'Want me to lock it?' she asks, knowing me as well as – if not better than – I know myself. I manage a nod and only when I hear the key in the lock do I fully exhale.

She comes back and bobs down in front of me. 'All right?'

'How can something from over a decade ago have so much power over me? I mean, look at me!' I flap my arms about. 'Behold this pitiful specimen.'

'You're not pitiful. Besides, it's not just some *thing*. It's a symbol of what you've lost. It's perfectly normal for you to feel the way you do,' she says unconvincingly.

'You wouldn't let yourself wallow like this.'

'You're not wallowing, Elle.'

I catch her sympathetic look and it's nearly enough to send me over the edge. But I don't let it, instead steadying my breath to compose myself. Cassie's phone starts to ring but she stays put, watching me, which is even more disconcerting.

'Aren't you going to answer that?' I ask.

'You sure you're all right?'

'Just answer it.'

Reluctantly, she leaves my side, answering in that ultra-professional way she has. 'Cassie Bliss, Bliss Designs.' I'm about to leave and get back to work when she says, 'Wowser, already?' followed by, 'That's brilliant. I'll be right there.'

She hangs up, beaming. 'What's all that then?' I ask, my woes instantly forgotten.

‘Er, just that side—’

‘Side project. Right. Are you ever going to tell me what it is?’

‘We’ll see.’ She slips her phone into her handbag and slings it over her shoulder. ‘I’ll be back in time for the meeting with the show coordinator to finalise the music and lighting.’

She sends a kiss through the air and departs before I can quiz her further. This bloody side project! I’ll get it out of her eventually.

‘She’s waiting for us in there,’ says Nasrin, nodding towards the screening room. I drop my handbag at my desk, collect my tablet, and follow her in.

‘She must get up at the crack of dawn,’ I say. ‘It’s barely gone eight.’

‘I don’t think she sleeps.’

‘This was way faster than expected, right?’

‘Must be why we pay her the big bucks,’ Nasrin quips as we reach the doorway.

‘Pay who the big bucks?’ Marie, the agency’s investigator, is already seated in the front row of the plush cinema-style seats.

‘You,’ says Nas, heading down the short aisle. ‘Because you’re fast.’ She takes the seat next to Marie and I sit next to her.

‘Fast, yes. But I’m also the best.’

Marie (pronounced Mah-ree, as she’s French) Maillot could play Lisbeth Salander in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* if she weren’t nearing seventy – *Retiree with the Dragon Tattoo*? She’s petite, lean and wiry, has jet-black hair cropped short, tattoo sleeves up both arms, wears enough black eyeliner to sink a gothic battleship, and is dressed (as she always is) head-to-toe in black – most of it leather.

She's also 'smoking' an unlit cigarette – her way of observing the 'archaic' laws banning smoking inside. She once told me she can't quit, either smoking or sucking on unlit cigarettes, because she took up the habit when she was eleven. But the latter is about more than the nicotine – she also has a strong oral fixation, something I diagnosed long before her revelation. Actually, a first-year psychology student could have determined that – in their third week of uni.

'Where is the client?' she asks in her pronounced French accent, looking towards the door.

'On her way,' says Nasrin. 'You barely gave us any notice.'

Marie shrugs and draws in noisily through her cigarette.

'Wanna talk us through the highlights?' Nasrin prods.

'*Non*. We will wait.'

Nasrin glances at me, her eye roll conveying 'what's her deal?', then unlocks her phone and starts scrolling.

I stifle a smirk and turn on my tablet so I can review the case notes while we wait. How the next phase of this case plays out – reuniting Elle with Leo (if that's even a possibility) – will depend entirely on Marie's findings. Though, I have mapped out some approximations.

Nearly thirty minutes later, I've wandered down the rabbit hole and am wholly absorbed in my notes when Anita's voice cuts through my thoughts.

'Poppy, Nasrin, Ms Bliss is here.'

The three of us turn in unison and I stand so I can properly welcome Cassie. 'Thanks, Anita. Hello, Cassie, come on in.'

'Hi, Cassie,' adds Nasrin over her shoulder.

'Sorry it took me so long to get here.'

'No worries,' I say to reassure her. 'We're sorry we couldn't give you more notice, but we wanted to bring you in as soon as we had news.'

‘That’s brilliant – and perfect timing. Elle had a real wobble this morning.’ She looks past me to Marie, curious.

‘Cassie, this is our investigator, Marie Maillot. Marie, Cassie Bliss, our client.’

Marie nods at Cassie solemnly, and I indicate for Cassie to sit next to me.

‘We begin,’ says Marie with a dramatic gesture. Au fait with the agency’s AV system after years as our investigator, she presses a button on a large remote, and the screening room goes dark. Two seconds later, the slideshow begins and a low-resolution photo of Leo and Elle fills the screen. This was the sole photo of Leo that Cassie was able to provide us, mined from the archives of her social media.

‘*Et voilà*, Leo Jones,’ says Marie, ‘born in the early nineties in Dallas, Texas.’

Cassie shifts in her seat – excitement, perhaps.

The photo vanishes and is replaced by a photo of a man and a woman who appear to be in their sixties.

‘Leo’s parents,’ says Marie.

And even if she hadn’t just said where they were from, it would have been an easy guess. They look like they’re straight out of *Dallas*, the American TV show from the eighties. The man is wearing a large cowboy hat, his thick silver hair only visible at the temples, a dress shirt tucked into jeans, a bolo tie, and the most enormous belt buckle I’ve ever seen. In a pinch, it could be used as a satellite dish. His feet aren’t visible but no doubt they’re adorned with cowboy boots.

And the woman – *oh my god!* – is swathed in a hot-pink taffeta dress that screams ‘eighties prom’, and the only thing bigger than her puffed sleeves is her hair, which is teased into a blonde bouffant. She’s wearing an entire MAC counter of makeup and showing off (what I’m guessing is) a ten-thousand-dollar set of teeth. There’s also something quite sad behind her eyes, making me wonder why. My gaze flicks to her husband’s eyes, which are hard and steely. Perhaps that’s why – she’s married to a cold man.



‘Leonard Campbell Junior and his wife, Piper née Jones, marr—’

‘Wait,’ says Cassie. ‘So, Jones was his *mother’s* surname?’

‘*Mais, oui.*’ Marie doesn’t offer any further explanation and turns back to the screen, her expression sour. She prefers her presentations to ‘tell a story’ and I know from experience that interruptions mess with her flow.

‘Well, that explains it,’ Cassie mutters.

‘Why Elle couldn’t find him?’ I whisper and she nods.

Marie clears her throat with a loud ‘ahem’. ‘May I continue?’ she asks peevishly.

‘Yes, of course,’ says Cassie, frowning at the screen. I can only imagine the thoughts zipping through her mind.

‘Before he died, Mr Campbell was the—’

‘Sorry,’ Cassie interrupts again. ‘Leo’s dad has passed away?’

Marie huffs out a breath of frustration. ‘*Oui*, but there is more,’ she says, her tone indicating ‘no more interruptions’. ‘Before he died, Mr Campbell was the third wealthiest cattle rancher in Texas.’

‘Wowser,’ says Cassie under breath.

‘Now,’ Marie proceeds, ‘back to Leonard the third.’

The onscreen image changes to a collage of photos from Leo’s childhood. In the youngest, he is around three. In the oldest, I’d guess late teens. And in every single photo, he’s on a horse, wearing a cowboy hat, or both.

‘So, Leo was a cowboy in a former life?’ quips Nasrin, but the weak joke goes unacknowledged.

‘I knew Leo was from Texas but *this...*’ Cassie trails off, but her meaning is clear and I agree. The poor kid looks like he’s starring in a Western – and not by choice.

‘From a young age, Leo was groomed to take over from his father as head of the family business,’ continues Marie.

‘Unfortunately for Leo, his interests lay elsewhere.’

The next collage is a stark contrast: multiple photos of Leo – I’d say from his late-teens to early-twenties – in a variety of outfits and hairstyles (leaning heavily towards the Bieber flip-and-switch), and not a pair of chaps nor giant belt buckle in sight.

‘Now, *that’s* the Leo I remember,’ says Cassie, her voice steeped in affection.

‘As you know, Leo attended Kingston University to study fashion. But, of course, this was not his father’s plan. Leo was supposed to attend university in Texas and study agricultural business. His mother, however...’

Marie expertly moves to the next collage, this one showing several photos of Leo with his mother. There is obvious love between them and in one, she appears to be tickling Leo, who is caught mid-squeal, his face radiating pure joy.

‘She was his champion and it was *Madame* Campbell who made her son’s dreams come true. She helped him “escape”, one might say, using her own money to pay his tuition. When *Monsieur* Campbell discovered his son had not shown up at the university in Dallas, Leo was already in London and using his mother’s name. This, of course, caused an enormous rift between *Monsieur et Madame* Campbell. Their marriage – basically, kaput.’

Ah, so that sadness in her eyes... it *was* about the marriage.

‘And,’ continues Marie, ‘*Monsieur* Campbell threatened to discard Leo.’

My head pivots towards Marie. ‘Do you mean, disown?’

Marie flutters her hand in the air. ‘Discard, disown – as I said.’

Another thing she doesn’t like: being corrected for her malapropisms.

‘That’s like proper out of the stone age,’ says Nasrin.

Marie shrugs, her hands extended. ‘It happens,’ she says, then draws on her cigarette again.

‘But what about after uni? Why did Leo leave London so suddenly?’ asks Cassie.

‘Pfff, I am coming to this,’ says Marie. She progresses to the next slide, which shows photos of a little girl.

‘This is the sister, Brandy.’

‘Brandy?’ scoffs Nasrin.

‘It is an American name,’ replies Marie with contempt, though it’s unclear whether it’s for the name or for Americans in general.

‘Now...’ She moves to the next slide, a single photo of Brandy with Leo – and the age difference between them appears to be about six or seven years. ‘The sister, Brandy, *she* had a head for business – and the interest – from a very young age. But the father, *Leonard*’ – she says his name as though it’s left a bad taste in her mouth – ‘he does not want to leave the company to a *girl*.’

‘Now *that* is out of the stone age,’ says Nasrin.

‘*Oui, absolument. Alors—*’

‘Wait, when did Leo’s dad pass away? Is that why—’

Marie pins Cassie with one of her looks and Cassie’s words dry up as if they’ve been sucked from her mouth by a vacuum cleaner.

‘Sorry,’ she says. ‘Just thought I might be piecing it together.’

In Australia, we call Marie’s sour expression a ‘cat’s bum face’. She sits back and watches the screen as she advances to the next slide, an obituary, its headline blaring:

Cattle Mogul Leonard Campbell Jr, Deceased,  
Aged 67

‘Look at the date,’ says Cassie. ‘That was right after Leo and Elle finished uni.’

*‘Exactement.* Leo returned to Texas and took over from his father to run the cattle business.’

‘That would have sucked,’ mutters Nasrin, stating the obvious.

‘But what about Brandy?’ asks Cassie. ‘If she wanted the job...’

‘Too young. Brandy was only sixteen when their father died. Leo agreed to step in until she finished school, then university.’

‘Which was when?’ Cassie asks.

‘Three years ago.’

Cassie leans past me again, pinning Marie with a forthright look. ‘So, where is Leo now? Is he still in Texas?’

*‘Euh, non.’*

Marie moves on to the next slide, a screenshot of an online article. A man, who I barely recognise as an older Leo, stands in front of Bergdorf’s, the famous New York department store, and in the window behind him are some of the most gorgeous shoes I’ve ever seen – and I’m not really a shoe person. The headline reads:

### Reaching New Heights: The Rise of Lorenzo

‘Leo is now “Lorenzo”, based in New York and tipped to become one of the biggest names in shoes,’ says Marie.

‘He’s a famous shoe designer?’ Nasrin blurts out.

‘Not yet, but who knows...?’ Marie takes another draw on her cigarette.

‘So, Leo is *Lorenzo*?’ Cassie asks, almost to herself.

‘You’ve heard of him?’ I ask. ‘Lorenzo, I mean?’

‘Well, yes. I mean, vaguely. It might sound strange, but I’m not wholly across that side of things – the who’s who of fashion – but I have heard some buzz. But none of this explains why he disappeared on us, why he broke off all contact with Elle.’

Marie shrugs. 'For that, you would have to ask Leo.'

'Right.' Cassie frowns again and taps the knuckles of both hands on her armrests.

'There is one more thing,' says Marie. She advances the slide to reveal a shopfront that looks remarkably 'London': two sets of floor-to-ceiling windows with wooden frames either side of a wooden-framed glass door, painted in an eye-catching teal. The sign above the windows says 'Lorenzo' in a swirly gold font.

'Lorenzo's newest store,' Marie declares.

'That looks like it's in Soho,' says Cassie, leaning forward in her seat.

'It definitely looks like London,' I agree.

'Is it in Soho?' Cassie asks.

'*Oui.*'

'Wait, so that means he's *here*? Leo's here in London?' Cassie asks, her excitement visibly building.

The lights come on and I blink rapidly as my eyes adjust. As is her wont, Marie drags this moment out – literally, with another drag on that (must-be-soggy-by-now) cigarette, and metaphorically by locking her intense gaze on Cassie, her chin lifted.

'Lorenzo – both the label and the man – recently relocated to London. Your Leo, he is... pfff... fifteen kilometres that way,' she says, poking one of her bony fingers towards the side wall.

'Oh my god,' Cassie's says. She throws a hand over her mouth as she starts to laugh. 'I can't believe it!' she exclaims. 'This is brilliant.'

Marie is collecting her things, but she's omitted one salient detail, perhaps the most significant one. Cassie appears to be one step away from sending out wedding invitations but, as far as she knows, this could all be moot.

‘Marie, I’d just like to confirm that there’s no significant other in the picture,’ I say.

‘Ah, *non, c’est ça*. I am pleased to report that there is no spouse, girlfriend, boyfriend, or any form of significant other,’ she states.

‘Great work, Marie,’ I say, as though she had any influence over Leo’s romantic status. ‘And thank you.’

Cassie leaps up and approaches Marie who, even though she’s also standing, is completely dwarfed. ‘Thank you so much.’

‘But of course.’

‘And that...’ Cassie gestures at the screen. ‘That was brilliant. I mean, how did you get all those photos?’

‘*Euh*, I know a guy,’ Marie replies – her standard response when anyone asks about the ‘secret sauce’ of her methods. Actually, I suspect she has a sauce guy too.

‘Right,’ I say, wanting to progress to the next phase. ‘Let’s head to one of the meeting rooms and discuss our strategy for the reunion.’ Cassie may have asked us to hold off until after Paris, but given her reaction just now, I suspect she may want to get started right away.

I follow the others out of the screening room and pause at the door to turn off the lights. Nasrin doubles back. ‘Everything okay?’ I ask quietly.

‘Just... how do you think the sis is going to react?’

‘To being reunited with her long-lost love?’ I make a don’t-ask-stupid-questions face.

‘After he ditched her, cut off all ties, then moved back to her hometown a decade later and didn’t tell her?’

‘Hmm, Nas has a point.’

‘Oh... uh.’

‘Exactly.’

## 6

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### POPPY

‘And lastly, you have an update for us, Poppy?’ says Saskia, giving me the floor at our morning staff meeting. Seated at the conference table with Saskia are five agents, including me, Paloma, head of client relations, and Mia, our tech expert.

‘Thank you, Saskia, yes. We’ve just had a remarkable breakthrough in the search for Elle Bliss’s long-lost love, courtesy of Marie, and—’

‘Sorry to interrupt, but have you chosen a case name yet?’ asks George.

Of all the agents, I’m the least attached to the practice of finding the perfect case name. Over the years, I’ve endured dozens of huffs, sighs, and eye rolls of disappointment when I’ve chosen something too generic or a name that’s been used before.

Even when I think I’ve come up with something clever and original, one of my colleagues will poo-poo it as ‘too out there’ or ‘too Australian’ – forgive me for being an Australian! We are part of the Commonwealth, you know. While I digress, I *am* starting to wonder why I bother. I should just assign the naming of cases to the team and be done with it forever more.

‘Well, I—’

‘The key players are Elle Bliss, fashion designer, and – as we’ve just learnt – a shoe designer called Lorenzo who, in real life, is actually called Leo,’ Nasrin interjects.

I scowl at her. ‘I was getting to that.’

‘Come on, Poppy. That’s got to spark some sort of inspiration,’ says Freya (who used to be my favourite).

‘Fine, how about... I don’t know... “The One Who Slipped Away”?’

‘Oh god, that’s terrible,’ says George.

The others seem to agree with him. Freya makes an ‘eek’ face, Nasrin bursts out laughing, and Ursula weighs in with, ‘Oh no, you absolutely cannot call the case that.’ And while nothing on her face moves (Ursula has had more work done than my mother-in-law), I can tell from her tone that she’s horrified.

Even Saskia seems amused by my suggestion.

‘Well, what then?’ I look around the table. ‘What would you call it?’

There’s quiet for a moment, then Ursula raises a hand to get our attention. When all eyes are on her, she says, ‘Elle and the Shoemaker,’ as though she’s announcing a recently discovered symphony by Mozart or a previously unearthed Shakespearean sonnet and *not* the name of my case.

‘Great. Very clever. I like how you riffed on the fairy tale,’ I say – Ursula *always* names her cases after fairy tales. She smiles at me benevolently. ‘So!’ I say, continuing with my briefing. ‘Good news. Marie was able to track down Elle’s long-lost love.’

‘Excellent,’ says Saskia.

‘Bad news is we still have no idea why he disappeared ten years ago,’ Nasrin chimes in.

‘Yes, but more good news is that he’s here in London and we’re working with Cassie – the sister – to arrange a reunion.’

‘Bad news—’

‘Nas, can we please stop playing “good news, bad news”?’

‘But *is* there an additional challenge?’ Saskia asks – her way of getting this briefing back on track.



Nas starts to speak but as soon as I lock eyes with her, she stops. As much as she (obviously) wishes she was lead on this case, I am, and she knows it. She mouths, 'Sorry,' and I turn to Saskia.

'As I mentioned when I first presented this case, Cassie doesn't want her sister to find out she's behind the reunion. It's got to seem like a coincidence. But...' I grimace, wishing I could find a diplomatic way to put this.

'Want me to take this one?' asks Nas across the table.

I chuckle. 'Sure, all yours.'

'The sister is a terrible actor.'

A chorus of 'ahh' echoes through the room. This dilemma comes up on occasion. We plan a strategy for a 'happenstance meeting' but when we run through role plays in preparation, we discover that the person who's supposed to pull it off has the acting talent of a tea towel.

'I mean, she *has* been able to keep all of this under wraps,' I say, indicating the agency, 'so at least she has a reasonable ability to fib.'

In the context of cases, the term 'fibbing' is preferable to 'lying', as it's far more palatable (even though we all know they're the same thing).

'Yeah, she's spun something about a side project she's been working on,' says Nas, picking up the thread, 'which is perfect 'cause we're going to use *that* as the foundation for the meeting.'

'Exactly. We're planning to get Elle and Leo-slash-Lorenzo together to discuss a possible partnership, some sort of codesigned collection... That sort of thing.'

'Sounds plausible,' says Saskia.

'Yes, but as for Cassie achieving a look of genuine surprise at that meeting... Well, she's got Buckley's,' I say, my face scrunched.

'And that's Australian for...?' Ursula inquires.

‘No chance,’ I reply. I sometimes forget that my colleagues don’t speak fluent Aussie. That’s probably why they veto half my case names.

‘Can she be coached?’ asks Saskia.

‘Not even if we sent her to RADA for a year,’ quips Nas, and I snigger. Now that she and I are in the flow, we’re pinging off each other quite well.

‘So,’ I say to the team, ‘any thoughts on how to proceed would be greatly appreciated.’

‘What if she just doesn’t attend?’ asks George. ‘The sister, I mean.’

‘I’m not sure that would make sense,’ I say. ‘Cassie is essentially Bliss Design’s one-woman management team. She would be in a meeting about the two fashion labels working together.’

‘What if you went, Poppy?’ suggests Freya. ‘Perhaps do a bit of side-coaching?’

‘But as what – or who?’ asks Nasrin, leaping in before I have the chance.

Around the table, we collectively mull this question over, but even I’m stumped about what role I could play.

‘I know!’ says Freya, sitting up taller. ‘What if the initial meeting is a simple meet-and-greet between the two creative visionaries – no other people, not even her sister, no business talk, no finances or logistics – just to see if there is, you know...’ As she often does, Freya leaves the rest of the thought unsaid, her words hanging in the air.

‘Creative alignment?’ offers George.

‘I was thinking “a spark” but yes,’ she replies. ‘Call it a meeting but make it more like a *date*.’

‘I love that idea. And excellent use of buzz words, George,’ I add.

‘Well, you know, half an arts degree has to pay off sometimes,’ he says with a slice of self-effacement. Ursula

pats him on the hand.

‘Nas? What do you think? Can we sell that to Cassie?’

‘I should think so. She knows how rubbish she was in that role play. “Oh my god! Leo?! Is that you?”’

Nasrin’s impersonation is enough to kick us all off. Even Saskia joins in, smiling faintly while her slim shoulders shake almost imperceptibly. This is the Saskia equivalent of me throwing back my head and belly-laughing.

‘Right,’ says Paloma, ‘if that’s all, I’ve got a call with Berlin in five.’

‘Thank you, everyone,’ says Saskia.

As we’re leaving the conference room, I hook my arm through Freya’s. ‘You ol’ romantic, you.’

She casts me a sidelong glance, the corner of her mouth lifted. ‘We’re a matchmaking agency, Poppy.’

‘Yeah, but not all cases are about romance.’

She nudges me. ‘This one is. Start with the romance and everything else will fall into place,’ she advises.

‘See? Spoken like a true romantic.’

‘So, marriage hasn’t turned you into one?’ she teases.

‘Nah, just a sexaholic.’

‘Bahahaha,’ bellows George from behind us.

‘You weren’t supposed to hear that,’ I scold.

‘Open-plan office, Poppy. Everything’s fair game,’ he retorts.

He has a point.

\* \* \*

*Elle*

He’s late. Of course he is. It’s not like I’m in the middle of preparing for the biggest fifteen minutes of my life or anything. And who schedules a business meeting at 8 p.m. on

a Tuesday at a (quite nice) restaurant? The next big thing in shoes, apparently.

I cannot *believe* I let Cassie talk me into this. Surely this could have waited until after Paris.

At 8.18 p.m., I give in to the yeasty smell rising from the centre of the table, snatch up a now-cold grainy bread roll, and stuff half of it in my mouth. It was a ridiculously early start this morning, followed by a twelve-hour workday, and all I managed to eat was an overripe banana, a cold ham-and-cheese croissant, and a handful of wine gums. Okay, it was *two* handfuls.

‘You must be Elle,’ says a voice.

I’ve still got a mouthful of bread when I look up to find a sixty-something woman sporting a kaleidoscope of colours – her outfit, her makeup, *and* her spiky hair. She looks like unicorn vomit. I smile and swallow at the same time, which means I end up grimacing at her.

‘Hello, sorry, yes. Elle Bliss.’ I rub my palms together to dust off the breadcrumbs and hold out my right hand. She takes it in one of those limp, wet-fish type handshakes. I hate those.

‘Ser, Lorenzo’s publicist,’ she says with a strong American accent I can’t quite place. Her name sounds like ‘Sair’, but I’d be hard-pressed to spell it correctly.

‘Hello,’ I say again. She continues to hover. ‘Um, is Lorenzo coming?’

She sniffs the air and I can’t tell if it’s because, like me, she’s famished and there are some delicious aromas wafting in from the kitchen, or if it’s an affront of some kind.

‘He’s on his way.’ She’s looking at her phone now, which she taps on impatiently.

‘Right. Well, he’s late,’ I joke. Only she clearly doesn’t think it’s funny and her eyes narrow as they swing in my direction. ‘Will you be joining us?’ I ask, hoping she says no.

‘No.’

*Well, good, because you have the conversation skills of a dung beetle, I think. Then I feel bad for dung beetles.*

‘He’s here,’ she says, and without another word to me, she heads towards the door. Wait, did she only come in to tell me he’d arrived? How odd.

I watch her and just inside the doorway, she’s joined by a man: tallish, slim, platinum-blond hair tied into a half-ponytail, wearing ultra-wide-leg jeans (he could smuggle ham hocks in those), a tight denim waistcoat (double denim? Who is he, an extra from *Barbie?*), and enough bangles on each arm to (almost) cover his tattooed forearms. He’s also wearing sunglasses. Inside. At night-time.

Fuck me, what a poser! And I work in *fashion* – I encounter all sorts. But *this!*

Ser points towards me, then leaves, and I school my expression as I wait for him to join me.

There’s been all sorts of buzz about Lorenzo in the fashion forums – when I get a chance to read them, that is, which is rare these days. He’s all about sustainably produced leather, even jumping on the leather-from-cactus bandwagon, and ground-breaking designs that offer style *and* comfort (something promised by most shoe designers, but rarely delivered).

And if what Cassie says is true, a partnership between Bliss Designs and Lorenzo could be our big break – possibly even bigger than Paris.

She’ll kill me if I cock this up.

He approaches the table, flops onto the chair opposite me, and without even saying hello, raises his hand to a passing waiter.

‘Hey, man,’ he says with a drawl, ‘can I get a beer? Like, a *real* one? You know, in a bottle? I can’t do that warm piss in a pint glass you guys call beer.’

As the waiter disappears to retrieve a ‘real beer’, chills prick the crown of my head, as if a thousand tiny spiders are dancing in stilettos. They crawl down my face to my neck,

shoot along my spine, and land heavily in my stomach where they settle in and kickstart a swell of nausea.

I know that voice.

And when his head finally swivels in my direction and he removes his sunglasses, I know that face too.

‘Leo?’ I choke out, right as his eyes widen and he replies, ‘Ellie?’

The strange thing about a moment like this is you can imagine it a thousand times, playing it out a thousand different ways, but you will never even *consider* that your ex-boyfriend (and possibly the love of your life) is the person you're supposed to be meeting with.

Or that he'd look like such a tosspot.

This isn't Leo – *my* Leo – this is a facsimile, a tacky Instagram filter come to life.

We gape at each other for what feels like an hour and, as my eyes scour his still-handsome angular face, thoughts and emotions zip about inside me, as if my body is hosting a dodgem car rally. Zoom – crash – zoom – crash. Lots of collisions.

And the questions! SO. MANY. QUESTIONS.

'What are you doing here?' pops out first.

'Oh, um...'

He looks helplessly towards the door but Ser, the human butterfly, is nowhere to be seen – probably off flapping her wings and causing a tsunami somewhere across the world. She's certainly caused one in here.

'No, really, what the fuck are you doing here?'

Again, the words leave my mouth before the thought properly forms in my head. But it's now patently clear that a decade's worth of pining and longing and building up the memory of Leo in my mind has been constructed on a bedrock of anger. In the past ten years, it's the one emotion I've never

consciously experienced, yet here it is, centre stage and basking in its spotlight like a veil has been lifted.

‘More to the point, where the fuck have you *been?*’ I add, my voice laced with venom.

He seems to ignore my questions, or perhaps they’ve yet to land, as he’s still shaking his head in disbelief.

‘I’m not sure why I didn’t put two and two together and get four,’ he says with a slight smile.

‘Well, maths was never really your strong suit.’ This isn’t me – snarky questions and bitchy retorts – but I can’t seem to help it.

‘Bliss Designs,’ he says thoughtfully. ‘Well done, Ellie. It’s what you always wanted and from all accounts, you’ve made it.’

‘I’m called Elle now, *Lorenzo.*’

He fiddles with his fork, darkness clouding his features as he locks eyes with mine, his countenance visibly shifting. It seems my blows have finally landed. *Good.*

‘*Elle* then,’ he says feebly.

His beer arrives and he barely acknowledges the waiter, instead lifting the bottle and tipping it sardonically in my direction. He takes a long pull as his eyes scan the restaurant. The waiter hovers nearby, probably to take our order. I send him a weak smile and thankfully, he gets the message and leaves.

‘So now what?’ I ask, knowing I’ve obliterated any chance of the hopeful, romantic reunion I’ve fantasised about for *ten years.*

Or, more succinctly, *he* has obliterated it, showing up unexpectedly like this – and looking ridiculous. I’m back to angry again, dizzy from the carousel of emotions whizzing through me.

Leo – or Lorenzo – I have no idea what to even call him – licks his lips and places the bottle on the table. It’s already



half-empty. ‘I think we’re supposed to discuss a possible collaboration.’

‘Hah!’ I bark out.

‘Look, Ellie—’

‘Elle.’

‘Sorry. *Elle*.’ He watches me, his eyes like a storm over the sea – dark grey with flecks of gold. Tempestuous. ‘You really had no idea?’ he asks, his voice low and gravelly (damn him) and that Texan drawl tempered by... By what? Age? Or has it been carefully curated along with the rest of this persona?

‘About you? That *you*’re Lorenzo?’

He nods sharply, his eyes returning to the beer bottle, where he tears off a strip from the label and rolls it between his thumbs and forefingers. He always did that – twirling paper. There were dozens of pieces of rolled up paper all over his share flat when we—

‘No,’ I answer curtly, curtailing my stroll down memory lane. This man *left*. No word. No contact. He just loved me and left.

‘Really?’ he asks arrogantly, his eyes meeting mine again. ‘Because I’ve kinda been everywhere.’

‘Everywh—’

‘You didn’t see the *Nouveau* article?’ he asks.

Oh god, he was in *Nouveau*? How did I not know this? Oh, right: I’ve been working my arse off trying to turn my label into a household name. There was a time when I would pore over an edition of *Nouveau* like I’d unearthed the secrets of the universe – actually, that’s exactly what I’d been doing. *My* universe: fashion.

And if I didn’t despise him for being an arse – *then* and now – I’d be jealous about being featured in my favourite – sorry, the *world’s* favourite – fashion magazine.

All right, I am jealous.

‘I’ve been busy,’ I say curtly. ‘You know, building an up-and-coming fashion label. I’m showing in Paris the week after next.’ I lift my chin, hating myself a little more for each degree of that incline. I’m not typically boastful either, but seeing Leo seems to have unleashed parts of me that want to... Well, maybe not *destroy* him, but at least inflict a little damage.

He sneers, snorting a mocking laugh out through his nose. How was I ever in love with this man? I search for any sign of the Leo I loved – the affable, funny bloke who turned my insides to mush with just a look – but there are none. Just a good-looking prat with an awful hairstyle wearing ugly clothes.

‘Congratulations,’ he says, though there isn’t an ounce of sincerity in his words. ‘I’m also showing at Fashion Week.’

This revelation is a snag in my newly hatched plan to laud my success over him, especially as it’s unlikely he’s a last-minute addition to the programme like Bliss Designs is.

‘So, who’s the collaboration with?’ I can’t help the question, even though it may be interpreted as collegial – I really want to know.

‘No collaboration. Just me.’ I’m confused and my face must betray me because he laughs. ‘You’re wondering what I’ll send down the runway, what the models will be wearing. Besides *shoes*, I mean.’

‘Well, yes.’

My show has been through dozens of permutations as we finalise the collection: mixing and matching my pieces to form different looks, the order of those looks, which model will wear which, hair and makeup styling, the *shoes*. We’re tossing up between a chunky boot, a brogue, and a heel – each from a different label, and we’ll be *buying* them. No collaborations for me just yet...

There are many factors that come into play, but in no version of my show are the models naked and strutting down the runway only wearing shoes. Perhaps he’ll dress them in

plain-white cotton shifts – not particularly inspiring, but shoe designers have done this in the past.

‘Well, why don’t you come and see?’ he offers.

‘Oh, I—’

‘What? Afraid I’ll show you up?’

‘No. Just... I’ll be busy, you know, with my own show.’

‘Right.’ He reaches into the front pocket of his jeans and takes out his phone. He taps on it, concentration etching his features. Eventually, he turns the phone around to show me the screen. ‘The programme. Mine’s the day after yours.’ My eyes meet his and he shrugs, smiling at me smugly. ‘See? No excuse not to come. And if we’re going to collaborate—’

‘We are never going to collaborate.’

I am so sure of this that Tay Tay could write a song about it.

‘Just...’ He sighs as if he’s already tired of sparring. ‘Come and see the show. I’ll show you mine if you show me yours?’ He grins at me, both hands raised, palms up.

But his attempt at humour falls flat – horizon flat – and I scowl at him.

‘I have to go.’

It’s not the most graceful exit line, but I’ve had enough and I need to get out of here. I stand, unhook my handbag from my chair, and swing it over my shoulder. As I walk past him, he clasps my wrist.

‘Ellie, *please*.’ There’s something visceral in his plea and for a second – only a second – I consider that I may have got it wrong, got *him* wrong. Maybe he *is* still Leo.

But then if he is, he’s the one who left without a word, who ignored every email, text, and phone call – the one who ripped out my heart and took it with him to Texas.

‘It’s *Elle*.’ I snatch my wrist away and march out of the restaurant without another word and without looking back. I’m halfway down the block when I realise I have no idea where

the nearest Tube stop is, and I stop in a shopfront portico to get my bearings.

Leo Jones.

He was my whole world, my universe, the person who shared my orbit. Then he was gone, and there was a void so unfathomable, I could hardly breathe. For weeks – *months* – I lived in a sort-of fog, as if I were experiencing the world through a milky lens. Food lost its taste, colours were muted, and all the sharp edges of life – anything I'd once felt acutely – good or bad – even burning my tongue on too-hot tea – felt *soft*. If I laughed at something spontaneously, it felt like a betrayal of the great gaping space inside me.

I even stopped designing. I missed job interviews, I missed my graduation.

I was lost.

Slowly, I came back to myself – with Cassie's support and some tough love from my parents who, after months of putting up with me, 'gently nudged' me to move back out of my childhood bedroom and re-engage with life.

I did, but when it comes to relationships, I've never really let myself get close to anyone. Which is probably why I have so many first dates but very few fourth dates – and why I choose such boring or boorish men to go out with.

Leo Fucking Jones.

The tears, when they come, are hot, angry, fat tears.

I wish Cassie had been there. She would have known what to do, how to handle the situation, how to handle *Leo*. I still can't believe I didn't make the connection before now. I feel so foolish. I've been searching for the man for *ten years* and for the past few months, he's been right under my nose.

And he's far from the person who once lived and breathed inside my orbit.

Who knew Cassie's little 'side project' would be so catastrophic.

\* \* \*

‘Cass! Cassie!’ I call as I enter our flat.

She pops her head out of the bathroom, her electric toothbrush whirring in her mouth, and holds up a finger. She finishes and joins me in the lounge.

‘You’re home early,’ she says, scrutinising me. ‘Is that good or bad?’

I flop onto the sofa. Now that I’m home, I’m not sure how to broach this with her. She was so excited about a potential collaboration with Lorenzo.

‘Elle?’

She sits opposite me on her favourite chair and when my eyes meet hers, I feel a little queasy. ‘Um...’

‘Tell me.’

I heave out an immense sigh, then look her in the eye. ‘I know you were really hopeful about this meeting but—’

‘Well, yes. This could be the huge break we’ve been hoping for.’

‘It’s not going to happen,’ I say.

She looks crestfallen, which stings, but I’m hoping that as soon as I explain the situation, she’ll understand.

‘Why?’ she asks quietly.

‘Well, you’re never going to believe this but Lorenzo... He’s *Leo*. Leo Jones.’

‘What?’ she asks, leaping out of her seat, her mouth agape. It’s almost comical, her reaction. ‘*Your* Leo?’

‘Yes. Well, no, not my Leo, as it turns out. But, yes, *the* Leo – Leo of “A Thousand Nights of Pining” by Elle Bliss fame.’

‘I see,’ she says, sitting back down. ‘And how was it seeing him again?’

There’s still a glimmer of hope in her eyes and I’m about to extinguish it.

‘Fucking awful.’

‘Oh.’

‘First off, he was late. And then his publicist showed up – now *she’s* an odd bod, to say the least – and when he finally arrives, he looks like a reject from an eighties sitcom. *And* he’s a complete tosser, Cass – *so* arrogant. He didn’t even have the decency to explain himself for being late or apologise or anything. And the longer I sat there, the more I realised how fucking angry I am. It never even *occurred* to me before tonight. But who does that to a person? Leave suddenly, then cut off all ties? And then to not even acknowledge it... No! He just brags about his success and – get this – invites me to his show in Paris! As if I’m going to your show, you total fucking wanker.’

‘Right.’ Cassie stares hard at the floor. That glimmer of hope? Completely snuffed out. She even *looks* deflated, as if I’ve stuck a pin in her and she’s slowly losing air.

I get up and go around to the back of her chair, lean down, and hug her from behind. ‘Cass, I’m sorry. We’ll find someone else to partner with, okay?’

‘It’s just...’ She wriggles out of my hug, then stands and starts pacing.

‘Cass? It’s a firm no from me. There’s no way in hell I can work with that man – not after our history and—’

‘Just...’ She stops and faces me. ‘What if—’

‘No! You weren’t there. You have no idea how it felt to see him after all this time, and everything I’d built up in my mind about what our reunion would be... It was the total opposite. I couldn’t recognise one *iota* of Leo in there – he’s a totally different person. And I mean... why the fuck didn’t he ever contact me, Cass? We were together for four years and then nothing?’ A sob takes hold. ‘I felt so *stupid*. I’ve been so, *so* stupid.’

‘No.’ Cassie crosses to me and wraps me up in a hug. ‘You’re not stupid. You just had your heart broken is all. I’m sorry the meeting turned out so badly. But I’ll talk to his management team and we’ll tee something up—’

I break away from her. ‘What the fuck?’

‘What?’

‘Cassie, did you not hear me? I am not working with that man.’

Her head tilts and she sighs.

‘No, Cass.’

I drag the back of my hand under my nose and wipe under my eyes with my fingertips.

‘Can we at least go to his show? I mean, we’ll be in Paris anyway. What’s the harm?’

What’s the *harm*? I could be given a week and still not have enough time to answer that question. But hope has sparked again in Cassie’s eyes and I can’t bear to let her down further. It’s just a show. It’s not like I have to talk to him or anything.

And part of me is curious.

‘Fine,’ I say with a sigh.

‘Really?’ she asks, her eyes wide with excitement.

‘Yes.’

She beams at me.

‘But you owe me!’ I say.

‘Fair.’

‘As in, a first-born-child level of debt, Cass.’

‘Got it.’

‘And just the show, no meeting.’

‘Right.’

‘I mean it,’ I say, heading towards my room.

‘You might change your min—’

I cut her off by forcefully closing my bedroom door. I rest against it, moments from the evening flickering through my mind and making my stomach lurch. I didn’t eat anything at

dinner except that bread roll – only I'm not remotely hungry.  
Just shellshocked.

What the fuck have I said yes to?



I'm reading an email from a potential client when the phone on my desk rings. 'Hi, Anita.'

'Poppy, I have Ms Bliss on the line for you,' she says. 'I'll just put her through.'

'Poppy?' says Cassie.

'Hey, how did it go?' I ask. Elle and Leo's meeting was last night.

'Er...' *Uh oh.* 'I'd tell you "not well" but that would be a massive understatement.'

'Oh no, what happened?' I cast my eyes around the office for Nasrin but can't see her.

'Let's just say that we're going to need a Plan B. And fast. Before Fashion Week.'

'Right.' Nasrin comes out of the bathroom and I wave her over. 'It's Cassie,' I mouth. 'Cassie, can I pop you on hold for a sec?'

'Yes, all right.'

'What's going on?' asks Nas.

'The meeting between Elle and Leo didn't go as planned and Cassie wants a Plan B.'

'Fuck.' She turns and scouts for an empty meeting room. 'Come on.'

I follow her into the room that looks out over the Thames, close the door, and tap a button on the console in the middle of the table.

‘Hi, Cassie, I’m here with Nasrin. Want to talk us through what happened?’

‘Sure, but I’ve only got a few minutes before Elle comes back. The long and the short of it is that he’s turned into a massive prat, the meeting dredged up a lot of deep-seated anger, and Elle wants nothing to do with him.’

‘Okay,’ I say, my eyes flicking towards Nasrin. She nods at me. We’ve been in similar situations with clients before. Even though there’s obvious panic in Cassie’s voice, this is likely just a minor setback. But still, we need to respect the client and not patronise her.

‘And you know how he’s showing at Fashion Week?’ she adds.

‘Yes,’ we say together. It came up when we were deciding when and how to plan the surprise reunion. The three of us agreed that staging their initial meeting as an ‘incidental run-in’ in Paris would be less than optimal – Elle would be focused on her show and, as Cassie indicated, more than a little stressed out – which is why we went with last night’s meeting.

‘He’s invited her to watch. His show.’

‘Right,’ says Nas. ‘And?’

‘She told him to bugger off, but I think I’ve talked her into going.’

‘That’s promising,’ I say.

‘Well, yes and no. I’ve had to promise my first-born child in return.’

‘Ouch,’ says Nas.

‘The favour aside, Cassie,’ I say, ‘I’m putting that in the plus column, okay? So, let’s address the three points you made earlier: he’s a prat, she’s pissed off, and she wants nothing to

do with him. First off, *we* all know that Leo made a massive sacrifice for his sister, so it's possible he's—'

'Not actually a prat,' interjects Nasrin.

'Well, probably not,' I concur.

*Though, people do change*, I think.

'I agree,' says Cassie. 'In the greater scheme of things, he's probably not, but Elle said he was arrogant and superior and kind of a dick. He even showed up late – without an apology.'

Nas and I exchange a look. 'Well, let's proceed as though he's got a good heart,' I say.

'And a good reason for behaving like a dick,' adds Nasrin. The line goes silent and she grimaces at me.

Cassie breaks the silence with a loud sigh.

'Look, Cassie,' I say, 'you're Elle's sister and if you *really* think there's no sense in pursuing this any further, we totally understand. We can close the case. Sometimes, that's all a client needs – closure – but it's your call.'

There's more heavy silence from Cassie and I move to the window to watch the boat traffic on the river. Finally, she speaks.

'No, I don't want to give up just yet. I knew Leo back then and you're right, he was lovely, and now we know why he left so suddenly. I still can't fathom why he thought he needed to break off all ties with Elle – they were *so* in love; surely they could have made it work – but I believe he deserves a second chance. They both do.'

'Good,' I say. 'So, setting aside Elle's anger for a sec—'

'Hell hath no fury, right?' Nasrin interjects and, even though it's mildly annoying that she's interrupted me again, Cassie chuckles on the other end of the line.

'So,' I say, leaping back into the conversation. 'If we can fashion a situation in which the two of them can *really* connect—'

‘So to speak,’ says Cassie.

‘Yes, so to speak,’ I say. ‘*And* give Leo the chance to explain his absence, then—’

‘We may just get back on track,’ says Nasrin, finishing my thought.

‘All right, we’re in agreement,’ says Cassie. ‘And this leads me to an ask. It’s big.’

‘Go for it,’ I prompt.

‘Poppy, I want you to come with us – to Paris.’

‘Me?’ I ask, right as Nasrin asks, ‘Her?’

‘Yes!’ says Cassie. ‘I need you there. Actually, if this is going to work at all, *we* need you. I’m not good at all this subterfuge and manipulation.’

I don’t take it as an insult that she thinks *I* am – it’s part and parcel of my job.

‘But how would that work?’ I ask. ‘How would we explain my presence?’

‘You could be undercover as a fashion journalist or something.’

Nasrin starts laughing.

‘Hey!’ I say to her. I mean, it *is* a reach, but laughing about it is just insulting. She raises her hands, indicating that she can’t help it, and *keeps laughing*.

‘Please, Poppy,’ says Cassie. ‘We have to fix this. And I’d feel better about everything if you were with us.’

‘Okay,’ I say, conceding. ‘I need to run it by our boss for approval. *If* she approves, I’ll try to find a connection to a fashion magazine – and fast.’

‘Paloma might know someone,’ Nasrin says to me, clearly enjoying this. ‘That’s our head of client relations,’ she tells Cassie. ‘I’ll check with her after this.’

God, even *with* a connection, I have about as much chance at passing for a fashion journalist as a Formula 1 driver. Still,

Cassie may be right – I should probably be close at hand while Elle and Leo are both in Paris.

‘Okay, so if all that lines up, I’ll come to Paris Fashion Week,’ I say. Nasrin, unable to contain herself, erupts into an even bigger laugh. ‘Don’t make me regret this,’ I say.

‘Don’t worry, it will be brilliant,’ says Cassie. ‘Oh, bollocks, Elle’s back. Speak later.’

She ends the call and Nasrin is *still* laughing.

‘*Please* let me do the update at the staff meeting,’ she says through her laughter. I pin her with my sternest look, but she ignores me, wiping away tears and fanning her face.

It’s not that bloody funny.

\* \* \*

I’m making tentative travel plans for Paris when Nasrin perches on the edge of my desk. ‘I have news,’ she says. I regard her, curious, while she draws out the suspense. ‘Paloma knows someone at *Nouveau*. Actually, she and Saskia do – an old school friend is the features editor of the British edition.’

‘Oh, that sounds promising.’

‘It is. You’re going to Paris. Saskia approved it.’

‘Wow – that was fast. So, what happens with the magazine?’

‘You’re getting six inches and a thumbnail in either “What’s Hot?” or “Who’s Who?”.’

‘Sorry. Six inches? That’s— I don’t know what that means.’

‘Column space – around a hundred and fifty words. Don’t you read *Nouveau*? Actually, never mind. Stupid question.’ She pushes off my desk and wanders towards the kitchen.

‘That’s not nice,’ I call out to her uncaring back.

I get another dose of incredulity when I arrive home and discover my bestie, Shaz, sitting at our breakfast bar. She’s drinking a glass of white wine while Tristan makes dinner.

When I tell her my news, she throws her head back and laughs loudly.

‘Why is that hilarious?’ I ask, which makes her laugh even harder.

Shaz is a fellow Aussie expat and has been my best friend for the past decade. We moved from Melbourne to London together in our late twenties and she’s seen me through every high and low life has thrown at me. I’d walk through fire for her – or I would have. I’m starting to have second thoughts the harder she laughs.

‘Sharon! I’ll send you home if you don’t stop.’

‘What? You’re going to Paris pretending to be a fashion journalist. It’s hilarious.’

‘It’s completely plausible,’ says Tristan, snaking an arm around my waist and kissing my cheek.

‘Thank you, darling,’ I say, glaring at Shaz.

‘Oh, don’t be like that,’ she says. She waves her empty wine glass at Tristan. ‘Excuse me, there seems to be something wrong with my glass.’

His mouth quirks as he tops her up. I am so glad these two get along – together with Mum and Dad, they’re my most important people.

‘Now,’ Shaz says as Tristan goes back to making us dinner. ‘Who are you pretending to be a journalist for?’

‘*Nouveau*.’

She chokes on her wine, adding insult to injury. I blink at her, my lips pursed. ‘Okay, sorry,’ she says, one hand raised in contrition. ‘But seriously? How are you going to get away with that? I mean, won’t the *actual* journalists from *Nouveau* be there?’

‘Well, yes, and *Nouveau Britain* declined to give me press credentials under their name,’ I admit. I suppose school-day friendships only extend so far when it comes to professional favours.

‘And?’ Shaz prods.

‘Marie, the agency’s investigator, is getting me press credentials that say I’m from *Nouveau Oceania*.’

‘Wow, fake ID! Wait, is *Nouveau Oceania* even a thing?’

‘No. But apparently, no one *wears* their lanyards. You just flash it at the door and put it back in your handbag.’

‘And which handbag would this be, the Chanel or the Louis Vuitton?’

I ignore the dig, as we both know I have neither. I may be married to an uber-wealthy man, but I didn’t become a society wife overnight. In fact, I will *never* become one of those, much to my mother-in-law’s chagrin. ‘Look, I only need the press credentials for access to the shows.’

‘And the parties. Please tell me there are parties.’

‘Well, yes, apparently, but I’m not sure I’ll be going to those.’

‘You absolutely *are*. And I want constant updates. And pics. Actually, you should just live stream the entire week.’

‘I’m not doing that.’

‘Had to try,’ she says with a shrug. ‘So...’ She trails off and twirls her wine glass by the stem. ‘You know I love you and I think you’re very pretty—’

‘She’s beautiful,’ says my husband over the sound of the range hood.

‘All right, yes, you’re beautiful...’

‘But?’

She locks eyes with mine. ‘You know what I’m going to ask.’

‘Yes, I’m getting a makeover.’

‘You don’t need one,’ Tristan interjects.

‘Thank you, darling, but I’m with Shaz on this one,’ I say over my shoulder. ‘According to the client’s sister – the one

who hired us,' I say to Shaz, 'it won't be drastic. Just a little zhuzh.'

'Can I come?' asks Shaz.

'To Paris?'

'No, to your... ' She flaps her hand in front of my face.

'If you must.'

'Oh, I must. I'm living vicariously through you, you know.'

'Why? Your life is amazing right now.'

Just after Tristan and I got married, Shaz left her (shitty, soul-sucking, and surprisingly underpaid) job as a psychologist for a prestigious Harley Street practice. It was one of the best decisions of her life, as she's now part of a not-for-profit women's health group in south-west London and loves both her patients and her colleagues. She's also been dating her girlfriend, Lauren, for the past six months.

Oh, wait. I catch the slight downturn of her mouth and she avoids eye contact, her fingers tapping lightly on the countertop.

Dreading the answer, I ask, 'So, which is it? The job or the relationship?'

'What? Oh... uh, neither.'

'Sharon, what's going on?'

Her shoulders visibly drop. 'It's not the job. Job's still good.'

'So, Lauren then?' I adore Lauren and she and Shaz are so good together. *Please* let this not be the end of the line for them.

'She wants me to move in.'

'Oh my god, that's amazing.' Only Shaz's face says the opposite. 'Why isn't that amazing? You said that Alfie's been hinting at moving in with his boyfriend. Why don't you two pack up the share flat and—'



‘Because it’s terrifying, that’s why.’

I need to tread carefully here. I don’t want to invalidate Shaz’s feelings, but she has a track record of sabotaging the good things in her life, as well as a string of disastrous relationships in which she gives up everything she wants and acquiesces to the other person, ultimately losing sight of herself. But with Lauren, she’s Shaz, the whole person. She’s happy and complete and, most importantly, she’s loved.

‘It can be really scary,’ I say, ‘moving in with someone.’

‘*You* did it.’

‘Well, yes, but under very different circumstances.’ I flick a glance towards Tristan but he’s popped his earbuds in now – he likes to listen to podcasts while he cooks. Even so, I lean towards Shaz. ‘Look, I understand the fear – it’s completely justified – but answer this: do you love her?’

‘Yes.’

‘And can you imagine spending your life with her?’

‘Yes, but more in a “sometime in the future” way.’

‘And what’s at the heart of it, do you think? This nebulous future, the fear?’

‘Please don’t be my psych right now. Can’t we just...?’

I let her off the hook – for now – and send a smile her way. ‘Sure. So, got a Chanel handbag I can borrow?’

She smiles at me wanly. ‘Thanks, Pop.’

‘Hey, what sort of bestie am I if I don’t distract you with opportunities to ridicule me?’

‘Seriously though, *Nouveau Oceania*.’ She starts laughing again.

‘Yeah, yeah.’

Three days until we leave for Paris and my sister is AWOL – something about a consultation. Though, I know my sister well enough to suspect it's to do with this so-called side project – or rather, the never-gonna-happen collaboration with Leo.

She'd better not be digging us in deeper. I may have agreed to go to Leo's show but that will consist of entering, standing at the back, then exiting immediately afterwards. I haven't even agreed to say hello, let alone meet with him. *Again.*

It's been over a week since I saw him, a week of replaying our conversation in my head on repeat. I keep asking myself if I could have said or done anything differently, if I could have elicited some sort of apology – even an explanation. But then I end up questioning the point of an apology.

'Oh, Ellie, I'm terribly sorry I was a complete arse and ghosted you like that. But it was only because I was too busy saving kittens from burning buildings all over Texas, while simultaneously solving the climate crisis.'

Anything less than that and Leo can sod off.

God, have I really spent a decade mourning the loss of something that was entirely one-sided? It certainly feels like it. Why else would Leo have done what he did?

Thankfully, I've had work to keep me busy. Any time I feel myself on the brink of wallowing, another decision has landed in my lap. This close to launching a collection, my role

is essentially ‘extreme decision maker’. If it were an Olympic event, I’d medal for sure.

‘Elle, we’re ready for you,’ says Zara, poking her head into the office.

Speaking of decision making...

For the seventy-fifth time – and I’m only *slightly* exaggerating – we are reordering the looks for the show.

If I do say so myself, this year’s autumn/winter collection is my best yet. I was inspired by Hollywood’s Golden Age and the women who embraced the trouser, the pant suit, and even the tuxedo. Back then, they were considered daring – gender benders with a propensity for comfort, leading to some of most iconic looks of the past hundred years.

And drawing from Virginia Woolf’s assertion that all women should have a *room* of their own, I’ve called my collection, ‘A *Suit* of One’s Own’. I hope people make the connection, but even if they don’t, *I* do.

So, Dietrick, Garbo, Hepburn, and Woolf... Thank you for the inspiration, ladies.

I’ve created eighteen looks: six day looks, six looks that will transform from day to night, each of which requires the model to perform a precise set of manoeuvres on the runway, and six night-time looks. What I’ve yet to decide is which looks will go first and last, *and* the order for the entire middle section. So, essentially, most of the show’s running order. I’m not complaining – I derive a lot of joy from this aspect of putting a show together.

I join the team in the workroom where they’ve put each look on a dress form and lined them up in the current order – one day (hopefully soon), we’ll be able to afford actual models for this part. I scan the cluster of dress forms, which range in sizes but are all calibrated to read ‘tall’. Perhaps in the future, I’ll design a petite range for people like me, but it occurred to me recently that most of the time I’m designing, I’m picturing the look on my much taller sister.

‘So,’ says Zara, signalling for the ‘show’ to begin. ‘We’re thinking this for look number one.’

Gaz rolls the first dress form down the centre aisle and I imagine it on a model with hair, makeup, and shoes. It’s a great first look: a single-breasted jacket worn open over a high-waisted short – both in a fuchsia linen I sourced from Belgium and finished with raw edges – with an off-white, high-necked silk blouse.

‘And the shoe?’ I ask – another pending decision.

Prue steps forward with a block-heeled, round-toed Mary Jane in silver, a chunky ankle boot in champagne patent leather, and a nude suede brogue. I look to the team and point at each of them in turn, asking for their pick. When they’ve answered, we have two for the brogue and one for the Mary Jane, but I’m still undecided.

‘Can you show me the frontrunner for the final look?’ I ask.

Gaz runs to the back of the lineup and walks forward with a flat-fronted, extra-wide-leg palazzo in off-white silk linen and a matching button-up waistcoat worn over a different high-collared silk blouse, this one with billowing sleeves, and a wool cape flung over one shoulder. This is as close as I get to the bridal-look finale that the couture shows often have.

‘I agree – great choice. We’ll go with this as the last look,’ I say. ‘And don’t let me change my mind.’

There’s a polite titter of laughter. I am famous for changing my mind even after I’ve said, ‘This is definitely it.’

‘Let’s see all the shoe options with this look.’ Without models and without trialling the entire show exactly as it will run on the day, this stage of the process is all about imagination. Fortunately, I have a vivid one. In fact, this show has already run in my mind so many times, I could commentate each permutation from memory.

And now, seeing the first and final looks side by side, tears prick my eyes. Noting the continuity of the raw edges on the lapel of the jacket and the cuff of the trousers, and the tiny

rows of buttons up the fly-front of the short and down the front of the waistcoat, observing the masterful sewing of each piece by my incredible team, how the fabric falls exactly as I imagined, how each piece and each ensemble screams ‘bolshie femininity’, my signature, I am so incredibly proud.

I look down to the floor where the shoes are lined up. One option now stands out to me.

‘Sorry, team, but we’re going with the boot.’

‘Love it,’ says Gaz.

‘Brilliant.’ Prue makes a note on her tablet. She’ll be coordinating with our supplier to ensure we have enough pairs for the show, including a range of sizes.

‘Well, poo,’ says Zara candidly. ‘But I’m taking home a pair of the MJs.’

‘Honestly, after the past few weeks, you can *all* take home a pair of the MJs – *and* the brogues and the boots,’ I say magnanimously. ‘Give your sizes to Prue and she can order them in.’ Prue grins at me and the others swamp her.

My eyes dart to the large clock on the wall: 8.08 p.m. A surge of exhaustion hits, but we still need to firm up the rest of the running order, as the looks will be packed for shipping tomorrow.

‘All right, everyone, let’s get this running order sorted so we can go home. Gaz, look number two.’

As Gaz runs back to the other dress forms and pushes forward a belted jacket dress, I stifle a yawn. In two days, we’ll be on our way to Paris and in four days, my show takes to the runway. If that weren’t enough to induce a hefty dose of panic, there’s also the fact that the day after that, I’m expected to be at Leo’s show.

I suppose I could still back out. Cassie will be cheesed off, but why would I put myself through something like that? Sure, I’m curious about his designs but that’s minor compared to how badly I want to give him a swift kick up the arse.

Leo, Leo, Leo, why the fuck did you have to turn up now?

\* \* \*

*Poppy*

‘You have a real sense of style,’ says Cassie as she trawls through my wardrobe. ‘Classic,’ she declares.

‘Oh, thanks. I just like to be comfortable. My work clothes are—’

‘Boring,’ Shaz chimes in, right as I say, ‘My uniform.’

‘Hey,’ I say to Shaz. ‘That’s not nice. If you don’t behave, I’m sending you home.’

‘I’m sorry.’

She isn’t.

Cassie chuckles good-naturedly. ‘You’re probably being a little harsh,’ she says to Shaz. ‘There’s a lot to be said for buying timeless pieces you can mix and match.’

I send Shaz a smug smile as though we’re squabbling siblings and not in our mid-thirties. She makes a face back.

Cassie, undeterred by our childish antics, starts pulling dresses, blazers, blouses, and trousers from my wardrobe and laying them out on the bed in various combos. ‘I wish Elle were here – she’s the real fashionista – but, of course, that’s not possible... Still, we have a lot to work with here,’ she says as she switches some pieces around. In my layperson’s opinion, she’s got a good eye and I snap photos of each outfit so I can assemble them by myself.

She turns to me. ‘And what’s your shoe of choice?’

‘Ballet flats,’ Shaz answers for me. ‘She has them in every colour.’ She opens up another door in the wardrobe, revealing my shoe collection.

‘Not *every* colour,’ I say defensively.

‘You’re right; you’re missing puce,’ she quips.

‘You wouldn’t know puce from chartreuse.’

She shrugs, but I know I’m right.

‘That is quite the collection,’ says Cassie. She reaches to one of the upper shelves. ‘These will work for some of the outfits,’ she says, holding up a pair of white leather sneakers. ‘Do you have any kitten-heeled mules?’

I go to the wardrobe and scan my selection. ‘I have these,’ I say, taking out a pair of basic black heels. ‘They’re my going-out shoes. And I have a nice pair of black boots...’ I show them to her.

‘Hmm.’ I can tell she’s trying to be polite. ‘This is what I suggest: for the shows, you wear one of your linen shifts and we get you a pair of nude kitten-heeled slingbacks. They’re always in fashion and they go with everything. They can be your signature.’ She turns back to the bed. ‘For travel and any time we’re not at a show, wear trousers and a white T-shirt with a blazer, and the sneakers.’

‘What about the parties?’ asks Shaz. ‘There are parties, right?’

‘Yes, good point. Does your husband have a tuxedo, by any chance? We’d just need the jacket.’

‘Hang tight,’ I say. Tristan is in the lounge, stretched out along one of the sofas, reading. ‘Darling, quick question: you have a tuxedo, right?’

He places the book on his chest and peers at me, amusement tugging at his lips. ‘Last-minute black-tie event you haven’t told me about?’

‘Cassie wants me to wear the jacket.’

His mouth quirks.

‘God, *you’re* not going to laugh at me now, are you?’

He swings his legs over the edge of the sofa and stands. ‘Absolutely not, but I did just imagine you wearing my tuxedo jacket – and *only* my tuxedo jacket.’

I grin at him. ‘We can play dress up when the others leave.’

‘Oh, we are definitely doing that.’ He lands a less-than-chaste kiss on my lips and I am *this close* to shooing Cassie

and Shaz out of the flat. Instead, I grab his hand and pull him towards the bedroom so we can raid his wardrobe.

Half an hour later, I have an I'm-pretending-to-be-fashion-journalist wardrobe and a shopping list. Against each item is the name of a shop and Cassie's going to call ahead so they'll be expecting me. I'll even meet with a lipstick designer (I had no idea that was a thing) to find my perfect shade.

But at the very bottom of the list is one item that terrifies me: a haircut. I've worn my straight dark-brown hair in the same style since... well, since I can remember. When I step out of the salon – I visit four times a year for a treatment and a trim – it sits in a straight line across my back, between my shoulder blades and my bra strap, with some layers around my face.

Every hairdresser I've ever had has tried to convince me to do something more daring with it, but I like my hairstyle. It's *me*. And I've seen Shaz through as many hairstyling disasters as romantic ones over the years – it took her two years to grow out that undercut – so I always stand firm.

But Cassie thinks I need something a little edgier to convincingly portray a fashion journalist.

'What's that?' Tristan asks, reading over my shoulder. 'Oh, if you ask my mother along, she'll be delighted.'

I ignore the comment – I am *not* taking Helen on my shopping spree – taking refuge in Tristan's arms as he wraps them around me. 'Look,' I say, pointing to *haircut*.

'I take it you're not particularly keen?'

'What if they shear it all off? Give me a pixie cut or something?' I reach up and grab a lock of my hair, pulling it through my fingers and twirling the ends.

'You would still be beautiful.' He turns me around, his hands resting on the small of my back, and I snake my arms around his neck, letting the list dangle from my fingertips.

He dips his head and presses his mouth to mine and I give in to the feeling of his (oh-so-gorgeous) lips, parting mine, our breaths mingling. Our tongues touch lightly and fireworks start



exploding between my legs. I never knew until being with Tristan that a *kiss* could set my entire body alight.

The list flutters to the floor but I won't even notice until I find it on the lounge room floor in the morning.

It's the night before my first showing in Paris and surprise, surprise I cannot sleep.

Cass and I are sharing a hotel room to economise and not five minutes after we turned out the lights, her distinct sleep noise, a sort of snuffling, filled the room. If I didn't love her so much, I would hate my sister for how easily she can fall asleep. Isn't it enough that she got the height, the boobs, *and* the dimples?

I stare at the ornate ceiling, tracing the curves and shadows of the cornices with my eyes, as snapshots from the past few days fly through my mind. It's been a blur of cab rides and fittings and consults and run-throughs. The show coordinator we hired has been brilliant, answering every one of my zillion (probably stupid) questions and ensuring that we've been exactly where we've needed to be at any given moment.

They even cast our models for us, absolutely smashing it, and we have the most *gorgeous* lineup. The final look – my not-quite-bridal look – will be worn by Juju, a stunning non-binary model with dark-brown skin and a shaved head. They look magnificent in that off-white ensemble.

And Zara is with us, literally my right-hand woman. She's been working tirelessly to ensure each piece is fitted perfectly to our models. You can fit all you want onto a dress form but until you put your clothes onto a live model, you won't know exactly how a piece will fall or move. Now I do. And if it's possible, I love this collection even more.

Cass is convinced we're going to be swamped with orders from department stores and if we are, she has a manufacturer on stand-by. She's been silent about Leo this past week. Which, of course, makes me all the more convinced she's up to something.

And we have an interloper in our entourage, a fashion journalist called Poppy. She seems nice enough and I am sure the coverage in *Nouveau* will be beneficial – no such thing as bad publicity, right? – but having her around is just another thing to worry about. What if she writes about my obsession with perfect stitching, even on a garment's lining, and I come off as a pedant or a perfectionist? I mean, I am both those things when it comes to my designs, but I'm not sure I want *Nouveau* readers thinking ill of me. I want them – and every other fashion devotee – to love me and love my clothes.

Cassie farts in her sleep, which makes me laugh. I can't help it. Farts are funny – they just are – and when you are exhausted, nervous, *and* excited, they become hilarious. I snigger into my hand but pretty soon, a hand is not enough to contain the hilarity. Even when I smush my face into my pillow to smother the sound, it's loud enough to wake Cassie.

'What?' she moans grumpily.

'Nothing,' I say through my laughter. 'Go back to sleep.'

'I can't. My sister is laughing maniacally only four feet away.' She rolls towards me and in the light seeping into the room from the gap in the curtains, I make out her frown.

'Soz – it's just... You know when you're so exhausted, you're too tired to sleep?'

'No.' Her eyes drift shut and she snuggles further under the duvet.

'Goodnight, Cass.'

'Goodnight, sis,' she murmurs. 'Now go to sleep. Big day tomorrow.'

As if I need reminding. Still, laughing released a lot of the tension I've been holding onto and it's not long before I feel the tug of sleep and drift off.

\* \* \*

*Poppy*

‘So, how is it? You’ve left me hanging here,’ says Shaz. I clap a hand over my mouth to save her from seeing a close-up of my dental work. ‘Oh my god, it’s barely gone ten there, you nana.’

‘Hey. It’s been flat tack since we got to Paris. Twelve- and thirteen-hour days, a whirlwind of meetings and people and venues.’

‘Ah, the glamour...’

‘Exactly. I don’t know how fashion designers do it. All this work – hundreds, if not thousands of hours – just for a fifteen-minute show.’

‘But it’s less about the fifteen minutes and more about the exposure, though, right?’ she asks.

‘Yeah, probably.’

‘And how’s Elle? You know, about you being there?’

‘Yeah, good – chatty sometimes, quiet others. But Cassie seems to have fudged how much coverage she’ll get in the magazine. I hope she won’t be too disappointed. She’s such a darling – and her *clothes*, Shaz! Love, love, love.’

‘And that’s coming from *you*.’

‘Don’t you know I am a respected fashion journalist?’ I ask with a laugh.

‘Good to see it hasn’t gone to your head.’ We exchange grins. ‘But are you really going to let this poor woman think she’s getting a proper feature in *Nouveau*?’

‘Pretty sure her sister is banking on her being too loved up to care.’

‘Well, I wouldn’t be happy about it. Would you?’

I frown. ‘Hmm, you might be right.’

‘I often am. Hey, unrelated, your hair... I can’t get over it, Pop – I mean, it’s gorgeous. You’re like Poppy two-point-o.’

I reach up, still shocked to find my neck exposed. ‘Thanks,’ I reply feebly.

Despite me being *explicit* with the stylist that I wanted as little off the length as possible, he gave me a chin-length bob, angled slightly from the back to the front and parted on the side. I’ve never coloured my hair before, but now it’s got some subtle caramel highlights. If I didn’t get a shock every time I caught a glimpse of my reflection, wondering who the hell that woman is, I would probably agree with Shaz. It’s a cool style. I just don’t think it’s *me*.

Though, I look the part. Together with Cassie’s guidance on my wardrobe, my hair and (now-signature) red lip mean that no one has looked at me sideways over the past few days – and I have been in and out of a dozen fashion-related venues. Apparently, to all these fashion people, I am just another fashionista. Hilarious!

I yawn again. ‘I need to go. I still have some emails to answer and Tristan’s waiting for *his* goodnight.’ Shaz makes a face. ‘Not like that, you dork.’

She chuckles. ‘Okay, sleep tight. Don’t let the out-of-fashion bugs bite. And take photos, will you? Good ones. A blurry shot of the Eiffel Tower out a car window doesn’t count.’

‘Goodnight, Sharon.’

‘Night.’

After ending the call, I remind myself that when I return to London, we need to have a proper talk about her moving in with her girlfriend. She still hasn’t given (poor) Lauren an answer.

But more pressing is what Shaz said about the *Nouveau* article, which validates my concern. I fire off a text message to Nasrin:

**Can you figure out a way to get Bliss Designs a proper feature in Nouveau?**

She must have her phone in her hand because she writes back immediately:

Really?

Yes.

I can try. Not hopeful.

Talk to Saskia.

Will do.

And Marie.

Okay Poppy!

I read it as, ‘Oh-*kay*, Poppy, calm the farm,’ with an added eye roll. But Nasrin likes a challenge almost as much as I do. I reply:

Thanks.

Nasrin also likes having the last word and replies with a thumbs-up emoji.

\* \* \*

*Elle*

My heart is thudding so loudly, it’s almost deafening.

The back-of-house rush was a blur – hair, makeup, models dressing, final checks (making sure every piece is sitting exactly right, clipping the odd stray thread, and trying not to lose my mind) – and now it’s only seconds before the show is announced.

Cassie approaches, grabbing my hand and squeezing it tightly.

To our left, the models are lined up, ready to step onto the catwalk, and they each look so confident, so elegant, so *gorgeous*. All but Juju have sleek ponytails and every model is glammed up with full dark brows, a silver shimmer eye, and fuchsia lip. I can barely believe they’re wearing my designs and this is my show and we’re in the Louvre! At Paris Fashion Week!

It’s beyond surreal. My shoulders do a little shimmy almost of their own accord – if ever there was a moment for a happy dance...

*‘Mesdames et messieurs, Bliss Designs présente sa collection, Un tailleur à soi – A Suit of One’s Own,’* says the announcer and the music starts, an arrangement of noir-style instrumentals.

*Oh my god, Elle, breathe. Not a good look to collapse back of house at your own show.*

‘I’m so proud of you,’ says Cassie, stooping to talk into my ear. I flash her a smile, a mix of excitement and nerves. Then it begins and my eyes are glued to the monitor.

There are no missteps or mishaps. Each of the six day-to-night transformations goes exactly as planned, including a jacket swap between two models at the end of the runway, which elicited an ‘ooh’ and even louder applause from the audience. And as Juju steps onto the runway in the final look, magazine-cover ready, the applause ratchets up.

‘They love it. They bloody love it!’ Cass shouts in my ear. I didn’t know it was possible to grin this widely. My cheeks hurt.

‘Ready?’ she asks me.

I shake my head.

‘Yes, you are,’ she says. ‘You’ve earned it.’

As the models ready themselves for the finale, I wait for Juju to come off the runway, then join them in the lineup. We’ve practised this – twice – but I may have lost the ability to walk. Juju takes my hand and I look up at them. They wink and then it’s our turn and we walk onto the runway, holding hands, Juju adjusting their long stride to match mine. The camera flashes are nearly blinding and the applause almost deafening, but this is the most amazing moment of my entire life.

I’m practically soaring, propelled by the cheers and applause.

We reach the end of the runway, where we pause, turn slightly to the left, then to the centre, then the right, so the photographers can get the shot. We’re just about to make our way back down the runway when a giant bouquet of flowers

appears from the darkness beyond the stage lights. I reach to take the flowers, straining to make out who's handing them to me.

The person steps closer and, in the midst of the most important moment of my career, it's like I've been punched in the gut.

Leo.

Thank god for Juju, who takes the flowers from me as though we've rehearsed this, then raises our clasped hands. The applause grows louder, then we turn and make our way to safety, back of house. Behind us, the house lights come up and the sound of people chattering hums in the background.

Juju leans down and kisses both my cheeks.

'*Merci*, Elle, and congratulations. It was a very good first show. And I love this look,' they say, their arms wide. 'Oh, these are yours.' They hand me the bouquet which weighs a tonne. '*Ciao*.'

Like the other models, Juju has another three or four shows today, so they join the others and step out of my clothes, which are handed off to Zara and the show coordinator to be re-racked.

'I am so bloody proud of you.' I spin around to find Cassie full-on weeping. She envelops me in a hug. 'This definitely calls for some fizz.'

'Thanks, Cass.' She steps back and beams down at me. 'Phoof. I can't believe it's over.'

'I know! All that work and we're finally finished.'

'Until the next collection, right?' says Poppy, approaching our little huddle. 'Huge congrats, Elle. That was ah-mazing!' She's a fashion journalist so it's hard to tell if her effusive congratulations are genuine or just out of politeness.

'Thank you. Hasn't quite sunk in yet,' I tell her.

'I can imagine. And those are beautiful,' she says, indicating the bouquet of peonies – my favourite flower.



‘Yes! I’d love to claim credit,’ says Cassie, leaning down to inhale their fragrance. ‘Actually, I should have thought of flowers – but with everything else going on, it didn’t occur to me. Soz, little sis.’

I wave her off. ‘I wouldn’t even *be* here if it weren’t for you.’

She smiles at me modestly, one shoulder lifted.

‘There’s no card,’ says Poppy. ‘Did you see who gave them to you?’

‘Um, yes, actually,’ I reply, my stomach clenching.

‘Well?’ asks Cassie with a laugh.

‘It was Leo,’ I reply.

Her eyes blink in disbelief. ‘Oh. Well, that’s—’

‘Sorry, who’s Leo?’ asks Poppy.

Oh god, she’s not going to write about me and Leo now, is she?

‘Off the record?’ I ask her. She nods. She *seems* sincere – I really hope I can trust her. ‘He’s my ex. A complete bastard, who I had no contact with for a decade and who’s suddenly back in my life. Oh, and he goes by *Lorenzo* now,’ I add with an eye roll. ‘Here.’ I thrust the flowers at her. ‘You can have these.’

‘Oh, I...’ She glances at Cassie and there’s something in the look they exchange that unsettles me.

‘Elle?’ Zara calls above the hubbub. Saved by the assistant designer.

‘Duty calls,’ I say, then I rush over to help Zara pack up the collection.

Cassie and I watch Elle scarp away, then our heads come together. ‘Did you tell him to bring flowers?’ I ask right as she says, ‘Were the flowers your idea?’ We spring apart, our eyes wide.

Cassie looks over to where Elle and Zara are (literally) knee-deep in garments and custom-made packing boxes. ‘It’s okay,’ I say, ‘she’s otherwise occupied. I don’t think she’ll figure out we’re working together.’

Cassie looks at me. ‘Well, at least our plan to get him here succeeded,’ she says. I had an invitation couriered over to his hotel yesterday. ‘But how did he know about peonies?’

‘Sorry?’ I ask.

‘They’re her favourite flower. How did he know that? Or do you think it was just blind luck?’

‘Oh, well, they were together for a long time. He must have remembered.’

‘You’re probably right. Still,’ she says, a small smile alighting on her face, ‘it’s a good sign, don’t you think?’

‘That he showed up with her favourite flowers? Yes. That it pissed her off? Not so much. Do you still think we can get her to his show tomorrow?’

‘I’ll make sure of it,’ Cassie replies. ‘Even if I have to tie her up and stuff her in the boot of the cab.’ I laugh but she doesn’t, suddenly serious again. ‘This has to work, Poppy. At

the very least, she needs to have it out with him so she can move on with her life.’

‘That’s the worst-case scenario, okay?’

She nods, her lips drawn into a tight line.

‘Listen, I’ve worked with dozens of clients over the years and in a former life, I was a psychologist. Her reaction to these’ – I hold up the flowers – ‘that was *miles* away from indifference, which is a positive sign. *And* he showed up. That counts for something too. Actually, it counts for a lot. So, let’s proceed as if we’re “Team Reunion”, rather than just “Team Closure”, okay?’

Cassie brightens up a bit and smiles again. ‘Sounds good.’

‘Cass!’ Elle is waving her sister over.

‘Will you join us for a celebratory drink?’ Cassie asks me.

‘If it won’t feel like I’m intruding.’

‘No,’ she replies as if I’m being silly. ‘Just bring your notepad and pretend it’s all part of the article.’

‘Thanks. I’d love to.’

Just over an hour later, we’re at Le Fumoir, a restaurant and bar that’s reasonably close to the Louvre. It’s quintessentially Parisian, with its golden awnings, dark polished wood, and tufted red leather sofas. This afternoon, it’s even mild enough to sit outside, which we do, with me sacrificing the view of passers-by so Cassie and Elle can face the street. Half the fun of Paris is people watching.

The waiter arrives, wearing a stark-white, waist-to-ankle apron and bearing the champagne we’ve ordered, expertly cracking the bottle and pouring into three flutes.

‘*Merci*,’ we say in unison when he finishes pouring and sets the open bottle into an ice bucket. He scowls at us, which is Parisian waiter for, ‘My pleasure – enjoy.’

‘So, Zara really didn’t want to come?’ I ask Elle.

‘I insisted she join us,’ she says, ‘but then *she* insisted that she needed to oversee the shipment of the collection back to

London, even though we offered to help her with that tomorrow.’

‘Very conscientious of her,’ I say. ‘Still, it’s a shame.’

‘She’s promised we’ll celebrate properly with the others when we get back.’

‘And on that – celebrating, I mean,’ says Cassie, holding her flute aloft. ‘To my brilliant and talented little sister. I am so proud of you, Elle. Congratulations on your first of many, *many* Fashion Week shows.’

‘Hear, hear. Congratulations,’ I add.

Elle flushes, her cheeks pinking, but she lifts her flute and clinks it against ours. ‘Thank you.’ She sighs loudly. ‘I can’t believe it’s all over.’

‘It’s an incredible amount of work,’ I say.

‘It is, but you must see this all the time?’ she asks. She sips her champagne, watching me over the rim.

‘Don’t forget, I’m new to fashion,’ I say, leaning into the fib that before *Nouveau*, I wrote about mental health and wellbeing. To really sell a lie (sorry – a *fib*), stick as close to the truth as possible.

‘Oh, that’s right,’ Elle replies. ‘So, did you always want to be a journalist?’

‘Nice try,’ I say, deflecting with a smile. ‘As I’m still on the clock, how about you tell me about you? Where did your passion for fashion – oh shit, I really didn’t mean to rhyme like that. *Or* swear in front of you. Fuck.’ I clap my hand over my mouth and the three of us share a laugh. ‘Ahem,’ I say, sitting up straighter and doing my best to present myself as a real fashion journalist. ‘So, Ms Bliss, tell me about your journey into fashion.’

Elle begins by telling me about her as a five-year-old, who spent hours either playing dress-up with her dolls or designing new outfits for them.

‘That’s fairly early to choose your profession,’ I say, making a note in my notebook.

She shrugs. ‘I suppose. Better than getting to your GCSEs and wondering what to do with your life. For me, the path has always been clear.’

I write that down.

She then walks me through her uni days, her expression clouding a little when she gets to this part – no doubt troubled by thoughts of Leo – and some time and a bottle of champagne later, her fashion journey arrives at today. And it may be because of the champagne, but there’s an easy camaraderie between us now.

‘Oh bugger,’ I say, something occurring to me. ‘I didn’t get a photo of the two of you celebrating – for the magazine.’ I take out my phone.

‘*Nooo*,’ says Elle, holding her hands over her face. ‘I must look a fright. I’ve been up since five – impossible to sleep – and no amount of concealer will get rid of these.’ She points to under her eyes.

‘You look fine,’ says Cassie.

‘But I don’t want to look *fine*, Cass. It’s *Nouveau!*’

She has a point and I slip the phone into my handbag.

‘How about this?’ I ask. ‘When we get back to London, we book a studio and do a proper photoshoot.’

As soon as I’ve spoken, I realise what I’ve promised. For a millisecond, my eyes meet Cassie’s – she’s clearly as horrified as I am – but, thank god, Elle doesn’t seem to notice.

‘That sounds brilliant,’ she says. She turns to Cassie. ‘I still can’t wrap my mind around it. I’m going to be featured in *Nouveau!* It’s so surreal.’

Cassie drains her glass and sets it down heavily on the table. ‘It’s unbelievable,’ she says, her eyes flicking in my direction.

The very least I can do after my blunder is pick up the tab – ‘on *Nouveau*’, of course. Cassie feigns a protest, but I insist.

As we're walking away from the bar, she leans close. 'I hope you can make it happen.'

So do I. I'll text Nasrin in a sec to check if there's any chance of turning that six inches into a double-page spread, with glossy photos to match.

'Leave it with me,' I say with a confident smile.

Her lips flatten into a line – one of her staple expressions, I'm learning – and I wave the sisters off as they slide into the backseat of a cab, the bouquet of peonies on the seat between them. Elle may have gifted them to me, but I asked Cassie to take them back to the hotel so I don't have to lug them around Paris all afternoon.

After sending a message to Nasrin, I head off to sightsee. It's a guilty pleasure while working but, well, *Paris!*

Leaving Le Fumoir, I make my way past the Louvre, skipping a jaunt through the Tuileries Garden, as I'm in my new kitten heels (that gravel would shred them to bits), then head up to Place de la Concorde. The view straight up the Champs-Élysées to the Arc de Triomphe is one of the most iconic views in the world for a reason and, as it does every time I've been here, it takes my breath away.

*Oh, I could live in Paris,* I think, emitting a dreamy sigh. But then, doesn't everyone think that when they visit?

As I cross Place de la Concorde – the safe way – I remind myself that my husband is now worth an eye-wateringly large sum of money. If I asked about us living here – even just for a few months, or perhaps a year – he could make it happen. *We* could make it happen. He's always reminding me that his inherited fortune belongs to both of us. Which I suppose is fair considering he only inherited it because we got married.

I walk the length of the Champs-Élysées, home to some of the most exclusive shops in the world, dodging hordes of gawping tourists – from the accents, mostly Brits, North Americans, and Antipodeans. The uber wealthy are also here – those of the see-and-be-seen crowd. I'm not even surprised when several Kardashians burst out of Longchamp, cooing

over their purchases. They must be here for Fashion Week, but I really couldn't tell you which one is which.

As I continue walking, my phone rings.

'Hey!' I say to Shaz. 'What's up?'

'It's cold and raining and miserable. Please tell me it's sunny in Paris.'

'Yep. Hang on.' I snap a selfie of me with the Arc de Triomphe in the background and send it to her.

'I hate you,' she says and I laugh. 'No, I love you really.'

'Wait.' I spin around and snap a second selfie and send it.

'Oh my god, are those Kardashians?' she shrieks in my ear.

'Yes, we were just hanging out in Longchamp.'

'I want your life,' she quips, and we both laugh.

'So, how's your week going?' I ask. A heavy breath comes down the line. 'Shaz? What's going on?'

'Lauren asked me about moving in again.'

'Okay, and how do you feel about that?'

'Terrified!'

'No need to shout, Sharon.'

'Sorry.'

'But do you get the sense that if you don't move in with her it's...'

'Over?'

'Yes.'

She's quiet for a moment. 'No. She hasn't given me an ultimatum or anything – I don't think she'd do that.'

'I'm glad.'

'So, what should I do?' she asks as I dodge a family of Americans who've just come out of the Nike store. 'Pop?'

This is a well-established dynamic in our friendship. When it comes to advice, we have an unspoken agreement that we only give it when asked – *and* when the type of advice has been specified. Is she asking me to comment as her best friend, her pseudo-psych, or does she want a dose of tough love? I wait, knowing she'll soon twig.

‘Oh, sorry. Wearing your bestie hat, please,’ she requests.

I stop outside Omega and look through the shopfront window at those ridiculous watches with all the dials and doohickies. They're so huge, you'd need round-the-clock physiotherapy to wear one – either that, or you'd end up walking in a circle from the weight of it.

‘Okay. As your best friend, I've never seen you happier – or more yourself – than when you're with Lauren. She's a beautiful person, Shaz, and Tris and I already consider her part of the family – Ravi and Jass too,’ I say, referring to Tristan's closest friends and now part of my extended family. ‘I understand if it feels too soon – *believe* me.’ She chuckles and we share the joke about me marrying Tristan only a month after we met. ‘But Shaz, if your heart knows it's right, then tell your head to shut the fuck up and just say yes.’

‘You wandered into tough-love territory there at the end,’ she says.

‘It's the next neighbourhood along and the boundaries get blurry,’ I retort. ‘Look, you don't need to make any decisions right now. Come over when I get back from Paris and we'll talk it through properly, okay?’

‘A reprieve!’ she exclaims. ‘How benevolent of you.’

‘I'm going now.’ I set off again.

‘Wait, what are you up to this arvo?’

‘I am taking myself up the Arc de Triomphe,’ I reply. ‘Haven't done that since that trip we did in 2018, remember?’

‘Vaguely. I'm overdue for a trip to Paris.’

‘Maybe you and Lauren can come on your honeymoon,’ I tease.



‘Goodbye,’ she groans, ending the call.

I chuckle, about to put my phone away when a message comes in from Cassie:

**Help! Elle refuses to go to Leo’s show.**

I’m less than a block away from one of my favourite Parisian landmarks, but duty calls. I hail a cab so I can hightail it back to the hotel as fast as possible.

On the way, I send a reply to Cassie:

**Reinforcements on the way!**

I also send another text to Nasrin about the photoshoot and a bigger spread in *Nouveau* for Bliss Designs:

**Any luck? May be urgent.**

This time, she replies immediately:

**Paloma is on it. Looks good. Keep you posted.**

Phew. Ever since Shaz mentioned my pretence for being here, I’ve felt worse. Yes, I have lied to clients before – sorry, *fibbed*. I even lied to Tristan when he was my client, and that bit me in the bum big time. But this time... it feels more sinister, less noble than it usually does. Why didn’t I push back when Cassie came up with the idea? It’s one thing to create situations and conditions in which love can spark, but this impacts Elle’s career as well as her love life, and it’s blatantly obvious being a designer means the world to her.

And I truly understand that feeling. After my people – especially my husband, parents, and bestie – my job is *everything*. I hope Paloma comes through for us.

As the cab turns onto the street the hotel is on, my phone chimes with a message. It’s Nasrin again.

‘That was fast,’ I say to myself.

**Seen this?**

She’s attached a photograph that may just be a game changer – especially now that Elle is refusing to go to Leo’s show.

Brilliant. Thank you!

Still on the other thing. Keep you posted.

I send her a thumbs-up emoji and pay the cab driver. Time to get this case back on track.

‘Look!’ I say, holding up my phone. ‘Insta’s going bananas, especially hashtag Bliss Designs, and we’re already up hundreds of followers since this morning. Same on Facebook. And check out this post on the *Fashion Week* account.’ I scroll, landing on a shot of me and Juju at the end of the runway, our arms raised. ‘We’re blowing up. We don’t need Leo.’

Cass dons an expression so dour even Maggie Smith couldn’t pull it off.

‘What?’ I ask.

‘It just feels... I don’t know, *rude*.’

‘Rude?’

‘Yes. He invited you to his show, we have front row seats... He’ll notice if we don’t turn up.’

‘Good.’

‘Elle.’

‘I don’t understand what the problem is. I never want to see him again – ever, for the rest of my life.’

‘That’s... *extreme*.’

‘It isn’t if I mean it, and I do. Which also means I don’t care if he thinks I’m rude.’ Cass expels a frustrated sigh, so I come up with an alternative. ‘Here’s an idea. Why don’t you go by yourself?’

‘I’m not—’ She doesn’t finish her thought because we’re interrupted by a knock at the door. ‘That must be Poppy,’ she says, ‘come to collect her flowers.’ She emphasises ‘her’, an obvious dig at me, but I don’t care about the bloody peonies either!

Cass opens the door.

‘Hi,’ says Poppy, stepping inside our cramped room. ‘I promise not to be in your hair too long. I just wanted to go over some more background for the article.’

‘More background?’ I ask. ‘Didn’t we cover everything this afternoon at the bar?’

‘Actually, it’s a little more delicate than what we’ve already discussed. I have some questions about you and Lorenzo – or rather, Leo.’

‘What?’ My eyes fly towards Cass. ‘What is she talking about?’

‘I have no idea. Poppy?’

‘I know you said “off the record” before.’

‘Yes, and I meant that,’ I say. Until now, Poppy’s presence had been mostly unobtrusive, but this tangent is extremely *intrusive*.

‘And I understand – I really do – but I just heard from my editor. There’s a photo going around – of the two of you. I’ve got a copy on my phone.’

My stomach roils as I imagine a grainy photo of me and Leo during uni days, probably at some party and slightly drunk.

Poppy taps on her phone. ‘This one,’ she says, holding it out.

I don’t know if I can look. It’s the Schrodinger’s cat of photographs. If I *don’t* look then it won’t be a photo of me with Leo from a decade ago. I freeze, my eyes fixed on the rose-coloured carpet.

‘Elle?’

I turn to Cassie. ‘Can you look?’

‘All right.’ She takes the phone from Poppy, glances at it, and says, ‘Bloody hell, that was quick.’

‘Quick? How do you mean?’ I ask, confused.

She lifts her gaze to meet mine. ‘It’s from today. From your show.’

‘What?’ I snatch the phone from her and there he is, in profile, at the edge of the runway, holding up those stupid peonies. My hand is outreached and in the split second it took to take the photo, it looks like I’m smiling right at him. ‘Well, fuck.’

‘So, you see?’ Poppy asks, taking her phone back. ‘It really does seem like there’s a story and with us going to his show tomo—’

‘I’m not going,’ I say, interrupting her. ‘I’ve already told Cassie. I don’t want to see him. It ended badly between us and —’ My voice catches, betraying me. I was aiming for ‘casual dismissal’ but ever since I saw him again in that bloody restaurant, long-buried emotions have been popping up like jack-in-the-boxes – a terrifying toy for a child, by the way, and an apt analogy for what I’ve experienced over the past fortnight.

Damn him for showing up again like that! And why now?

‘I’m really sorry, Elle, but...’ Poppy exchanges an unreadable look with Cassie. ‘I’m afraid my editor is insisting that we pursue this angle of the story.’

‘Sorry? I don’t understand.’

‘What she’s saying is that if you don’t go to Leo’s show, there is no article,’ says Cassie.

‘I hate this, I really do,’ says Poppy, ‘but Cassie’s right.’

‘I see.’ A pinprick to a balloon would have less impact than this revelation has on me. I sink onto the bed, my shoulders slumped.

‘It’s your decision, of course,’ says Poppy, ‘and I completely understand if you’d like to call it good.’

All that bluster before about Bliss Designs trending on socials – I mean, it is trending and that’s great – but trending for a day is hardly the level of exposure I could secure for us if I agree to Poppy’s request. She’s working on a deep dive into us as a fashion label – from our (extremely humble) beginnings right up until today. This could lead to opportunities I cannot even imagine.

I stand and go to the window, looking through the gauzy curtains at the street below. Parisians and tourists mingle on the footpaths, scooters zip in and out of traffic, and there are a surprising number of Citroëns on the road – though I suppose they *are* French.

What’s that expression? You’ll regret the things you didn’t do more than those you did. Or something like that. I turn my back on the view.

‘All right. I’ll tell you about me and Leo – but just the gist, okay?’

‘Okay,’ says Poppy.

‘And his show tomorrow?’ asks Cassie, her expression hopeful. I nod and she grins at me, her dimples prominent. She’s clearly still on the whole collaboration tangent, but I have time to dissuade her from that. At least, I hope I do.

Ten minutes later, after I’ve given Poppy a potted history of my relationship with Leo, she stops recording and puts her phone away.

‘Excellent,’ she says, ‘that should be all I need for now. I’ll leave you two to – well, whatever it is you do after one of the biggest moments of your career – and I’ll meet you in the lobby tomorrow morning.’

She grins at us and I do my best to return the smile.

After she leaves, I fix my eyes on Cassie. ‘Happy now?’ I ask her.

‘I just want what’s best for—’

I cut her off. ‘I know. So,’ I say, changing tack, ‘would it be completely ridiculous to take a long bath, then a nap?’

‘You mean because we’re in Paris and you can bathe and sleep when we get home?’

‘Precisely.’

‘Not at all. I’ll take my book downstairs to the restaurant and give you some time by yourself.’ She gathers her belongings and kisses my cheek before she goes. ‘See you later, Bean,’ she says, pulling the door closed behind her.

\* \* \*

I thought I was nervous yesterday, moments before *my* show, but this!

‘You all right, Bean?’ Cassie asks. ‘You look like you’re about to be sick.’

‘Yup.’ I lower the car window and breathe in deeply, focusing on landmarks as we wind our way through the streets of Paris. I’d rather be on my way to get a pap smear than to watch my ex’s fashion show. Add in a bikini wax, a trip to the dentist, and having bamboo spikes shoved under my fingernails, and I would *still* choose that itinerary over the Lorenzo show.

The cab stops close to the Carrousel du Louvre, and Poppy pays the driver and gets out. This is the part where I’m supposed to follow her, but it’s like I’m glued to the seat.

‘Bean?’

‘Stop calling me that,’ I snap.

‘Sorry,’ says Cassie. ‘Look, I’ll be right there with you the whole time, okay?’

Poppy is waiting on the footpath for us – the show starts soon – but I stay put, turning to Cassie. ‘Can we *please* just go back to the hotel?’ I ask, clutching her forearm.

She looks at me, her expression inscrutable, but I notice the dark shadows under her eyes. ‘If that’s what you really want,’ she says eventually.

Only I can't do it. Cass has put her career on hold for me, for Bliss Designs, and the past few weeks have been the most intense we've endured. The least I can do is go to this bloody show, even if it's only for Cass. What's twenty minutes out of my life? I'll be back at the hotel and getting ready for the H&M party before I know it.

'It's okay,' I say, feigning enthusiasm.

'Really?' she asks, confused.

'I know I keep flip-flopping. I'm sorry. Let's just get this over with and draw a line under the Leo Jones chapter, once and for all.'

She pats my hand, then climbs out of the car. Begrudgingly, I follow, joining her and Poppy on the footpath. There are dozens of fashionably dressed people milling about, maybe even a hundred, and the buzz of excitement is palpable.

I signal for Cass and Poppy to follow me, then lead the way to the long escalators that will take us below ground. At the bottom, I retrieve the tickets from my clutch and stride towards the woman with the clipboard who's closely guarding a velvet rope.

I hand her the tickets and she nods, then signals to one of the smartly dressed attendants.

'*Par ici, je vous prie,*' they say to us, and we follow them deeper into the pavilion where the hum of excitement amplifies, voices bouncing off the floors and walls, creating a cacophony of anticipation. The attendant leads us through the milling crowd and into the space where my show – along with several others – was held yesterday.

Overnight, the space has been transformed, with giant screens suspended from the ceiling either side of the runway. The audience is about two-thirds full and the attendant directs us to our seats. Left side, centre front row. So much for standing in the back and sneaking out immediately afterwards.

I sit, setting my clutch on my lap, and clasp it tightly. Cassie sits next to me and Poppy next to her. Only when we're all seated does it hit me that Amelia Windsor, editor-in-chief



of *Nouveau*, is sitting opposite us on the other side of the runway. Amelia Windsor! I wonder if she was at my show.

I lean across Cassie to speak to Poppy. ‘Have you ever met her?’ I ask.

‘Who?’

I jerk my head in Ms Windsor’s direction. ‘Amelia Windsor,’ I whisper.

Poppy looks across the way. ‘*Oh*,’ she says, drawing out the sound. She looks at me and shakes her head. ‘Not yet. I doubt she’d be interested in a lowly writer like me.’

‘Mmm.’ I’m still watching Amelia Windsor when she appears to look straight at me – and I mean ‘appears’ because she’s wearing her ubiquitous sunglasses. I look away, my eyes landing on Cate Blanchett chatting to Sandra Bullock.

‘Oh my god, this place is a who’s who,’ says Cassie low in my ear.

‘I know. I feel like the great pretender.’

‘You’re not. Or at least you won’t be for long. You’re Elle Bliss, don’t forget.’

The rest of the seats fill up quickly and I open my clutch to peek at the time. One minute to go. Then the houselights dim, the hum of conversation immediately dies, and the only sounds are people shifting in their seats and one person coughing.

‘*Mesdames et messieurs*,’ says the announcer, ‘Lorenzo présente sa collection, *Hors des sentiers battus* – Off the Beaten Track.’

Well, that’s almost as intriguing as the mystery of what shoe models will be wearing down the runway.

Music starts – sounding very much like a Western theme song – and an array of images appears on the screens. They’re photographs of a family with two children – a boy, who’s easily recognisable as Leo, and a girl – along with their mother. I glance around the vast space as the images dissolve

into each other, all displaying this happy trio in various permutations, either smiling into the camera or at each other.

Leo was a sweet-looking little boy, all round cheeks and large grey eyes, and my traitorous heart twangs at the sight of his infectious grin. He used to talk about his mum and his sister with such affection when we were together and I know how much he loved them – *loves* them, I should say. His father's absence from the photographs is glaring and I recall that there wasn't any love lost between the two of them, but I can't remember why.

After about thirty seconds, the photographs still, each screen inhabited by just one – Leo and his sister and mother laughing together – then the stage lights hit the runway.

All the times I've imagined Leo's show since he told me about it – and I would never admit this to Cass, but that's been a *lot* – I couldn't have predicted what walks down the runway.

And they call *me* a wunderkind!

So, what *do* shoe models wear down the runway?

In this instance, fully realised Western-inspired outfits – mostly low-slung boot-cut jeans, fringed suede vests and jackets, and sheer-cotton bustier tops. There are several graphic T-shirts in the mix and every model is wearing a super sexy cowboy hat. Leo must have been lying when he said he didn't collaborate. But whoever the other designer is, these models look *hot* – the good kind, not the pass-out-from-heat-exhaustion kind.

They are also wearing the coolest shoes I have ever seen.

Leo has a clear point of view, leaning into the classic cowboy boot for inspiration, especially that distinctive heel, but elevating it and adapting it to produce ankle boots, knee-high boots, mules, and even pumps. I definitely want a pair of those Kelly-green heels – not that I'd tell him that, of course.

And from the changing projections on the screens – shots of barren deserts covered in cacti, vineyards, paper-pulping machinery, and even a coffee plantation – it seems that Leo has been experimenting with various vegan leathers, not just cacti. I read something about the various leathers now being made, but it's incredible how good it all looks.

And I am so swept up in the show – the easy sexiness of each look, the impressive designs of the shoes – that before I know it, it's the finale and here comes Leo, wearing worn-in jeans, a fringed vest that reveals his taut stomach, and cowboy boots – clearly his own design. He looks like sex on toast – the

bastard – and he’s escorting supermodel, Franzia, who’s wearing those heels I want so much.

As they approach the middle of the runway, it’s hard to miss how tightly she’s gripping his arm – her knuckles are white – and a sharp pang of jealousy rips through me, taking me completely by surprise. So, a twanging heart and now pangs of jealousy? *What* is going on?

The two of them reach the end of the runway and pose for the posse of photographers, the large screens now showing a live feed of the runway. Then someone hands Leo a microphone.

‘Hi, everyone, I’m Lorenzo,’ he says in that drawl of his and I notice that, even as he addresses the crowd, Franzia keeps a firm grip on him. ‘I just wanted to say that I would not be standing here today if it weren’t for one woman in particular.’

*Is he talking about me?* I think, instantly realising how ridiculous (and narcissistic) that is. Especially since, until a couple of weeks ago, Leo had completely forgotten I even existed.

‘My mom,’ he continues, and there’s an audible ‘aww’ from the audience. ‘She couldn’t be here today – she’s having some health problems right now...’

The ‘aww’ turns into a hundred-person gasp – one I contribute to along with Amelia Windsor who, when I glance over, is literally clutching her pearls.

‘That’s awfully kind of you folks,’ says Leo, his drawl intensifying. ‘But even though my mom couldn’t be here today, the second most important woman in my life is’ – Franzia smiles smugly, her strong jawline tensing – ‘my sister, Brandy.’

Several things happen at once: a young woman across the way shyly raises her hand, the audience breaks into loud applause, and Franzia’s face sours so intensely, it looks like she just downed a shot of cat wee.

‘Isn’t that sweet?’ Cassie asks over the loud ovation.

‘What?’

‘Mentioning his sister like that.’

I shrug, unwilling to admit to Cassie that not only is it sweet, but it also paints Leo in a markedly different light to the bastard who left suddenly, then ghosted me.

‘Anyhoo,’ says Leo, and the audience quietens. ‘I just wanted to shout out to Brandy and my mom – get well soon, Mom – I love you!’ he says into the lens of the video camera. ‘And to thank you all for coming, especially my old friend, the extremely talented designer, Elle Bliss.’

‘What?’ I clap my hand over my mouth, mortified that came out so loud.

Leo chuckles into the mic, but I’m paralysed, barely registering Cassie’s elbow in my ribs.

‘Have a great rest of your day, folks,’ says Leo and with that, he turns and leads his models back down the runway, a sour-faced Franzia by his side. When he passes me, we lock eyes and he winks.

Yesterday, he brings me flowers and now he mentions me at the end of his show?

Utter, utter bastard. How dare he be so... so... *lovely* – especially after our encounter in London.

And what am I supposed to do with that?

\* \* \*

*Poppy*

Well, fuck me. I have no idea what to unpack first – that Leo shouted out to Elle, that his sister is in Paris, or that Franzia (literally) has her claws in him. The first is brilliant and plays right into our plan to reunite the lovers. The second is an interesting plot twist and could be used to our advantage. The third, not so much. We have got to get Franzia out of the picture, even if it’s a one-sided affair, so to speak.

I glance across the runway to where Brandy is chatting to the Fanning sisters and decide on my tactic.

‘So,’ I say, turning to Elle and Cassie, ‘should we hang around and wait for him to come out? Say hello?’

Elle is beet red and it’s hard to tell if that’s signposting fury, passion, embarrassment, or all three.

She’s visibly frustrated, so Cassie answers for her. ‘Yes, absolutely! Wonderful idea.’

But Elle quickly recovers enough to protest. ‘I want to go back to the hotel – to get ready for the H&M party.’

‘That’s hours away,’ says Cassie, glancing my way.

‘It really would be good for the article if you congratulated him,’ I add.

‘Congrat—’ Elle cuts herself off, her eyes darting about – first towards Brandy, then to the business end of the runway, where Leo is most likely to emerge from, and back to us. ‘Look, they’re already shooing people out to set up for the next show,’ she says, indicating the attendants who are straightening chairs. ‘We should go.’

She stands and sidles past us, beelining for the exit.

When she’s out of earshot, I sigh. ‘Your sister is becoming a master at escaping,’ I say to Cassie.

‘But that was good for us, wasn’t it?’

‘Him mentioning Elle like that? Oh, yes, that was *very* good for us. I couldn’t have scripted it better.’

‘So, you didn’t? Script it, I mean?’

‘Oh, no. That was all him.’

Cassie seems puzzled. ‘Oh.’

‘I know I’m a matchmaker, but beyond ensuring he had a ticket to Elle’s show yesterday, there’s only so much I can do to influence Leo’s behaviour.’

‘Is that why you’re doubling down on the article angle?’ she asks. ‘Adding an impatient editor and a faux photoshoot...?’

I wince at her pointed question – she’s not wrong. ‘I know. Sometimes the subterfuge seems to take on a life of its own. I don’t *love* this part, being the puppet master.’

Cassie nods, seeming to understand.

‘Are you two coming or what?’

Cassie and I appear to have exhausted Elle’s patience, as she’s doubled back and glares at us, hands on hips.

‘Sorry, just talking about the show,’ I say, holding up my notebook to sell the fib.

Her gaze swings towards the end of the runway again and, in an instant, her eyes turn to saucers. I look over and there he is – Leo.

‘Come on,’ says Elle, rushing towards the exit. This time, Cassie and I follow.

\* \* \*

‘Hello, darling,’ I say, flopping onto my hotel bed. I snuggle into the generous array of pillows, feeling the full weight of exhaustion.

‘I miss you so much, I am this close to catching the next Eurostar to Paris,’ Tristan says, pinching his thumb and forefinger together.

‘Can you? I can probably wangle an extra ticket to the H&M party.’

‘I assume that is literally a big-ticket item.’

‘The biggest.’

‘Do you want me to come?’ he asks, serious now.

‘I *do*...’

‘But?’

‘I’ll be working, and this case has already taken an unexpected turn. It will be full-on tonight.’

‘Anything like that party in Poros?’ We chuckle softly, sharing the joke. Poros was where Vittoria, an Italian contessa,

who was supposed to be a potential fake wife for Tristan, propositioned him. This was while I was fending off advances from her creepy friend. Tristan and I ended up swapping cabins on her yacht for the night, so when she showed up to seduce him, she actually crawled into bed with me. The situation became even more absurd from there.

‘Likely as intense, but this time, I’m attempting to unite the couple, not keep them apart.’

‘Yours is an odd job,’ he says, his eyes radiating mirth.

‘Tell me about you,’ I say, changing tack.

He laughs. ‘I will not bore you with the details.’

‘What have you been doing without me?’ I ask, fishing. I’ve only been gone five nights – tonight’s the sixth – but I’ve missed him too. This is the longest we’ve been apart since we got married.

‘Pining,’ he responds.

‘Good,’ I retort. His mouth quirks, his eyes narrowing in a way that sends a lightning bolt between my legs.

‘If you keep looking at me like that...’ He trails off, his stare intensifying.

‘Should we?’ I ask.

‘I’ve sort of already started.’

I gasp at the thought of what my husband is doing off-camera.

‘Thank goodness it’s the weekend,’ I tease. ‘Definitely not suitable workplace behaviour.’

‘Are you joining me?’

‘I’ve sort of already started,’ I parrot.

He grins at me lasciviously, and we stop talking, our eyes locked.

\* \* \*



‘Sorry! I fell asleep and...’ I shrug, hoping the Bliss sisters will forgive my tardiness.

After Tristan and I enjoyed some ‘long-distance relations’, I did fall asleep, waking with a start only twenty minutes ago. And knowing I was going to one of the biggest fashion parties on the calendar, I hope I’ve done a decent enough job of getting ready in record time.

‘You’re only a few minutes late,’ says Cassie, ‘and you look fantastic.’

‘Oh, thanks.’ I look down at my outfit – black cigarette trousers, a sleeveless silk blouse with a pussy bow, and Tristan’s tuxedo jacket. I’m carrying a diamante-encrusted clutch and wearing my one pair of stilettos – *model’s own*, a magazine would put in the caption. Everything else was procured or borrowed post-makeover. Before then, I couldn’t have told you the difference between a pussy bow and a pussy cat. I’ve also leant into my bedhead hair, parting it low on the right and zhuzhing it to look deliberately messy. I added a cat eye and a red lip and *voilà!*

Elle smiles at me, but she seems miffed. Or maybe she’s just worried about the party. It’s a big night for her professionally – a chance to schmooze with the who’s who of fashion – and we all know that Leo will be there. Based on what he said at the end of his show, he’s going to seek her out.

‘Oh, sorry!’ I say, realising that I have (rudely) not repaid the compliment. ‘You both look incredible. That,’ I say, pointing to Elle’s outfit, a mix of pieces from her current collection, which have been altered to fit her petite frame perfectly, ‘looks amazing on you. And Cassie, my mum would *die* for that outfit!’

‘What?’ say the sisters in unison.

‘Oh my god. No, not like that. Sorry!’ I shake my head at myself. ‘I just mean that my mum *loves* movies from the thirties and forties – all those sassy women. I practically grew up on those films – that’s why I love your collection so much, Elle. And Cassie, you look like a film star from the 1940s – that’s all I meant...’

They're smirking at me now, clearly enjoying watching me dig myself out of this hole.

'Yeah, yeah. I know. I'm cursed with verbal diarrhoea. Have I sufficiently backpedalled?' I ask.

Cassie is full-on laughing at me now. 'Yes,' she says through the laughter.

'Come on,' says Elle, linking her arm through mine and steering me towards the door. Maybe this display of amity means she's finally warming to me. Then she drops a clinker. 'Just make sure you don't put your foot in your mouth at the party,' she says. 'You won't be a fashion journalist for long if you keep telling designers that their clothes remind you of your mum.'

Ouch.

Though, she's probably right.

‘Wow, this party is going off!’ Poppy exclaims as we walk into the enormous venue.

I agree – the theme appears to be a riff on Carnivale and the organisers have gone all out – but you’d think that Poppy has never been to an event like this before. Though, to be fair, there probably *aren’t* events like this in the world of health and wellbeing. She’s probably more accustomed to yogis handing out shots of wheatgrass than waiters dressed as plague doctors bearing trays of brimming champagne flutes.

Speaking of...

I signal to a passing drinks waiter, and we relieve them of three flutes. I take a sip of fizz just as Cass holds her glass up to make a toast – oops.

‘To my little sister, who has taken Paris Fashion Week by storm.’

It’s generous, though I’m not sure ‘taken by storm’ accurately depicts the coverage we’ve received since my show. It’s been positive but hardly effusive.

Cassie’s eyes mist over, and she adds, ‘I am so proud of you, Bean.’

‘I’ve been meaning to ask about that since this morning,’ says Poppy, clinking her glass against Cassie’s, then mine. ‘Why “Bean”?’

‘Nickname from before Elle was born,’ Cassie explains. ‘When my parents—’

‘*Our* parents.’

‘Sorry, yes, *our* parents. When they told me Mum was having a baby and that it was in her tummy, I got confused because I couldn’t see anything – her stomach was still flat. Then she told me that the baby was only as big as a bean. So, that’s what I called the baby. And it stuck.’

‘That’s sweet,’ Poppy says.

It may be, but childhood memories are doing nothing to assuage my mounting nerves. I take another swig of fizz – French courage? – and try to appreciate that it’s a huge step up from what we usually buy from Aldi.

‘Excuse me, sorry to interrupt, but you’re Elle Bliss, aren’t you?’

I pivot towards the oddly familiar voice and find myself face-to-chest with Tom Finn. Tom Finn(!) – style guru, co-host of the most popular fashion show on television, and the personification of ‘debonair’. He’s taller than I thought – definitely over six foot – but as expected, he smells divine and looks a million pounds.

He smiles at me kindly, head tilted as he awaits my reply, but I’m utterly tongue-tied. In the end, Cass has to nudge me to get me to speak.

‘Uh, yes, hello.’

He holds out his hand for me to shake, which I do, and he takes my hand in both of his. Tom Finn is holding my hand!

‘I just wanted to tell you, I absolutely *loved* your show yesterday.’

‘Oh, thank you,’ I squeak. He is still holding my hand!

‘Your aesthetic is classic, it’s *classy*, but you’ve also got that Elle Bliss *je ne sais quoi*. I imagine big things are coming your way. In fact—’

‘You found her.’ *And* that’s Hilde Klein, supermodel royalty. I try not to stare but she’s even more beautiful in person than I could ever have imagined.

‘Hello, I’m Hilde,’ she says, reaching past Tom, her hand outstretched. He releases me and I shake hands with Hilde.

‘We loved your show,’ she says.

‘I was just telling her,’ says Tom, nodding in agreement as they both regard me intently.

Cassie nudges me again. ‘Thank you. I— that means the world to me. Oh, and this is my sister, Cassie Bliss, and Poppy Dean, who writes for *Nouveau*.’

There’s an exchange of polite hellos but it’s hard to miss the odd look on Hilde Klein’s face when she greets Poppy. I wonder if there’s some sort of history there.

‘We’ve been talking,’ Hilde says, turning her attention back to me, ‘and we think you would be a great guest judge for our show.’

My jaw drops and all I can manage is, ‘Er.’

‘That’s brilliant,’ says Cassie. ‘Elle would be thrilled.’ At least one of us sounds like a grown-arse woman and not an extra from *The Last of Us*. ‘Here’s my card,’ she continues. ‘I’m Bliss Designs’ business manager.’

‘Excellent,’ says Hilde, slipping it into her clutch. ‘We will be in touch. *Tschüss*.’ She adds that million-watt smile and wiggles her fingers at me as she goes.

Tom squeezes my arm. ‘So, I guess this means we will see you soon!’

We exchange smiles – at least, I *hope* I’ve achieved a smile, rather than grimacing at the poor man – and he leaves.

‘Whoa!’ says Poppy.

‘Wowser!’ exclaims Cassie.

Then there’s an ‘eee’ sound, like the one the bath makes when you let the water out.

‘Elle? Are you all right?’ asks Cassie.

Oh, that sound is coming from me. I cease eee-ing and look up at my sister. ‘Did that just happen?’ I ask, not trusting

my own eyes and ears.

‘Tom Finn and Hilde Klein offering you a gig?’

I nod.

‘Yes!’ Cassie answers with a wide grin, her eyebrows lifting so high, they almost reach her hairline.

‘Elle, that’s brilliant,’ says Poppy. ‘And *so* deserved.’

‘I’m going to be on their show,’ I say, the words barely permeating my fugue.

‘You *are*,’ Cassie confirms again. I may need her to tell me a hundred more times before it sinks in. ‘Now,’ she says, surveying the room, ‘let’s see who else we can network with.’ Her eyes glint with excitement, and she gulps down the rest of her champagne, then calls over her shoulder, ‘Follow me.’

Poppy and I exchange looks – hers signposting excitement, and mine? Well, I’m unsure, but I do know the fizz is now hitting my bloodstream. Coupled with the offer to appear on Hilde Klein and Tom Finn’s show as a guest judge, I’m riding such an intense high, anything feels possible.

\* \* \*

‘Listen to what I am saying. It’s *not* going to happen.’

Cassie and I square off, eyeing each other with matching Paddington Bear hard stares.

‘How about—’ interjects Poppy but I cut her off.

‘How about you stay out of it? Because this is between me and my sister.’

‘Sorry.’ Poppy raises both hands in contrition and now I feel like an absolute shit.

‘No, I’m sorry,’ I say. ‘That was ill-mannered.’

It wasn’t just ill-mannered; I keep having to remind myself that Poppy is a *journalist*. What if she paints me as a diva with questionable manners?

‘Look,’ she says, ‘it’s been a big week – an *intense* week – and you not only put on an incredible show, but you’ve also

had to deal with me following you about like an over-eager puppy *and* your ex is here *and* it seems like you're in the cusp of a professional break-through. You're entitled to feel overwhelmed.'

'That's generous but—'

'*But,*' I say, interrupting Cassie, 'none of that is an excuse for having poor manners. I know you're on my side, Poppy, and I apologise.'

'Accepted,' she says, and I can't help but admire how easily she forgives and, generally, how good-natured she is.

'All that aside,' says Cassie, 'we're meeting up with Leo tonight.'

'No!'

'I'm wearing my business manager hat, Elle. When we get back to London, I'll pop my big sister hat back on and you can moan and whinge and we'll down a bucket of cheap wine and a dozen packets of even cheaper chocolate biscuits. All right? But for now, we're going over there' – she points to where Leo and his hangers-on are swilling (expensive) wine – 'and saying hello.'

It's rare that Cassie puts me in my place. I think the last time was when I borrowed her razor to shave my initials into the (poor) cat when I was a pre-teen. It sobers me up immediately, from both the fizz and my encounter with two fashion megastars.

'Okay,' I say.

'Really?' she asks and I laugh.

'That whole speech and you're surprised it worked?'

'Well, yes.' We share a gentle laugh and Poppy steps between us.

'Now that's sorted... Shall we?' She nods towards Leo et al.

I down the rest of my fizz, set my empty glass on a passing waiter's tray, and give Cassie and Poppy a thumbs up. Cass

smirks at me, then leads the way. I fall into step and Poppy brings up the rear.

‘Lorenzo!’ says Cassie loudly as we approach. She holds out her hand. ‘Cassie Bliss, Bliss Designs.’

This is all for show, of course. Cassie has known Leo nearly as long as I have. I also don’t know that I’ve ever really seen Cassie in full business-manager mode before. She’s bold and confident and I can’t help admiring how savvily she’s navigating this event.

Leo leans in for a cheek kiss and says something in Cassie’s ear that makes her smile.

‘And, of course, you know my sister, Elle,’ she says, loud enough for everyone in the vicinity to hear. She turns and waves me forward.

Leo edges towards me and I hold out my hand for him to shake, because that’s what you do, right? Shake hands with the only man you’ve ever loved when you meet him in a professional environment? But Leo is having none of that. He gently clasps my shoulders and leans in for a triple cheek kiss, as though we’re close friends *and* Parisian.

My disloyal heart hammers in my chest as his scent – the distinct Leo scent that’s been imprinted on my brain for a decade and a half – assaults my senses and I instantly feel light-headed.

‘Hey,’ he says, steadying me on my feet. ‘Are you okay?’

I nod, not trusting my voice. But I need to say *something* – what if he thinks he’s made me swoon? ‘I’m fine – too much fizz on an empty stomach,’ I lie.

He nods in understanding, flashing me a smile. *That* smile. It’s even more potent than his scent and my heart hammers louder. Last time we were face to face, he came off as an arrogant wanker. But this bloke... he seems... well, like *Leo*. It’s also hard to ignore that he’s sexy as hell, having thrown a camel-coloured, single-breasted linen sportscoat over that cowboy ensemble. I’ve never really had a thing for cowboys – until now.



‘Hey, I really loved your show – honestly, it was impressive,’ he says, his eyes boring into mine. My breath hitches and I succumb to the moment, my eyes locked on his and basking in his Leo-ness.

‘Thank you,’ I say, recovering. ‘And *yours*... Just, wowser.’ I wish I could more eloquently explain how much it blew me away – the seamless collaboration, his successful foray into vegan leather – but I’m still tongue-tied. I’d like to imagine it’s because I’ve just met two of my idols, but deep down I know it’s because of him. Myriad emotions war inside me – nostalgia, tenderness... and, yes, attraction. Bucket loads of attraction. There’s also a smidge of hurt peeking out, but it’s outnumbered for the moment and I shush it.

‘Thank you kindly, ma’am,’ he says, laying on the Texan drawl and tipping an imaginary hat. ‘Who would have thought those wide-eyed kids from Kingston would end up here, hey?’

It’s jarring, his question.

‘I did,’ I say, partly baffled, partly miffed. ‘It’s been my dream since I was a little girl, remember?’

‘I do remember, yes,’ he says with a wink. ‘I was just, you know...?’

Oh, right – it was rhetorical. *Idiot*. But before I can respond, we’re interrupted.

‘Hi, you must be Elle.’

Brandy. She’s tall and slim and impossibly pretty – essentially, a female version of Leo, only her hair is the same glossy brown that Leo’s used to be.

‘I’m Brandy, Leo’s sister,’ she adds when I don’t answer her right away.

‘Sorry! Hello, I’m Elle.’ She looks at me oddly and I realise what I’ve said. ‘And you knew that already,’ I say with a shake of my head. ‘Anyway, nice to meet you.’

‘You too! Leo tells me you used to date – when he was living in England.’ What may seem to her as a casual remark is yet another punch to my gut.

‘Um, yes,’ I manage, right as Leo says, ‘*Brandy.*’ He exchanges a look with her, the kind that says, ‘Behave, little sis.’ I know that look because Cassie uses it on me from time to time. Brandy presses her lips together in a suppressed smile.

‘So...’ she says, beaming at me brightly, ‘have you been to Paris before?’

‘Er, yes,’ I say, feigning excitement. I’m still reeling from ‘used to date’. That’s one way to describe spending every waking hour together – *and* most nights. ‘Not as often as I’d like – work is pretty intense,’ I add, trying to hold up my side of the conversation. Based on tonight, I’d say a doorknob has better conversational skills than I do.

‘I’m sorry I missed your show,’ she says. ‘I only got in last night. But Leo wouldn’t stop raving about it.’

‘Really?’ This both surprises and delights me, but when I glance at Leo, he’s looking at the floor, shaking his head in embarrassment. So much for reining in his sister; she seems hellbent on embarrassing him, or at least clueless she’s doing it. It’s quite sweet how his cheeks are flushing.

I want to hear more – and to share with him what I loved about his show – but then he says, ‘Please excuse me,’ and turns away to speak to Cassie and Poppy.

*No, talk to me!*

It takes a significant amount of willpower not to go after him, but it would be impolite to abandon Brandy. *And* I’d be admitting – to myself, as well as everyone in earshot – that he’d affected me. *Affects* me.

This party was supposed to be the crowning event of the most extraordinary week in my career. But so far, I’ve bumbled my way through a conversation with two of my idols and now I’ve allowed my ex-boyfriend to crawl back under my skin.

Gah!

‘That’s on me,’ says Brandy, drawing my attention back to her. ‘I seem to have developed a superhero-like ability to embarrass my brother.’

‘Or should that be supervillain?’ I ask.

‘Hah! Totally,’ she says with a laugh. ‘Oh, you’re dry too.’ She signals to a passing waiter and in moments, we’re both holding full flutes of champagne. ‘To you and a successful collection,’ she says, toasting me.

Okay, it isn’t so bad being left to chat with Brandy.

‘Thank you, that’s very kind, especially as you didn’t get to see it.’

‘Oh, wait! Leo sent me this.’ She takes her phone out of her clutch to show me a photo of my finale outfit. ‘Love!’ she says. ‘I am totally ordering this. Oh, and this!’ She swipes and holds up her phone again. ‘This would be perfect for board meetings. Really kick-ass but totally feminine, you know.’

‘You think so? That’s exactly what I was aiming for.’

‘Well, you nailed it. It can be tricky being only one of two women in the room – *and* the youngest – even being the CEO.’ She’s a *CEO*? I do a quick calculation, realising she’s only twenty-seven. Impressive. ‘Wearing this, however,’ she says, ‘I’d feel like I really *belonged* at the head of the table.’

*And* I might be falling for Brandy.

‘That’s... that’s very kind of you to say. You know, you can spend months, even a year, conceptualising a collection then seeing it through to fruition. It’s brilliant hearing that it resonates how you hoped it would.’

‘For sure.’

‘So, what did *you* think of your brother’s show?’ I ask.

‘Oh, it was amazing. I mean, I knew Leo was talented—’ She leans close. ‘Sorry, I know I’m supposed to be calling him Lorenzo when we’re in public, but it’s so hard to get used to.’

‘I can imagine. For me too. Do you happen to know why the change?’ She looks uncomfortable and I worry I’ve overstepped. ‘Never mind, you don’t—’

‘No, that’s okay. It was just something dreamt up by our—I mean, his publicist,’ she replies, clearly wanting to change the subject. ‘So, what did you think of his show?’

Publicly, every comment I make about another designer’s work is positive, even if I think otherwise. And the times I’ve experienced everything from indifference to revulsion have been kept within the confines of Cassie’s and my flat. I’m even careful about what I say in front of my team.

But my reply to Brandy’s question comes easily because it’s true. ‘I loved it. It was so fresh – and that callback to the late-nineties and early-noughties! So playful. Oh, and the shoes!’

She laughs. ‘I know, right! And what about those green heels that Franzia was wearing?’

‘Yes! They were my absolutely fave,’ I gush.

‘Mine too! And they’re made of *cactus* leather. Can you believe it?’

‘I had no idea that was even a thing until recently.’

‘Yeah, he’s gotten really into vegan leathers – ironic considering the family business.’

I cannot, for the life of me, recall what the family business is but rather than ask, I want to know who Leo collaborated

with on the show.

‘So, who was the other designer?’ I ask. ‘Would I know them or are they just breaking out?’

Confusion mars her pretty features. ‘Sorry, I’m not sure what you mean.’

‘Leo’s show. I know he designed the shoes, but what about the garments?’

This obviously confuses her even more. ‘Leo did. He designed everything – jeans, tees, tops, *belts*. He even designed the hat.’

It’s a lot to take in – that my ex is not just a brilliant shoe designer, but he designed his entire collection (literally) head to toe.

Brandy casts her eyes over her shoulder towards Leo and smiles, then turns back to me. ‘I am just so proud of him, especially after everything he sacrificed for me.’

‘Sacrificed?’ This conversation is certainly keeping me on my toes.

‘Yeah, how he stepped up when—’

Only Brandy doesn’t have a chance to finish before we’re interrupted by Ser, Leo’s publicist. Tonight, she’s dressed as a children’s birthday party entertainer, the kind that induces nightmares and leads to a lifetime of therapy.

‘Lorenzo, honey, we *need* you,’ she says, tugging on his arm.

He throws the rest of us an uncomfortable smile, then turns to Ser. ‘Can you hold on a sec? I’m just catching up with some old friends.’

‘Honey,’ she says with a condescending tilt of her head. ‘Now.’

She drags him away and Brandy, Poppy, Cassie, and I huddle together.

‘What was all that about?’ asks Poppy. ‘Do you know?’ she directs at Brandy. ‘And hi, I’m Poppy by the way.’

‘Hi, Poppy, and to answer your question, I haven’t a clue.’

I like Brandy. And in a single conversation, she’s helped me gain a multitude of insights into the Leo of today. Insights that negate the impression he left when we met up in London a few weeks ago. Between what she’s told me and how he’s behaved tonight, he seems a lot more like the Leo I remember than the persona I’m guessing Ser conjured up for him.

This realisation sends another jolt of remorse rocketing through me. I was a little curt with him earlier, regarding his comment about our aspirations when we were younger. He was being lovely, and I need to apologise. I stand on tiptoes, wondering where Ser has taken him, but I can’t see over the crowd – a disadvantage of being five-foot-two.

‘Scuse me. Scuse me, everyone.’ Someone taps loudly on a microphone, then blows into it – a *big* no-no. I imagine all the sound techs are shuddering. ‘Hey! I’m over here.’

A lighting tech must have worked out this is a moment of some kind, because suddenly there’s a spotlight on a small platform – a stage of sorts – and on it, Franzia is waving one arm over her head as though she’s hailing a bus.

Beside her stands a very confused-looking Leo. He squints in our direction, but it’s unclear if he can make us out through the glare of the spotlight.

‘Ello, everyone. Scuse me!’ Franzia again and, holy shit, she has an awful voice – a high-pitched scratchy whine. She also sounds like an extra from *Emily in Paris* who has wandered onto the set of *Emmerdale*, which is odd. I thought she was European, though I’d be hard-pressed to name a specific country from her bizarre accent.

‘I ’ave an announcement about me and Lorenzo,’ she says, grabbing one of Leo’s hands and pressing it into her (formidable) chest. Leo seems either mystified or horrified – perhaps both.

*What is going on?* I wonder.

And then Franzia drops her bombshell.

‘We’re engaged!’

They're *what*?

There's a burst of camera flashes and Franzia transforms back into the supermodel in an instant, draping herself over Leo and angling her head this way and that for the photographers. Meanwhile, as well-wishers rush the stage and pat him on the back, Leo looks like the proverbial deer in headlights.

When I look over at Cassie, she seems just as perplexed as I am.

'What the fuck?' she says, and Cassie rarely says 'fuck'.

'Oh my god,' says Brandy, looking open-mouthed at the rest of us.

'So, you didn't know about the announcement?' Poppy asks her.

'Not a clue,' she replies. 'And not just about the announcement. I didn't even know they were dating.'

'Did Leo?' Poppy asks. 'He seemed to be caught completely off-guard up there.'

'I guess, but despite the whole "Lorenzo" thing, my brother's a really private person. Maybe he was just uncomfortable with the attention.'

'Maybe,' says Poppy.

'And he was probably hoping to tell our mom before anything was announced. Anyhoo, I should go congratulate him,' says Brandy. 'Hey, are you okay?' she asks me, but I can barely hear her over my ragged breathing.

'Elle?' Cassie says, grasping my arm and peering at me, concerned. 'Are you all right? It's like you've seen a ghost.'

'I need to get out of here,' I say. I turn and push my way through the crowd, heading towards what I hope is the exit.

Seeing Leo tonight – with how lovely he was to me and after everything Brandy told me about him – part of me had entertained the idea...

That what?

*That maybe we could reconnect*, I admit to myself. Or at the very least, collaborate on a collection, like Cassie has begged me to.

But now?

The last thing I want is to spend time with him, especially the amount of time required to design a collection together. Because the truth is, Leo Jones is my kryptonite and now he's back under my skin and – worse – engaged to a fucking supermodel. If we work together, I am positive I will end up falling back in love with a man I cannot have.

I look like I've just seen a ghost? No shit, Cass. It's the ghost of boyfriend past and it is *terrifying*.

\* \* \*

*Poppy*

After Elle disappears, Cassie and I say a hasty goodbye to Brandy, asking her to pass on our congratulations to Leo – even though it was patently obvious he had no idea that was going to happen and looked about as happy as Eeyore on a bad day.

'What on earth was that?' asks Cassie as we wind our way to the exit.

'I have no idea.'

Just before we step outside, she tugs on my arm. 'Tell me you have a plan.' We stare at each other, me biting my top lip. 'Poppy?'

'Not right this second. I still can't— That was—' I shake my head.

'It was. And how did he look to you? Leo, I mean?'

'When Franzia said they were engaged?'

'Yes.'

'Confused, horrified, *blindsided*. I don't think Brandy's right. There's private and there's "I have no idea what is happening right now".'



‘Then this must be his publicist’s doing, right?’

‘That’s what I think. Hot new designer, whose star is on the rise, plus world’s biggest supermodel. It’s publicity gold.’

‘Do you think they’re even... you know?’ she asks, her face contorting with distaste.

‘Fucking?’ She purses her lips, chastising me. ‘Sorry, that was crass – and unprofessional. I’m just a little discombobulated.’

‘But you can fix this, right?’

‘Look, we don’t know if this is a publicity stunt or if it’s legit, but if Leo is really engaged to Franzia, then... well, I’m not sure there’s anything I can do.’

‘Right.’

‘I’ll get Marie onto it right away. And I’ll speak to Nasrin tonight, get her thoughts. Okay?’

She sighs. ‘Fine.’

‘Hey,’ I say, grasping her arm to reassure her, ‘there’s still hope.’

Her open book of a face tells me she doesn’t believe me. I don’t wholly believe me either, but I’ve had cases in far worse predicaments than this and most of those turned out as I hoped.

‘We should find Elle,’ she says, and we head out into the night.

\* \* \*

‘Fuck me, I would never have seen that coming,’ say Nasrin, echoing my thoughts.

‘I’ve already spoken to Marie and she’s going to dig into the extent of the Leo–Franzia “relationship”.’ I use air quotes, making Nas smile.

‘Yeah, it does seem a little convenient. So, if turns out to be a sham, what are you thinking? Proceed with the collaboration angle and hope they fall back in love?’

‘Exactly.’

‘Yeah, that’s what I would do too.’

‘Of course, the tricky part of that is that Elle is no longer willing to entertain the idea.’

‘Of a collaboration? Did she say that?’

‘Not exactly. She was silent all the way back to the hotel, but Cassie sent me a text after I got to my room. Elle is firmly in the no-fucking-way camp when it comes to working with Leo.’

‘Hmm. Do you think Cassie can get her to change her mind?’

‘She could put her foot down, I suppose – as Bliss Designs’ business manager.’

‘And what about Leo?’ Nas asks. ‘How was he?’

‘Towards Elle?’ She nods. ‘Well, I was watching them together at the party and he seemed... I don’t know...’

‘Into her?’

‘Hard to say, but there was a lot of eye contact and smiling – a bit of touching.’

Nasrin nods in approval. ‘And what if he really is with Franzia?’

‘The more I think about it, the less likely it seems. Cross that bridge if we come to it?’

‘Sounds good.’

‘Thanks, Nas. It helps to have a sounding board.’

‘Well, it’s my case too,’ she says, somewhat snarky.

‘I haven’t forgotten,’ I reply, somewhat snarky back.

We end the call and I contemplate calling my husband for some more long-distance relations, but as appealing as that is, I’m absolutely wiped. Besides, I’ll be home tomorrow – the real thing will be well worth the wait.

‘I just want to get home, fall into bed, and sleep for three days,’ I say, more to myself than to Cassie. I’ve changed into my pyjamas, washed off my makeup, and started packing, even though I’ll have ample time in the morning.

‘That can be arranged,’ Cassie says from her bed, where she’s also in her pyjamas and is idly scrolling on her phone. ‘You’ve certainly earned it,’ she adds.

I stop folding my clothes and watch her for signs that she’s cross with me. ‘It’s for the best,’ I say, though I sound about as convincing as a ‘real’ sighting of Nessie.

‘What is?’ she asks without looking up.

‘Turning down a collaboration with Leo.’ I continue packing. ‘It’s for the best, right?’

‘Are you asking me or telling me?’ Her tone is a like a siren’s song and I can’t resist lifting my gaze to meet hers. Right, so she *is* cross with me – at least a little bit. I recommence packing, taking extra care to fold and place each item into my case just so.

‘Our design aesthetics are poles apart, for one thing,’ I say. ‘Plus, his fashion house is across the Atlantic – so that would be problematic. And there’s his whole vegan leather slant – I mean, brilliant initiative, great for the environment – but where would we source cacti in the UK? And do we even want to branch out into accessories?’ I’m aware that I’m rabbiting

on but it's only when I say, 'And, really, he's so... so...' that Cass interjects.

'Elle, just stop.'

I drop a pair of trousers, unfolded, into my case, my eyes stinging with unshed tears. 'I am so stupid, Cassie. I thought I could be professional and talk to him – designer to designer – but... I can't believe he's *engaged*.' I barely get the words out before my throat closes – it's as if I've tried to swallow a golf ball.

Cassie leaps off the bed and is over to me in a heartbeat, wrapping me up in one of her sisterly hugs.

'It's all right, Bean. It's all right,' she says. And I am so close to succumbing to a bout of tears – it would be easy to let Cass play big sis and wallow – but a little voice inside tells me that crying will just burden her further. And she's already shouldering so much.

I ease back and stand tall, swiping under my eyes. 'Soz.'

'You don't need to apologise,' she says, watching me closely. 'This past month has been a lot. You've just pulled off the biggest show of your career, with very little notice, you've met up with your ex for the first time in a decade, and we're away from home—'

'Away from home in *Paris*, Cass,' I say, stepping away. 'And it's not even gone nine and we're in our hotel room in our *pyjamas*. I mean, what the actual eff?'

She blinks at me, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. 'Hold on. What happened to being completely shattered?'

'Who cares? It's *Paris*. I can sleep on the train tomorrow. I'm only thirty-two for crying out loud. If Iris Apfel were in Paris, she'd be dolling herself up and heading out somewhere fabulous – and she's over a hundred!'

'Iris Apfel *is* in Paris. It is Fashion Week.'

'Oh, good point.'

‘So, what did you have in mind? We did just leave the biggest party of the season.’

‘And do we really want to get all dressed up again?’

‘And there’s that,’ she says, stifling a yawn.

I pause for a moment, regarding the tiny, cramped wardrobe, as well as the clothes I’ve already packed. No, I don’t fancy getting dressed up again. But I want to do *something*.

‘How about this? We get dressed—’ Cassie groans. ‘No, not like that,’ I say with a grin. ‘I’m thinking no makeup, jeans and a jumper, and our sneakers, then we hit all the big landmarks and take photos for our Insta. Just us, the Bliss sisters. How does that sound?’

Cassie returns my grin. ‘That sounds brilliant.’

Ten minutes later, we strike out from the hotel, headed for the Eiffel Tower, the first landmark on our list.

\* \* \*

‘This was an inspired idea,’ says Cass, snuggling into her quilted jacket. As it’s not quite springtime, there’s a chill in the air, but that didn’t deter us from boarding a Bateau Mouche for a night-time tour along the Seine.

It’s our last outing of the night, having ping-ponged around Paris, taking photo after photo and posting them to the Bliss Designs Insta profile with the hashtag *#BlissSistersTakeParis*. ‘It’ll totes go viral,’ Cass joked after we posted a photo of us with the Arc de Triomphe in the background.

It’s been fun hanging out and exploring the city, just the two of us. It’s rarely just us lately, except when we’re at home, and then we’re queueing something to watch while heating up two ready-meals for one, or leftover takeaway – hardly exciting.

‘How gorgeous is this city?’ I ask as the boat slips under Pont Alexandre III. The gilded bridge, with its proud rows of streetlamps and statues of dancing nymphs, is lit so beautifully, it’s like the entire thing is made of gold.

‘It really is extraordinary,’ Cassie agrees. ‘And I love London, but...’

‘Me too, but...’

The rest of our thoughts go unsaid, but we both know what we mean. Cass and I have long shared the belief that London is one of the world’s most beautiful cities. And despite being a born-and-bred Londoner, there are parts of the city that still take my breath away, even after all these years – especially Tower Bridge at night and Covent Garden any time of day. But Paris! It feels almost *alive*. And no wonder it’s called the City of Lights.

As the boat emerges from under the bridge, I look back, seeing pairs of lovers strolling arm in arm or looking out over the Seine, and my heart twangs uncomfortably. So much for sightseeing. This is a cruel – and timely – reminder that Paris isn’t just the City of Lights, it’s the City of *Love*.

‘You all right, Bean?’

I nod, not trusting my voice, then turn away from the lovers on the bridge and concentrate on silently naming Parisian landmarks as they come into view: the Luxor Obelisk, Musée de l’Orangerie, Musée d’Orsay, Arc de Triomphe du Carrousel, the Louvre...

Bollocks. We’re back where we started and below that vast building, Leo is probably drinking champagne with his new fiancée.

Leo Jones. We’ve had two conversations in ten years – one of them fraught and tense and the other cut short – but it’s now clear that’s enough for him to invade my mind and my senses, and for dormant emotions of affection and attraction to come surging back like the swell of high tide.

I don’t *want* to want him. So how am I, once again, in the position of having to purge Leo Jones from my system so I can get on with my life? Even though I’ve ostensibly been looking for him for ten years, I thought my heart had given up the search a long time ago.

Apparently not.

\* \* \*

*Poppy*

Two things of note happened overnight.

First, my husband sent me a photo that made me long for him even more than usual – a calico cat called Saffron, who’s available for adoption. I’ve seen one photo and I already love her. I sent a reply to Tristan first thing and we’re going to visit her at the shelter later this afternoon. And by ‘visit’ I mean ‘bring home our sweet little babykins’.

You’d never know I grew up as a dog person – and a sheep and chicken and goat person. But this farm kid has always wanted a cat and now I’m married to someone who ‘is willing to give it a go’. Oh, he is going to fall in *love* with Saffron, I just know it.

Second, Paloma came through! She’s hooking me up directly with *Nouveau Britain* and tomorrow, I’m meeting with an assistant editor. If I play my cards right (and don’t let on how desperate I am), Bliss Designs will get more than a six-inch mention in the September issue.

Elle and Cassie are both quiet on the cab ride to Gare du Nord – *and* throughout check-in and during the one-hour wait until departure. Cassie seems absorbed with her phone, but I’ve been around her enough to know she’s not on socials much, so I assume she’s working. And Elle, well... she seems wistful. There’s been quite a bit of sighing, some frowning, and she appears to have been reading the same page in her romcom for the past forty minutes.

I’m hoping that, even if a reunion with Leo is completely off the table, I can at least support Elle professionally – as a pseudo consolation prize. I don’t like failing as an agent and the few times it’s happened, I’ve tried to find a way to make up for it – whether the client has known about it or not.

Our train is called and we board, settling into a four-seat berth with a table between the two pairs of seats. As my travelling companions are less than chatty, I open my phone to my message thread with Nasrin and type:

What did you think?

The reply comes almost immediately:

Don't give up your day job.

Rude! Early this morning, I sent her my notes for the *Nouveau* article, and they're obviously lacking. To be fair, the last time I wrote anything like this, it was for the Australian publication, *Psychology Today*, and the article was about cognitive behavioural theory and neuroplasticity.

Any suggestions?

Start again? It reads like a catalogue.

*Extremely* rude – from anyone but Nas. When I first met Nasrin, it took a while to get used to her dry humour. I wait, knowing her next message will come shortly. It does:

Have sent it to Freya.

It's likely Freya can turn my scribbles into something I can give to an assistant magazine editor – she was a marketing director before joining the agency.

Ta.

Nas sends her typical thumbs-up emoji in reply, and I turn off my phone and look out the window, smothering a yawn with my hand. It's been a big week. I'm looking forward to cuddles with my husband, a long hot bath, then cuddles with Saffron, our soon-to-be cat.

'Sorry,' says a voice, 'but I think you're in my seat.'

I lift my gaze and – I cannot believe this – *Leo* is standing in the aisle next to me. I'll need to think fast.



*No, no, no, no, no.* Of all train carriages on all the trains...  
*How* is this happening?

‘Oh, it’s you,’ Leo says, looking straight at Poppy. ‘Sorry, I —’ And then it must occur to him that where there’s a Poppy, there must be an Elle. The penny visibly drops as his eyes dart towards the other side of the table where Cassie and I are sitting.

‘Hi,’ he says.

‘Hi,’ I reply. Because what else is there to say? I am in the seventh circle of hell right now. I’m reserving circles eight and nine, respectively, for when Leo invites me to his wedding, then the christening of his first child.

Cassie, ever the grown-up, steps in. ‘What a lovely surprise!’ she exclaims.

I fire eye-daggers at her. *Lovely?*

‘I’ll say,’ he replies with a smile. *A smile?* He looks down at Poppy. ‘I can just sit by the window, if you like?’

He gestures to the seat next to Poppy, the one directly across from me.

Poppy looks over, as if asking for my permission.

Paralysed by the absurdity of this situation, I can do little more than shrug my agreement. She stands and moves out of the way, and Leo settles into the seat by the window.

He smiles at me and I gulp. His outfit for today is a throwback to his Hank Moody from *Californication* phase – well-worn, well-*fitting* jeans and a black T-shirt. Leo spent most of uni wearing this outfit.

The first time I stayed over at his, I discovered a stack of carefully folded, identical black T-shirts and next to it, three pairs of the same jeans, also carefully folded. Hanging in the wardrobe were several black dress shirts, again identical. During the colder months, he switched from T-shirts to dress shirts and added a leather jacket. Before visiting his flat, I'd thought he just did his washing every other day.

I'd also teased him about doing a 'Steve Jobs' and we'd had our first dust-up about the difference between Jobs' turtle-necks and baggy jeans ('dorky', apparently) and Hank Moody's cool, easy California style. That's when Leo introduced me to the show. He even had boxsets of the early seasons that he'd brought over from America. I didn't mind it and it did spark a long-held desire to visit Los Angeles.

Today, the look is working for him even more so than when we were younger. And I hate to admit it, but that's mostly due to the contrast of the black T-shirt and his platinum hair, which has grown on me. There's something 'Henry Cavill as the Witcher' about it – only Cavill is too beefy for me and Leo is... well, perfect.

The train starts to leave the station, and I'm left wondering what I'm supposed to do for the next two-plus hours. Stare pointedly out the window? Keep reading my romcom? Make polite conversation with the man I'd like to throttle and ravish in equal measure?

'Um, Cassie, how about we check out the café car? I'm famished,' says Poppy.

Wait, Cassie wouldn't abandon me, leaving me alone with Leo, would she?

'Er, there's table service,' I tell them.

'Right, but that won't be for ages,' Poppy replies, standing and collecting her handbag from the parcel shelf.

‘And I could murder a sandwich,’ says Cassie, popping out of her seat.

‘Can we bring you anything?’ Poppy asks and I look between them, gobsmacked.

‘I’ll take a coffee, thanks,’ says Leo. ‘An Americano – just black, no sugar.’

‘Elle?’ Cassie asks.

This is like an episode of *Black Mirror* – I’m the only person who’s horrified by the situation while everyone around me is acting like the train carriage isn’t on fire.

‘Coke,’ I manage, not even bothering to add ‘no sugar’ – Cassie knows. And then she and Poppy are gone and it’s just me and Leo.

\* \* \*

*Poppy*

‘Wowser, you *are* good,’ Cassie says over her shoulder as we enter the vestibule between carriages.

‘If you’re talking about Leo showing up, that wasn’t my doing.’ She stops abruptly and I nearly crash into her.

She turns, her eyes questioning. ‘Are you serious?’

‘Well, yes. I mean, I seeded the idea at the party last night, but I had no idea if he’d follow through.’

‘How do mean you seeded the idea?’

‘Remember, I asked him where he was off to next and he said London and I mentioned we were heading back this morning on the Eurostar...’

‘Oh, that’s right! I thought it was odd, you mentioning that we’d be travelling first class.’

‘Odd, but it appeared to work.’

‘Then you *are* that good,’ she says, her dimples making an appearance.

I shrug. ‘A lot of this job is seeing opportunities and taking them – like us checking out the café car.’

‘You’re being modest.’

‘I’m being honest.’

‘Well, *I* didn’t think of it. I’m really glad you came to Paris with us, Poppy.’ I accept her gratitude with a smile and am about to suggest we move on when she asks, ‘So, how do you think Elle will view it – Leo showing up like this? As a coincidence or...’

‘Kismet?’

She nods.

‘From her expression, especially when we left them together just now, I’d say that we’re still quite far from that. Kismet evokes romance and fate... Elle isn’t there yet.’

‘Right.’ Cassie’s enthusiasm is wilting faster than flowers in the Aussie midday sun.

‘But it doesn’t mean I’m not *thrilled* that Leo has landed in our laps.’

‘Quite literally,’ she replies, perking up slightly.

‘Exactly.’ We exchange smiles. ‘And it’s an excellent sign that he followed through – more evidence that his relationship with Franzia is a sham. But we still need proof. I’ll call Marie – check if she has an update.’

‘Can I be on the call?’ Cassie asks.

‘Sure, but let’s not do it here.’

We’re outside the toilets where a queue is forming and we’ve already been jostled several times. We find an empty berth in the next train carriage and slip into the seats. I dig out my earbuds and offer one to Cassie. Nothing worse than being the person on the train who takes a call on speakerphone. If I had my way, those people would be ejected at the next stop.

Seconds later, a close-up of Marie appears onscreen.

‘*Allo*, Poppy, Cassie.’ She lifts her chin and blows a plume of actual – not imagined – cigarette smoke, then looks into the camera.

‘*Bonjour*, Marie,’ I say.

‘You are hoping for an update, *non*?’

‘*Oui*.’ Having been *bonjour*-ing and *oui*-ing for five days now, it’s hard to stop, especially when speaking to my French colleague. Marie expels a puff of air the way the French do – it sounds like ‘pfff’ and could mean a million different things.

‘Is that “pfff” good or bad?’ I ask, doing my best to mimic the sound.

She shrugs. ‘*Bof*.’ So far, this conversation is about as illuminating as stars on a cloudy night. Cassie sighs beside me, indicating she’s in agreement.

‘What’s the bad news then?’ I ask. May as well get right to it.

‘I am still working on Leo’s relationship with the supermodel.’

‘Okay, so you’re not sure if that’s legit or not?’

‘*Non*.’

‘Sorry,’ says Cassie. ‘Does that mean they’re not really a couple or you don’t know if they’re really a couple?’

Marie’s shoulder lifts in another shrug. ‘No word yet.’

‘But someone’s on it?’ I ask.

‘But of course.’

Oops – she seems offended.

‘Who?’ asks Cassie and I poke her. We’ve already caused offence and Marie *never* reveals her sources. I thought Cassie would have learnt that during our initial briefing with Marie back in London.

‘I know a guy,’ Marie replies – just as expected. ‘He works at Franzia’s modelling agency.’ This is new – insight into one of Marie’s connections! ‘This is where the good news arrives.’

I don't correct her use of the English idiom. 'Franzia, she is...' Marie's face screws up tightly with distaste. 'How do you say... *une salope*.'

My French is as limited as all my other European languages, but I know that word. (Okay, I know a lot of the swearwords.) The feminist in me wants to call Marie out for calling Franzia a bitch, but the agent in me is far more interested in hearing the details.

'Tell us more,' I prompt.

'She is rude – always late, all the time, to everything – late, late, late. But, of course, she is Franzia, *non*? Everyone will wait. Today, she was due on set in Paris to film a *parfum* commercial for Adore – *late*. Two hours. For Adore. And? They wait. But this... pfff... this is nothing. She is very badly behaved – throws the most enormous tantrums. Like a baby, a toddler. And she is cruel – to the other models, to makeup artists, to her agents... *tout le monde*. Like I say, *quelle salope*.'

'So, if Leo's actually in a relationship with her, then she probably treats him badly as well,' says Cassie.

'Wait.' Marie holds up a finger, then taps away on her phone, her finger appearing huge onscreen. 'I just send you a video. You watch it now or later?'

'What's it of?' I ask.

'Franzia at the Lorenzo show.'

'We'll watch it now and call you right back,' I say.

'*D'accord*.'

She ends the call. I open the video and Cassie leans in. It's in portrait and has obviously been filmed on a phone. Franzia, her hair and makeup done but wearing only a thong, is stomping about, screeching about how hideous her outfit is and how it makes her look like some 'hick from Nowheresville'.

And wouldn't you know it? Not even a *hint* of that hodgepodge Eastern European accent from last night. Our

supermodel isn't just a B-I-T-C-H, she's as British as they come. A text pops onto the screen over the video:

Meet Karen Whitehead from Shropshire.

I type a reply:

Was Leo there? Did he see this?

Her reply comes quickly:

No. My source says she's never like this in front of the designer or the photographer.

'So, Leo probably doesn't know, then – what she's like.'

'I hope not,' Cassie replies. 'Why would he want to marry her if she's like that?' She points at my phone.

'Hmm. Well, you know him better than I do.'

'Not really. That was years ago and, yes, he *seems* like the same Leo but you never know. Elle said he was a right tosser when she met up with him in London.'

'That's right. But I still think we can use this to our advantage.'

I type another message to Marie:

Good news. Thank you so much!

The words *Marie is typing* appear, then:

She is horrible AND a fraud. You are welcome.

At that, Cassie and I laugh out loud like (dare I say it?) bitchy schoolgirls.

\* \* \*

*Elle*

Good god, how long can it take to buy a coffee and a Coke? Cassie and Poppy have been gone an *age*.

Meanwhile, Leo and I have exhausted all the small talk ever talked in the history of humanity. We've covered the weather (in Paris, London, *and* New York), how exhausted we are (very), what Brandy is up to (sightseeing in Paris for a few

days before heading back to Texas), and even the number of times we've been on the Eurostar (first time for him, fourth for me).

We'll have to move on to talking about *actual* small things if they don't return soon and I know very little about amoebas, cornichons, or babies.

I suddenly remember that I never got the chance to ask after his mum.

'I was sorry to hear about your mum being unwell,' I say. 'Is she going to be okay?'

'Yeah, thanks for asking. Just bad flu. The doctor advised her not to fly.'

'Oh, that's good. Sorry, it's not good that she has the flu, but at least it's not more serious.'

'Yeah, for sure.'

Uncomfortable silence descends. *Where* is my sister?

'So...' he says, fidgeting with his ticket – a *printed* ticket, as if e-tickets aren't a thing. He starts tearing it into strips and rolling each of those into tight coils. Some things never change.

As Cassie and Poppy are *still* nowhere to be seen, it's time to put my big girl pants on.

'So, can I address the elephant in the room – or rather, the train carriage?'

I don't know what made me say that, because the real elephant is that two people who used to have sex (pretty much) daily – one of whom is engaged to a supermodel – are now trapped on a train together for the next two hours.

What I am about to raise – what I'm *prepared* to raise – is that my sister would like us to collaborate on a collection and why that's a terrible idea and never going to happen. I spent most of the morning mentally shoring up the list of reasons I gave Cassie last night. It may be short, but it's compelling – compelling enough that the next time Cassie brings up the matter, I won't be backing down.



‘Uh, yeah. Go for it,’ Leo says, his eyes curious.

‘This collaboration between our—’

‘Oh,’ he says with a laugh. ‘I thought you were wondering why I’m going to London.’

‘Er... no, I—’

‘Well, I— Sorry,’ he says, having interrupted me. ‘You go.’

But now he’s said that, I’m curious. Why *is* he going to London when his fashion house is based in New York?

‘Okay, why London?’

He grins at me. ‘Home base for the next six months, maybe longer. I’ve rented an apartment in Hackney.’

‘You what?’ Hackney is where Cass and I live *and* where our fashion house is located.

‘Yeah, the UK’s got some incredible vegan leather producers, so I’ll be connecting with them, doing some exploring... getting inspiration for the next couple of collections... Operations and distribution will still be run out of the US, but who knows what the future holds?’ He shrugs with nonchalant optimism.

‘And, you know, a change of scene’s always good,’ he continues. ‘London’s big but after New York, it’s going to feel... I don’t know, *spacious*? I’m looking forward to it – a fresh perspective, reconnecting with old friends...’

Well, fuck. In one go, Leo’s invalidated more than half my reasons we can never work together. And ‘reconnecting with old friends’? What’s *that* supposed to mean?!

‘Here you go,’ says Cassie, appearing at precisely the right – or is it wrong? – moment. She and Poppy distribute food and drinks amongst us and settle back into their seats.

‘So, what have you two been up to?’ asks Poppy.

*Trying not to fall back in love with Leo while discovering that he’s moving in around the corner!*

‘Actually,’ says Leo, ‘I was just telling Elle that I’m staying in London till at least the fall.’

‘Interesting,’ says Cassie. She smiles at him broadly, looks to Poppy pointedly, then raises her eyebrows at me with a smile I’d describe as ‘evil mastermind’.

‘Interesting’ my arse, Cassandra Evelyn Bliss! If I didn’t know better, I’d think that Cassie orchestrated this entire thing, right down to us sharing a berth on the flipping Eurostar with Leo!

I'm at the morning staff meeting and the briefing on 'Elle and the Shoemaker' (still a dumb case name, IMO) is up next. There is so much happening that I'm not even listening to George's update (very rude and unprofessional of me). Instead, I'm consulting the notes on my tablet.

'And Poppy?' says Saskia, directing everyone's attention to me. 'How are you and Nasrin getting on?' I love how casually she asks this, as if she's enquiring about a tardy coffee order.

I sit up taller in my seat and don my Poppy-the-Professional expression. Part of my update is bound to be contentious, and I want to convey an I've-got-this vibe.

'The highlights are...' I say, pressing a button on a remote. The photo of Elle receiving flowers from Leo at the end of her show appears on the large screen above Saskia's head. She swivels her chair and everyone looks up. Freya – the romantic – sighs.

'Elle and Leo-slash-Lorenzo connected several times over the time in Paris, including at the conclusion of her fashion show, in which he gave her flow—'

'So, they've reunited?' Ursula interjects. 'Is the case closed?' *Hah! Far from it*, I think.

'Uh, no, not yet,' I reply. 'They have *talked* on several occasions, but I'd say it's more "reconnecting" than

“reconciling” at this stage. I *am* confident there are feelings – on both sides – that could lay the foundation for a reunion.’

She doesn’t seem to have follow-up questions, so I proceed.

‘Additionally, a few factors have come into play over the past several days that impact the case. First, Leo announced that he’ll be living in London for the next six months, maybe longer, which, of course, works in our favour’ – several murmurs of encouragement – ‘*and* while in Paris, he introduced Elle to his sister, Brandy, which we also consider a positive.’

I can sense Nasrin squirming beside me, bursting with the news I’m about to share. But she won’t interrupt me – we have a *plan*.

‘However,’ I say, advancing to the next image: Leo and Franzia on the small stage at the H&M party. Freya exchanges a sigh for a gasp and I want to say, ‘I know, right?’ but I don’t.

‘This was taken two nights ago. For those who don’t know, standing with Leo is Franzia, the supermodel. This was taken moments after she announced their engagement.’

The polite murmurs from a moment ago swell until the conference room fills with voices. Saskia’s eyes swing to meet mine, her expression inscrutable.

The Ever After Agency is not in the business of breaking up engagements, even ones we strongly suspect are fake. Doing such a thing could severely damage the agency’s reputation and, as the agency relies on absolute professionalism as much as it does discretion, that could be a death knell.

‘There’s more,’ I say loudly, hoping to quell the rising surge of alarm. The conversations around the table cease and all eyes return to me. Nasrin inhales deeply. ‘There’s this,’ I say, advancing to the video Marie sent.

It’s not the best quality and, as it’s shot in portrait, it only fills a vertical strip in the middle of the screen, but I play it in its entirety. I want – perhaps even *need* – its fullest impact.

When it concludes, I set the remote on the table and wait for my colleagues to settle once again.

‘This video was shot by someone at Franzia’s modelling agency – her *own* agency. It’s unlikely to get out – this or any video like it – because of the damage it could do. Not just to Franzia but to all the labels or brands she’s associated with, as well as her agency.’

‘So, the industry is protecting her,’ states Paloma. ‘That makes sense from a fiscal perspective but what about...’ She appears to struggle to find the right word.

‘Everything else?’ supplies Ursula. ‘Accountability, reputation...’

‘Exactly,’ says Paloma.

‘All salient points,’ I say, but we’re getting off track. We haven’t been hired to put Franzia on the naughty step. ‘But what Nasrin and I are considering’ – this is where I bring in Nas; I need the backing of my lieutenant – ‘is how Franzia’s behaviour impacts this case.’

*This* is the plan. Ahead of the meeting, Nas and I agreed that at this point, we would drop the grenade, seed the idea that the revelation could lead to our client’s HEA, then step back and let silence do its work.

As we hoped, the room stills. Everyone is *thinking* and if this goes the way Nas and I want it to, *we* won’t have to advocate for pursuing the case despite the engagement, because at least one of our colleagues will do it for us.

Nas pokes me firmly under the table and I dip my head in a surreptitious nod. Who will be the first to speak up, I wonder? Probably not George – he doesn’t like to rock the boat. Freya is definitely onside, but I’m not sure if she’ll have the confidence to speak first. And Mia, as our tech expert, doesn’t really have any skin in this game. I look over at Ursula. Although her face is immobile, I can tell that behind her eyes, her mind is working away.

‘We need to consider the greater good,’ Ursula says after some time. Nasrin pokes me again and I expel the breath I’ve

been holding as slowly as possible, so I don't give myself away.

'How so?' Saskia asks.

'If we assume that Leo has *not* been exposed to Franzia's behaviour,' Ursula replies, 'would we not be doing him a disservice by abandoning the case and not allowing him the opportunity to reunite with the woman who may be his true love?'

Not just a double negative but a triple! Still, Ursula's meaning is clear enough.

'Playing devil's advocate for a moment,' says Paloma. She plays devil's advocate so often, I'd swear she's on his payroll. 'Let's say that Leo *is* privy to Franzia's outbursts – would that not indicate he loves her and doesn't care how she behaves, thus negating the need to pursue the case?'

'Just to step in here,' I say. 'It may be that Leo *is* in love with Franzia' – I'd bet my parents' farm that he isn't – 'but from what I've witnessed in his exchanges with Elle, there's still a spark between them.'

Paloma eyes me curiously. I'm walking a tenuous line here, essentially contradicting a senior staff member. I can *feel* my fellow agents holding their breath.

'Poppy,' says Saskia, breaking through the tension in the room. 'Asking to pursue a lost-love case in which one of the parties is engaged, it's...' She pauses far too long for me to believe she'll land on a yes and I steel myself for the no as the tension rises again. '...problematic,' she concludes.

*Well, bugger.*

'As you know – as you all know – we have very strict and explicit guidelines that we need to adhere to.'

So, it is 'cased closed' but not in the way I'd hoped. I glance at Nasrin and her mouth tugs into a taut line of commiseration.

'That said...' Saskia continues, and I instantly perk up. 'What you've presented here today is compelling and warrants

keeping the case open.’

‘Yes!’ Nasrin exclaims in a stage whisper.

‘Under the proviso,’ says Saskia pointedly, ‘that you tread carefully and give me and Paloma daily updates. At even the *slightest* indication that we’ve overstepped or that this case won’t go our way, I’m calling it. Understood?’

‘Yes, Saskia,’ Nas and I chorus together.

I’m pleased with the outcome, but this discussion has emphasised how high the stakes are in this case *and* how critical it is that I get this right.

‘Thank you, everyone,’ Saskia says, her bright countenance restored, and everyone leaves the conference room except for me and Nasrin.

‘What do you think?’ I ask, standing and gathering my belongings.

‘That we’d better not mess this up.’

‘Agreed. But at least Saskia’s letting us proceed.’

‘On a tight leash.’

‘Well, obviously.’ I am trying to lift my spirits, but I’ve chosen the wrong colleague to debrief with. Nasrin is a glass-half-empty person.

‘You ready for your meeting?’ She means the meeting with the *Nouveau* editor this afternoon, a woman called Bex.

‘I think so. Freya did a good job of putting my notes into some sort of order. Hopefully, I won’t look like a total amateur.’

Nas goes to leave but I stop her.

‘Wait, I just... Why am I *anxious*?’

‘About meeting the editor?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Because it’s an important piece of an important case,’ she states.

‘But aren’t all cases important?’ I ask.

She laughs. ‘From the client’s perspective, sure, but not all cases have the potential to bring down the agency.’

‘That’s a little extreme,’ I say, even though we discussed this exact concern before the staff meeting. I, like many people, tend to contradict myself when I’m stressed.

‘You heard Saskia. And in a case that involves two pseudo-celebs and a supermodel, we need to be extra careful. The engagement is already all over socials and the media and we’re... well, *us*. If this gets any messier, there’s every chance the agency will get dragged through the mu—’

‘No, I get it. You’re right.’

This is where Nasrin would typically gloat. But today, she just pats me on the arm and leaves.

Yikes, we may be in worse trouble than I thought.

My phone chimes. It could be any number of people connected to this case, none of whom I want to hear from until I’ve wrapped up the meeting at *Nouveau*.

But when I check my phone, it’s Tristan.

Saffron settling in.

He’s added a photo. On his lap, looking very comfortable and delighted with the hand rubbing under her chin, is our new cat. I *knew* he’d fall in love with her on sight. Why else would a busy investment banker take a day off to ensure his ‘sweet little girl’ wasn’t left alone on her first day?

I send a quick reply:

Lucky girl. Miss you both. Px

I head towards my desk and my phone chimes again. At this rate, Tristan’s going to become one of those people whose photo feed is 90 per cent kitty pics. But it’s not Tristan – it’s Cassie. With a message that could mean a dozen different things:

Can we meet? Code red.



I'm assuming 'code red' means the same in the UK as it does in Australia – as in, 'everything's gone to shit'. I reply, telling her to come into the agency any time after 2 p.m., as I'll be back from my meeting by then – hopefully with good enough news to stave off some of the gone-to-shit-ness of this case.

I've had complex cases before, even ones where I've skirted the boundaries of what's permitted in the pursuit of an HEA – or happily ever after – but this... This is turning into one of those cases in which I'll be spinning plates and juggling while doing cartwheels. Wearing roller-skates.

If I can pull this off, I will be matchmaker of the year!

What does any self-respecting designer do when they've shown at Paris Fashion Week (to great acclaim), hobnobbed with the super famous, will soon be featured in *Nouveau*, and is about to collaborate with the 'golden boy of fashion', likely sending their career into the stratosphere?

Well, any *self-respecting* designer would be in their fashion house, fielding media queries, processing orders for their latest collection, and brainstorming their next.

*This* designer is skiving off work, lying on her sofa, scoffing Hobnobs (not to be confused with hobnobbing), and bingeing *The Kardashians*. I've fooled myself into believing it is completely reasonable to watch famous-for-being-famous people pontificating about thigh gaps instead of working, as I've always wanted to see what the fuss was about.

The truth is that finding out if Kourtney takes Scott back (again) is *far* better than Googling Leo and his newly minted fiancée – something I've avoided until now but is getting harder by the minute.

Because it turns out that Leo is *not* the complete tosser from that night at the restaurant. Sure, he hasn't explained his sudden departure from my life or apologised for ghosting me, but after spending that train ride with him, I came to a surprising (and maddening) conclusion: Leo is essentially still *Leo*.

After Cassie and Poppy returned from their trek to the ends of the earth for Coke and crisps and we were a foursome

again, conversation began to flow – especially after Poppy (cleverly) asked Leo about vegan leather and he launched into a passionate explanation of his venture.

The highlights: like many of us, he's worried about the environment; he wants to support small ethical producers, no matter where in the world they're located; he wants to be known for sustainability; and *not* making his shoes and accessories out of leather is a 'big fat F-U to the old man' – his words, not mine. In fact, he sort of said them to himself, and I'm not sure he knows I heard him.

That was the other thing I learnt on the train ride: Leo's dad was a cattle rancher. *Was*, as in past tense – he died years ago. I knew there was no love lost between them, but from the way Leo's eyes hardened when he mentioned him on the train, his father was cruel. This explains the 'F-U' comment and I imagine there's far more to the story. I would get to the bottom of it *if* I were ever going to see Leo again.

But I'm not. I can't let myself.

Two hours of sitting opposite him on that train, watching his eyes crease at the corners when he laughed, basking in his passion for his work, witnessing how fondly he talked about his mum and Brandy... All that did was stir up feelings of affection and longing.

And he was so charming, asking questions and drawing us into conversation – well, Poppy and Cassie, as I was monosyllabic at best. That turned to dumbstruck when Poppy asked Leo why Franzia wasn't accompanying him. She's staying on in Paris to film a perfume commercial, he said. But there was something strange about *how* he said it, as if it pained him to talk about her in front of me. It certainly pained me, the mere mention of her name igniting jealousy so intense, I felt like I was coming down with something.

By the time we disembarked, I'd endured two hours of intense emotions and was shaken to the core, dangerously close to being right back where I was ten years ago – mad about Leo and with nothing to be done about it.

St Pancras was as chaotic as it always is and when we reached the concourse, our heavy cases in tow, I stopped Leo with a hand on his arm.

‘Congratulations, by the way,’ I said. I was loathe to let him go and it was the only thing I could think of to keep him there a little longer. Meanwhile, Poppy had gone to find a cab and head home – she was desperate to see her husband – something about adopting a cat – and Cassie was doing her best to give us privacy in the most public of places by waiting just ahead of us.

‘Oh, yeah, thanks,’ he said, an odd look on his face. ‘And we should talk – you know, about working together.’

‘Oh, absolutely,’ I lied.

He grinned, which nearly undid me. Then it was time to go, as there was no other reason to stay, and I didn’t know whether we should shake hands or hug or...

Leo solved this conundrum by leaning down and gently kissing my cheek. Not quick French-style smacks on both cheeks, like at the H&M party. One soft kiss that lingered, my senses drowning in his scent, the closeness of his body to mine, and his very presence.

Then he stepped back, smiled once more, and disappeared into the crowd.

Cass was by my side in an instant. ‘Ready to go, Bean?’ she asked.

I wasn’t ready for *anything* at that point, but somehow we made it to the cab rank. The journey home from the train station was a blur, then there was unpacking, eating a ready-meal, and sleep. Since yesterday morning, it’s been sofa-and-television land, with occasional jaunts to the kitchen to restock on biscuits. I haven’t even had a shower.

I have, however, thought of that Polaroid locked in Cassie’s desk drawer about sixty times, wondering how I can retrieve it without her knowing, then hating myself for wanting to.

I am a pathetic, love-sick, thirty-two-year-old teenager.

\* \* \*

‘Get up! I’ve got brilliant news.’

Nine hours after Cassie left for Bliss Designs, the sun has nearly set and my eyes are now square. I peel myself off the sofa, having whiled away an entire day, and get a whiff of my body odour as I sit up. I scrunch my nose in distaste – at *myself*. I suppose two days is long enough marinading in my own filth. As soon as Cass tells me this ‘brilliant news’, which could be anything from ‘we heard from Tom and Hilde’ to ‘that cerise silk you desperately wanted has arrived’, I am showering.

‘Is that stench *you?*’ she asks, scrunching her nose the same way I just did.

‘No,’ I say defensively. ‘I’ve just thrown out some mouldy blue cheese.’

‘Blue cheese is mouldy by definition. You stink and you need a shower.’

I lift my chin – I will not be disparaged in my own home. ‘I had already decided that.’

‘Good.’ She flops onto her favourite chair – probably to keep her distance until I tend to my hygiene.

‘So, what’s the brilliant news?’ I ask, reaching for the Hobnob packet. Empty – poo.

‘The photoshoot for the *Nouveau* spread is booked for the day after tomorrow.’

‘But—’

‘No buts. No ifs or ands either. Oh, actually, there is one and – Leo’s going to be there.’

‘What?’ I screech. ‘But—’

‘We already covered that – no buts,’ she says, cutting me off.

I stand and start pacing – the Bliss sisters’ go-to when it all becomes unbearable and there’s room to move. Another thing I love about our flat: we have space for *days*. I cross to the

three wide windows that look out over the neighbourhood and watch for a moment. Just normal people going about their lives. Leaving work and heading home or arriving home after work – where we live is both residential and commercial. I wonder how many of these people also feel like they're drowning in quicksand. I'd wager that none of them have spent their day the same way I have.

'Bean? What's going on in there?' She means my head.

I turn around slowly and lean against the windowsill, which fits perfectly under my bum. 'If I tell you something, will you promise not to judge me or be all big-sisterly, or... Just don't make it harder than it is, okay?'

'I would never do that.'

I lift my brows and blink at her pointedly.

'Deliberately,' she adds, as good a promise as she can give.

I inhale deeply. Then exhale without saying anything, because saying it out loud will make it real and it cannot be real. Well, it can, because it is, but in the broader scheme of things, it makes life rather difficult – for me, for Cass, and possibly even for Leo.

Cassie waits patiently. I inhale again and this time, I say it, my voice tight and small.

'I think I still love him.' She doesn't say anything, even after several moments, so I add, 'Leo. I think I still love Leo.'

'I knew who you meant, Elle.'

'Well, why didn't you say anything?'

'Give me a chance,' she says with a mirthless laugh.

'Sorry.'

She shakes her head, indicating that I'm forgiven. 'So, what was it that tipped you over? It wasn't that long ago you called him a tosser – with bad taste in clothes.'

'I know. And I've wondered about that night – about why he was like that, all arrogant and too-cool-for-school. That's not really him, is it?'

‘Not the Leo I remember, no.’

‘But that’s just it – on the train, at the party before the announce— Before... well, you know.’

She nods.

‘Even him bringing me the peonies...’

‘I thought you were angry about the peonies.’

‘I was at the time but...’

‘Mmm. And where are you at regarding how things ended between you – back then?’

‘Okay – I think.’

‘Then you forgive him?’

‘I don’t know. I’m still angry, but it’s overshadowed now.’

‘By love,’ she states simply.

‘Yes? Oh, I don’t know. Ugh!’ I throw my head back in frustration and it collides with the window. ‘Ow.’

Cass leaps up. ‘Are you all right?’

I rub the back of my head with the heel of my hand as she makes her way over. ‘Hard head. I’ll live.’

‘Did you crack the window?’ she asks, looking behind me.

‘No, I didn’t crack the window – calm down.’ I expel a heavy breath. I feel lighter somehow, having shared my musings. Cass looks down at me, her expression earnest. ‘What?’ I ask.

‘Please, and I say this with love, *please* go and have a shower.’

I roll my eyes. ‘I’m going.’ I storm off towards the bathroom.

‘I’ll pour you some fizz and bring it in.’

I stop at the bathroom door. ‘Are we celebrating something?’

‘The photoshoot for *Nouveau*?’ she asks, like I am some sort of moron.

‘Gah!’ I call out before closing the door with more force than is probably warranted. One of the biggest things to ever happen to me and I am dreading it with every fibre of my being.



My life just keeps getting more and more fantastical. Today, Bliss Designs is being photographed for *Nouveau!*

Back in the land of the living and no longer stinking of body odour and despair, I'm now excited about the photoshoot. Well, excited tempered with a dash of imposter syndrome and more than a handful of trepidation. Leo will be there, after all, and we've had no contact since (what I shall forever refer to as) THE CHEEK KISS. Several days later and the thought of it still turns my insides to mush. Silly really. I'm not the heroine of a Jane Austen novel. Or maybe I am, pining over a man who's engaged to someone else.

But all that needs to take a backseat today, and Cassie and I head into Bliss first thing to collect three looks for the photoshoot.

The team, who got here at the crack of dawn, have just finished packing them into garment bags when Cassie and I arrive, bearing hot drinks and flapjacks from the café next door.

As the team descends on breakfast, I check over each look, overwhelmed with pride at the stellar job we've done to prepare for the photoshoot, despite having almost zero time to do it.

In less than thirty-six hours, the team has unboxed the shipment from Paris, checked every piece carefully for any loose threads, fallen hems, or even the slightest tear, then made any fixes. And yesterday afternoon, Prue and I had

model fittings, which required us to take in two pieces and let one out.

Having completed my final checks, I zip up each garment bag, then address the team.

‘You are just brilliant – all of you,’ I tell them, ‘and, again, I apologise for being AWOL at the start of the week. Not my finest hour, but you all stepped up and then some.’

‘That’s okay,’ says Prue. Gaz mumbles through a mouthful, and Zara sends me an understanding smile. They really are the *best*.

‘Well, as a thank you for your incredible work, next Saturday, Cassie and I are taking you out to celebrate our most successful season yet.’

‘Yay,’ Prue says, softly clapping her hands together.

‘Where are we going?’ asks Gaz.

‘It’s a surprise,’ Cass replies quickly.

It’s so much of a surprise, we have no idea what it is yet. It was only last night we realised that with everything else that’s going on, we’d forgotten to organise the post-season celebration. We have just over a week to come up with something truly special to acknowledge the team’s incredible work. We can also afford to spend a little more than last season’s high tea, as orders have doubled since last week.

‘Right,’ says Cass, ‘we’d best be off – our car is due any minute now.’ The team help us load up and soon we’re on our way to a photographic studio just north of Central London.

Poppy’s there when we arrive but, thankfully, Leo isn’t, giving me time to get my bearings and calm my building nerves before he does. But even sans Leo, the studio is thrumming with activity. There are three hair and makeup stations, a photographic assistant walking about a light meter, and several technicians moving lights and reflectors into position. Across the studio, three models, who are only wearing under garments, are trying on Leo’s shoes. Interesting.

We're met by the sort of person you can tell organises for a living – a twenty-something woman wearing simple, yet stylish, clothing and sporting a slick not-a-hair-out-of-place bun and a makeup-free face. She's even wielding a clipboard.

She introduces herself, but as nervous as I am, I don't retain her name. She signals for two people to relieve us of our garment bags, which are taken directly to the racks on the other side of the studio, where another team begins unpacking them. Clipboard woman instructs me to head over to hair and makeup.

'I'll stay here, Elle,' says Cass, indicating the sofa where Poppy has set up shop, a tablet in one hand and a mug of tea in the other.

Ooh, tea.

'Um, excuse me, would it be possible to have a cup of tea?' I ask clipboard woman.

She lifts her head and telepathically summons an eager-faced girl who can't be more than fifteen and is probably on work experience. The girl peers at me eagerly.

'Um, tea, please. White with one sugar.'

'I'll take one too, please,' says Cassie. 'The same.'

The girl disappears behind a stark-white curved wall. In fact, the entire space is white, including the floor. I wish I'd brought sunglasses.

Clipboard woman clears her throat and when I meet her eye, she says, 'Hair and makeup.' She's not being rude – not at all – but if she *weren't* wielding a clipboard for *Nouveau*, keeping everything running smoothly and everyone in check, I suspect she'd make an excellent secondary school teacher.

I head towards hair and makeup, where two of the scantily clad models are now being coiffed and painted. I'm greeted by a smiling older woman, who reminds me of Nana on our mum's side. She introduces herself as Sylvie.

'Now, love, are you one of the designers or one of the models?' she asks, and I know right away that Sylvie is a good

egg.

‘Just one of the designers,’ I say, climbing onto the empty chair beside her. Tall chairs, even ones that have a footrest like this one, are not made for people of my stature. I appreciate that Sylvie neither attempts to help nor calls attention to my considerable efforts. When I’m seated, she stands behind me and makes eye contact in the mirror. She leans in close, bringing with her the fragrance of lilies.

‘Never say “just” when referring to yourself as a designer, love. If it weren’t for designers, none of the rest of us would be here.’ She adds a wink, setting me further at ease. ‘Right, I assume you’ve been briefed on the concept for the shoot?’

‘Er, no, actually. We were asked to email photos of the looks we’ve brought, but we weren’t told anything about the concept.’ This isn’t my first photoshoot, of course, but even if it were, it wouldn’t matter. Each photographer has a distinct approach.

Sylvie consults a sheaf of papers on the table in front of her, as if reminding herself of what she is supposed to do with me. She lifts page one and scans page two, a slight frown on her face, then lifts page two and scans page three. This is not instilling confidence.

I look over at the models who are being made up – or rather, made under, as the makeup artists seem to be working towards a no-makeup look – essentially, the opposite of the dark brows and bold lip my models wore down the runway last week.

‘Wait here, love,’ says Sylvie, leaving me.

The work experience girl arrives with my tea, but Sylvie’s departure has wound me up even more and I’m terrified I’ll spill the tea down my front. I let it sit there, cooling, as I crane my neck to see who Sylvie’s talking to. She returns a minute later with a tall, slender woman of about fifty, who has cropped grey hair, a lean lived-in face, tan-coloured skin, and dark-blue eyes.

‘Elle Bliss,’ says the woman with a warm smile, ‘I’m Tally.’

Oh my god, *that’s* why she looks so familiar. I am being photographed by Eleni Talbot – AKA Tally – AKA one of the best fashion photographers on the planet. How did no one tell me this?!

‘Er, hello,’ I reply, silently willing myself not to vomit on her shoes – two-toned Oxfords in tan and white, by the way.

‘Sylvie says you weren’t briefed on the shoot?’ It seems to be a rhetorical question, but I answer anyway.

‘No, no I wasn’t. Is there something specific I should know?’

With the way Tally hedges, my nerves rapidly mutate into full-blown terror.

‘Sophia,’ Tally calls out across the studio. Clipboard woman appears almost instantaneously. In a low tone, but not low enough that I don’t hear, Tally asks, ‘Do you know who was responsible for briefing the designers?’

Sophia inhales through her nose the way some people do when they’re being challenged.

‘I was. I emailed the briefs to the two additional designers yesterday, I’m sure of it.’ She takes a phone out of her pocket and sets it on the clipboard, scowling intensely as she taps away.

‘What’s going on?’ Cassie has now joined our little gathering.

‘Something about the brief for the photoshoot,’ I tell her.

‘Is there an issue?’ she asks. From the edge in her voice, I am almost positive Cassie has no idea who Tally is.

‘Er, Tally,’ I say, stepping in to make the introduction before Cassie turns on big-sister mode, ‘this is my sister and business manager, Cassie. Cassie, meet world-renowned photographer, Tally.’

Thankfully, Cassie understands immediately and beams brightly, her hand extended. ‘A pleasure to meet you.’

Pleasantries over, we all look to Sophia, who’s superior manner dissolves before our eyes. ‘I am *so* sorry,’ she says. ‘The emails are still in my outbox. I don’t know what happened.’

‘Not to worry,’ says Cassie, ‘these things happen to all of us.’

But poor Sophia, now muttering to herself, seems intent on a serious bout of self-reproach. She wanders off, possibly to polish her résumé.

‘Right, well,’ says Tally, turning to me, ‘in a nutshell, it’s this: we’re photographing pairs of designers for a multipage spread, with each pairing featuring their designs – worn by the models – and the designers posed together. You and Lorenzo are a late addition, of course, but I’ve had a brilliant idea.’

‘Okay.’ That doesn’t sound too bad. I’m a professional. I can make it through a half-day photoshoot without slobbering all over the hottest, loveliest man I’ve ever known!

‘What I’ve conceived for you and Lorenzo,’ Tally continues, ‘is something a little... well, *different*, as your design aesthetics are almost polar opposites.’

Well, I agree there – that’s what I’ve been saying to Cassie all along.

‘What do you mean by “different”?’ Cassie asks.

‘The main photograph will be three models on the left wearing Lorenzo shoes, belts, and hats *and nothing else* – posed strategically, of course – and three models on the right wearing your outfits. You and Lorenzo will be together in the centre.’

‘Wearing...?’ I ask with a strong sense of foreboding.

‘It will appear as if you are wearing nothing’ – I inhale sharply – ‘but of course, we will be taking all the necessary precautions to protect your modesty, and you will have approval of the final image.’

My eyes fly to meet Cassie's. 'Help!' I silently telegraph.

'Can I just ask?' she says to Tally. 'Would you consider Elle perhaps wearing one of her pieces – such as a waistcoat – to perhaps... facilitate the transition from nude to clothed across the page?'

And there we have it – my sister the number-cruncher and brilliant business mind making an astute creative suggestion and advising Eleni 'Tally' Talbot on her photoshoot.

Tally's gaze lifts to the ceiling as if she's pondering the idea. Moments that feel like millennia pass, then a smile breaks across her face. 'I like that,' she says, and I exhale with relief.

That's right – I am relieved I get to wear a waistcoat and nothing else while posing with my ex-boyfriend. Beggars can't be choosers, right?

'Actually,' says Tally, tapping her lower lip with her forefinger, 'Lorenzo could be shirtless but wearing a pair of his label's jeans.'

I can tell, as a fellow creative, that she's now envisioning the final shot. I frequently go into this state – looking off, my gaze unfocused, mumbling to myself...

'Yes!' she exclaims, coming back to us. 'Lorenzo's models on the right – organic poses, nude makeup, natural – then you and Lorenzo as the hub of the transition, entwined, each wearing one of your pieces, showing *connectedness* – your aesthetics differ, but you're both *fashion* – then *your* models, fully-clothed, made up, structured poses, angular.'

She turns to Cassie. 'You were dead-on with that suggestion – it'll really elevate the shoot. Thank you.'

Cassie looks as astonished as I am. 'Oh, you're welcome.'

'I agree,' says someone behind us.

We turn in unison and there he is.

'Lorenzo!' Tally exclaims. They exchange cheek kisses like old friends. 'Wonderful to see you again.'

Right, so Leo has shot with Tally before – why am I not surprised?

Tally claps her hands. ‘Everyone, listen up.’ The hum of activity stills and everyone looks towards Tally. ‘Slight change of plan. This will impact wardrobe and hair and makeup – heads to me, please. We start shooting in thirty.’

The activity resumes, with Sylvie stepping away to huddle with Tally – she must be the head makeup artist and hair stylist – and Cassie re-joining Poppy on the sofa.

‘Hey,’ Leo says, coming over.

‘Hey,’ I say back.

He drops his canvas satchel on the floor next to my chair. Looking around, he rubs his hand along his jaw. ‘Pretty intense, hey?’

‘Yes.’ Why can’t I utter more than a syllable whenever he’s around? I reach for my now-tepid tea and take a sip, just for something to do.

Leo turns towards me, flashing a cheeky grin. ‘So, ready to get half-naked together?’

I spit my tea out all over the makeup table and the mirror.

*Oh my god!* I don’t know which is more horrifying – that I’ve just embarrassed myself like that, or the realisation that this is actually happening. In less than an hour, Leo and I are going to be in each other’s arms, semi-clad.

If I tap my heels together three times, will I wake up in my bed? Hah! Chance would be a fine thing. Instead, I’m mopping up spit-out tea with a wad of tissues and Leo is *helping* me – even *more* mortifying!

Then the head of wardrobe walks over carrying one of my waistcoats on a hanger and a pair of nude knickers clipped to a skirt hanger.

‘Elle, your wardrobe,’ he says, hanging the garments on a nearby rail.



Gah! Now I know how Carrie Bradshaw felt about her look for that runway show – only *she* got to wear a bra under the dinner jacket as well as knickers!

‘If it makes you feel any better,’ says Leo, ‘I’m also a little anxious.’

I frown at him in confusion.

‘You know, being bare-chested for the photos.’

‘Why? You were barely wearing much more on the runway. Besides, you have a great body.’

It’s hard to say who’s more shocked by my comment – me or Leo – but then he grins and all I can hope for now is that the world opens up and swallows me whole.

‘How’s it going?’ Nasrin asks. I get off the sofa to take the call in a quieter part of the studio, which turns out to be more difficult than I’d anticipated. I end up huddled in a corner near the kitchenette.

‘So far, brilliantly,’ I say softly. ‘Elle and Leo are going to be photographed *together*.’

‘As in posed together?’

‘Yep.’

‘That is good.’

‘Half-dressed,’ I add for impact.

‘What?’

‘Uh-huh. Cassie tried to give me credit, but I set her straight. She seems to think we have magical powers.’

‘Hah!’ Nasrin laughs. ‘I’ve had clients like that – attributing their good luck to me.’

‘Exactly. That would be the Hocus Pocus Agency, not the Ever After Agency,’ I quip, making her laugh again. ‘So, any news?’ I ask, hoping that’s the reason for her call.

‘Yes – sort of,’ Nas replies.

‘Well?’

‘Marie has been in contact with Leo’s publicist’s former assistant—’

‘Ser’s former assistant?’

‘Yes. How many publicists does Leo have?’

‘Sorry – continue.’

‘*Anyway,*’ she says, clearly irritated, ‘the former assistant said that right before they left, Ser had them working on a list of celebrities to match Leo with.’

‘And by “match” you mean...?’

‘A short-term fake relationship for publicity purposes.’

‘Oh, wow,’ I say, my hand flying to my mouth.

‘Exactly.’

‘*And?*’

‘And Franzia was on it.’

‘Franzia was on the list?!’

‘Poppy, are you intentionally being dim, or are you just messing with me?’

‘Sorry – I’m absorbing this new information. It’s not exactly a smoking gun, but it *is* significant.’ Something occurs to me. ‘So, why did the assistant leave Ser’s employ? Do you know?’

‘It didn’t come up.’

‘Okay. Keep me posted. We need that smoking gun.’

‘Yep. See ya.’ She ends the call.

Right, so now I’m 99.5 per cent sure that the Lorenzo–Franzia engagement is a publicity stunt. But it’s that other 0.5 per cent that could derail this case *and* gravely impact the agency.

‘Come on, Marie,’ I whisper to myself. Then I head back to the sofa, where I’ll have an excellent view of the photoshoot.

\* \* \*

*Elle*

I regard myself in the mirror.

Sylvie has done an amazing job – I barely recognise myself. I'm fortunate to have good skin to start with – Cassie and I both inherited our nana's peaches-and-cream complexion – but today, it looks like it's made from porcelain. With faux lashes and gold eyeliner, my hazel eyes really pop, looking more greenish than they usually do; my cheekbones are flushed with a natural-looking blush; my lips look particularly plump, Sylvie taking my natural pink a shade darker; and my hair is artfully tousled.

In its entirety, this look screams 'recently shagged' – if only.

'Thank you, Sylvie. You've done a wonderful job,' I say, still transfixed by my reflection. She beams at me in the mirror.

'Time to change into your look now, love – such that it is.' Indeed, Sylvie, indeed. I side-eye the two teeny pieces, then glance towards Leo, who is still in the makeup chair – or rather, standing next to it while the makeup artist touches up his torso. I'd look away but I don't want to.

He's wearing eyeliner too, only in a smoky grey that makes his eyes extra smoulder-y, and his hair looks like he's just stepped out of the shower and run his hands through it. The pièce de resistance is that now he's shirtless, his tattoos are visible – well, *most* are. I recall a small insignia on his left hip that's currently hidden below his waistband. He has a lot more tattoos now than he did ten years ago, and I like that the ink on both his forearms is monochromatic. It suits him.

*It suits him?* Understatement of the year, Elle Bliss. Leo Jones is pure, rockstar-calibre sex on legs.

Leo looks over, catching me watching him – perverting, more like – and winks again.

Gah!

I leap off the makeup chair, snatch up the waistcoat and knickers, and skitter towards a curtained-off fitting room.

*Please* let them have an enormous robe on hand so I can swath myself in it until the very last moment.

I'm not a prude. I'll happily change into my swimming costume in front of other women or walk around naked in front of a lover – I've even sunbathed topless in Nice. But none of that body confidence applies here. If this were a solo photoshoot, I probably would have agreed to Tally's original concept and gone topless – nipple covers or not. I wouldn't have loved it, but I would have agreed to it.

But Leo is here and that changes everything, including how I feel about public nudity.

I change, then look in the mirror. Top half? Fab. Thanks to Sylvie, I look sexy and I'm in love with this waistcoat – it's one of my favourites from the collection – white silk linen, tiny pearlescent buttons... exquisite.

My bottom half, however, is a different story. I tug gently at the hem of the waistcoat, which stubbornly remains the same length. At least the knickers are designed for maximum coverage – unlike what the models are strutting about in. I spin around and look at my bum in the mirror – thankfully, not too 'cheeky'.

'Elle, they're ready for you on set,' a woman on the other side of the curtain calls out. I quickly scan the space for a robe... Nothing. So, I *am* expected to walk across the studio like this? I open the curtain a sliver, and Sophia is waiting there. 'Ready?' she asks.

'Oh, I...'

'I brought you this, if you like?' she says, producing a white satin robe from behind her back.

'*Thank* you,' I say, resisting the urge to kiss her in gratitude. I take it and slip it on, then push the curtain open.

'I really am sorry about the email cock up,' she says to me quietly as she leads me to the set. 'It must have come as quite a shock.'

As I suspected, Sophia is still beating herself up. I lay a hand on her arm. 'It's okay. Even if I had got the email, I'd

probably still be a bit nervous about it.’ Her mouth extends into a lipless smile. ‘And thanks again for the robe,’ I say.

She gives me another cheerless smile, then steps away, and I take a moment to survey the set.

On the left, where Leo’s models will be posed, are three white blocks of various heights. The right of the set is mostly open space with one small riser towards the back, and in the centre is a white plinth about the height of a stool.

The models are all waiting just off set, Leo’s looking ‘au naturel’ and the three wearing my designs (sans the waistcoat I’m wearing) dolled up in that high-fashion look *Nouveau* is famous for. I look back to the set, Tally’s vision forming in my mind’s eye. No doubt the shots will be incredible.

She claps her hands, commanding everyone’s attention, and starts directing the models into position.

‘Isn’t this wild,’ says a voice low in my ear. I inhale raggedly – such is the effect of his proximity – and nod while keeping my eyes fixed on the flurry of activity on set. ‘I don’t know that I’ll ever get used to moments like this,’ he says, his tone conveying humility.

I’m about to reply when Tally waves us over.

‘Right, so I’ve been told you two have known each other a long time?’

I look to Leo, signposting, ‘How much does she know and how much are we telling her?’

‘We were at fashion school together,’ he offers. ‘So, about fourteen years?’

*Fourteen years if you don’t count the last ten, during which we’ve had no contact whatsoever!*

‘That sounds about right,’ I reply, offering Tally a professional smile. It’s incredible the power of a satin robe. Were we having this conversation with me standing here in my knickers: completely different story.

‘Good. I’m just wanting to assess your level of comfort with each other,’ she says.

I laugh tensely. Level of comfort? What number is lower than zero? In stark contrast to my reaction, Leo drapes an arm around my shoulder, sending a ripple of goosebumps down my arms – the bastard. ‘We were close at school,’ he says, referring to uni the way Americans do.

‘Excellent. Well, then let’s get started, shall we? Leo, we’ll have you here, just to the right of this plinth, and Elle, if you could...’ She mimes taking off the robe.

Right, that. My knuckles turn white as I clasp the robe’s tie, willing myself to undo the bow, rather than tie it in a double knot. Sophia appears beside me, which somehow makes this moment more bearable. I take a deep breath and, steeling myself, undo the tie and let the robe slide off my shoulders, Sophia taking it from me before it hits the floor. I lift my chin and look at Tally expectantly, as if I do this sort of thing all the time.

She pats the top of the plinth. ‘Let’s start with you up here,’ she says.

Me: five-foot-two. The plinth: waist height. The only way I am getting up there is if someone lifts me.

‘Here,’ says Leo. He grabs me by the waist and effortlessly lifts me onto the plinth. It happens so fast, I barely register that his hands were on me.

‘Perfect. Now cross your legs,’ Tally says to me. I do. ‘And Leo, if you could drape your left arm around her, resting your hand on her chest, just above the neckline of her waistcoat...’

*And breathe, Elle.*

The next thirty or forty or a thousand minutes – time loses its meaning – feel like an out-of-body experience with me watching from the sidelines as Tally directs me, Leo, and the models into dozens of poses. She moves panther-like about the set, the camera almost always affixed to her eye as she translates her vision into the perfect shot.

And being this close to Leo, his hands on me, mine on him, feeling his breath on my shoulders, his hair tickling my

neck – all these sensations add to the surrealness. The moment eventually comes when Tally stills, hands her camera to her assistant, and grins at us.

‘Want to see?’ she asks. Leo unfurls his arms, which were wrapped around me, and I viscerally experience the loss of him. My self-consciousness having dissolved soon after we started, all I want is for this day to continue indefinitely.

Leo lifts me off the plinth – I’ve been on and off it throughout the shoot – and we go over to where Tally is scrutinising a large screen. We stand either side of her and watch as she slowly scrolls through dozens of photographs, stopping to regard individual shots with a slight head tilt. Looking through the images, I can tell the moment I started to relax into the shoot – my jaw slackens, the fear leaves my eyes, and I adopt a serene, ethereal expression.

‘This one,’ Tally says, enlarging a thumbnail so it fills the screen. ‘Look at the light, how it’s dancing on your skin. You’re other-worldly, both of you.’

I lean in, my eyes roving the screen.

In the photograph, Leo’s arms are wrapped protectively around my torso, his chin dipped as though he’s about to kiss my shoulder. He’s looking down, his thick lashes black against the sharp outline of his pale cheeks. I, however, am looking right into the lens, my lips parted as if I am about to speak.

It’s stunning.

It also sends a slew of tingles down my spine, and I shiver.

‘Are you cold?’ Leo asks. He looks about. ‘Could we please get a robe for Elle?’ he asks the room.

The work experience girl hurries over with the one I was wearing earlier and Leo helps me into it, then pulls me to him and rubs one hand up and down my arm. I lean into his embrace, savouring the warmth of his bare torso through the fabric.

Then I realise: Leo is holding me and it feels like the most natural thing in the world.



Cassie and Poppy have joined us now and Tally continues scrolling, stopping to examine certain shots. ‘These are amazing,’ Cassie says.

‘I keep coming back to this one,’ says Tally, returning to the shot she showed us before.

‘Wowser,’ Cassie whispers.

Tally grins at her. ‘Amelia will have final say, of course, but I’d bet a fair amount this will be it.’ She straightens and addresses the entire studio. ‘That’s a wrap, everyone. Great work. Thank you.’

The bustle recommences as the set is broken down, the lighting techs rip gaffer tape from the floor and coil cables, the models wander off to get changed (or clothed), and the hair and makeup team start packing up. The shoot is over, yet Leo still has an arm wrapped around me.

He may owe me an explanation, he may be engaged to Franzia, but in this moment, it feels very much like ‘Leo and Ellie’ again – as if it’s just us and not us plus six models, a dozen crew, a journalist, my sister, and the world’s most famous fashion photographer.

‘So,’ says Cassie. ‘That’s it.’

‘Yep,’ Leo replies. He drops his hand from my arm – *no!* – then stretches his neck from side to side. ‘I tell ya, I will never be one of those people who thinks modelling is easy,’ he says. ‘I’m going to need to visit my chiropractor after that. How’d you go?’ he asks me. ‘Besides freezing to death?’ he adds with a laugh.

‘Good, yeah,’ I reply, realising that I’ve barely said two words to him all morning.

‘Lorenzo,’ says Cassie, all business-like, ‘we still need to connect on the collab—’

‘Totally,’ he says, interrupting her. ‘How about you have your people call my people, set something up?’

Cassie frowns, confused. ‘Oh, I...’

‘I’m kidding.’

Cassie laughs, immediately disarmed.

‘So, how does tomorrow work?’ he asks.

‘Perfect. Elle?’

They both look at me. ‘Oh, um, yes, tomorrow,’ I respond, going against everything I’ve told Cassie about us working with Leo. Or rather, *not* working with Leo. Apparently, she’s not the only one who has been disarmed by his charms. I remain in my semi-fugue state as they chat excitedly, arranging for Leo to come to Bliss Designs, as his workroom is still being fitted out and won’t be ready for weeks.

Reality arrives with a thud when the head of wardrobe comes over and says, ‘You can keep the knickers, but we’ll need you out of the waistcoat so we can pack up your looks.’

‘Oh, right.’ I go back to the fitting room and pull the curtain closed while Cassie and Leo, who’s still bare-chested I might add, continue to chat.

My mind conjures the photo of us – Tally’s favourite – and with a jolt, I realise we look like lovers. *If only*, I think again.

How the hell am I supposed to forge a professional relationship with this man when all I want is to fall back into ‘us’?

Leo arrives at Bliss Designs on time and dressed in worn-in jeans, a black T-shirt, and his cross-body canvas satchel. He's also wearing a navy baseball cap, stitched with *NY* – I'm not hating it, even though I don't typically like baseball caps.

Actually, I'm not hating anything about how Leo looks, except the unwelcome tummy flutters he's giving me. Tummy flutters are a massive no-no when a bloke is your ex, engaged, *and* owes you both an apology and an explanation, and now you're supposed to work with him on a flipping collection.

'Wow, this place...' Leo says, his eyes scanning the converted loft. Like our flat, our fashion house was once a fabric factory, which means it has enormous windows, is flooded with light, and there is enough space to work in *and* have the occasional impromptu dance party.

'The workroom above the Soho store is... well, *cramped* – or it will be once it's finished. It's in a great location, of course, but it's nothing like this.'

I never anticipated that Leo – sorry, *Lorenzo* – would envy *my* workroom.

'And the light!' he exclaims, wandering over to the windows.

'I know. I absolutely love it, especially this time of year, coming up on spring. Cassie teases me that I must be solar-powered, as I always seem to cheer up when the sun comes out.' Wonderful, now I'm rambling like a right muppet.

‘I remember that about you,’ he says, turning back to me. ‘You were always slightly glum on grey days.’

Oh, bollocks. I’m definitely not up for a stroll down memory lane. There are enough competing emotions buzzing about inside me without adding nostalgia to the mix.

‘Would you like to meet the team?’ I ask, changing the subject. They’re down the other end of the workroom, clumped together and pretending to work.

‘Sure.’ He grins at me and I’m reminded of the firm talk I had with myself this morning.

*You are a professional. This is a professional arrangement. You are not the same people you were ten years ago. And he is not yours to lust after or swoon over – he’s engaged. SO, ACT LIKE A NORMAL PERSON AND BE A PROFESSIONAL!*

I said all this out loud while I was in the shower and Cassie came in to ask if I was talking to her. I know she caught at least the end of my pseudo affirmation, but she didn’t mention it over breakfast, which I appreciated. I also appreciate that she’s hiding away in the office right now, letting me handle Leo’s orientation to Bliss Designs on my own.

I lead him over to the team and introduce him. Zara gushes about his shoe designs and Prue asks about America, particularly New York, as it’s top of her bucket list. Gaz seems too dumbstruck to say much of anything. I know how they feel.

We leave the team clustered near the sewing machines, pass the workbenches, and head to where we store our fabrics.

‘These are what we’ll be working with for next season,’ I say, indicating a section we’ve cordoned off. I run my hand along a bolt of ecru raw silk.

‘Incredible textures,’ he says, edging closer. ‘You have a really beautiful eye, Elle.’

It’s a compliment, of course, but it also highlights the main issue with us working together – well, not *that* issue – the other one: the clash of design aesthetics. It’s an enormous leap

between Leo's modern take on Western wear and my sleeker, more classic designs.

'I've just realised these may not work for our— Leo, what *are* we going to do together?'

He meets my eye. 'That's what I'm here to find out.'

'Right, but you... me... From a design perspective, we're worlds apart.'

'I don't necessarily agree with that. We both design in natural materials. You said yours are ethically sourced like mine are...'

'Well, yes, but you're all denim and cowboy boots and I'm—'

'Old-world Hollywood.'

'Exactly.'

'How about spaghetti Westerns?' he asks with a cheeky smile. 'The confluence of both our styles.'

'Er, how about no, thank you?'

Leo's smile falls away and he regards me intently. I stand taller, meeting his unwavering eye unwaveringly.

'You know that was a joke, right?' he says, the corners of his mouth twitching. Ah, there it is – a smidge of the arrogance from that night at the restaurant.

'Of course,' I reply, one eyebrow lifted. When we were together, he was jealous I could do that.

Our eyes are still locked the moment an idea comes to him. It's like watching lightning strike: his jaw drops, his eyes widen, and his whole face lights up.

'What about—' He cuts himself off, making his way to the workbench that's set aside for design work. He takes a sketchpad from his satchel, then scrounges inside it for something to sketch with. I open a drawer under the bench to reveal a large selection of pencils – any kind a designer might need, even though I mostly sketch on my tablet.

‘Perfect,’ he says, grabbing a graphite pencil and flipping open the sketchbook.

‘Are you going to tell me what—’

‘I’m going to *show* you,’ he says, his brow creased in concentration.

I watch over his shoulder, mesmerised by the deft movements of his hand. I’d forgotten what beautiful hands he has – or perhaps I didn’t let myself remember. Minutes pass without us exchanging a word, but even from a set of rudimentary sketches, his vision starts to become clear.

‘And then...’ he says. He tears the page from the sketch pad and, on a fresh page, sketches several more designs. Eventually, he steps back to regard his work.

I draw even nearer.

‘Do you see it, how we can come together?’ he asks in a whisper.

I do. He’s devised a way for our combined aesthetics to work within one collection.

In my periphery, he looks at me and I nod, my eyes still riveted to the pages. Of course, these are just rough sketches and I will need to put my stamp on the designs, but the concept is there – the *vision* is there.

‘Leo,’ I say, ‘it’s incredible.’

‘It’s *us*, Ellie.’

I tear my eyes from the sketches and peer up at Leo. His eyes are alight with excitement and possibility, his lips stretching into a broad smile. It’s impossible not to be swept up by his obvious passion, by everything dancing behind his eyes. I beam back.

*It’s us, Ellie.* The words echo in my mind as I direct my attention back to the sketches.

That’s exactly what thrills *and* terrifies me.

\* \* \*

‘Elle, Leo, we’re just going to get some lunch,’ says Cassie. ‘Did you want to come?’

Somehow, several hours have passed since Leo arrived. We’ve been bouncing ideas off each other with a dozen or so rounds of ‘What about this?’ and ‘Yes, and how about this?’ The workbench is now littered with sheets of paper, and each of those are covered with sketches and notes.

‘Oh, er...’ I look to Leo. ‘Are you hungry?’

He flicks his wrist and checks the time. ‘Starving,’ he says, ‘but I kinda wanna...’

‘Me too.’ I turn to Cassie. ‘We’re staying. We’ll order in.’

‘Suit yourselves,’ she says, then shepherds the team out the door.

‘I really am starving,’ says Leo.

‘I know,’ I reply, picking up my phone. ‘I really am ordering lunch.’ I open the delivery app and start scrolling. ‘So, Thai, Indian, Persian, Ethiopian... We’re in the *best* part of London. Spoilt for choice.’

When I look up, he’s watching me. ‘What? None of those take your fancy?’

‘It’s not that.’ His eyes bore into mine and the mood between us shifts.

‘Oh. Then what?’ I ask in a hushed tone.

‘It’s just... Never mind.’

I inch forward, as if I’m being lured by a giant magnet. ‘Tell me.’

‘Just...’ He breaks eye contact, his gaze dropping to my mouth, and I swallow – *hard*. ‘It used to be like this, remember?’ he says, meeting my eye with slight smile. ‘We’d be working on our assignments, in the design studio till all hours, sparking off each and—’

Something inside me clicks and I emerge from the nostalgic fugue.

‘Until you left.’

‘What?’

The rage bubbles up so quickly and completely, it consumes me. I glare at him, my hands in fists.

‘Not so much sparking after you gave me a day’s notice, then left the country, never to be heard from again.’

‘Wow, okay, so... I guess deserve that.’

‘You *guess*?’ I spit, my nails digging into my palms. ‘You completely ignored every attempt I made to contact you. How could you do that?’

His eyes fall away and his jaw clenches.

‘How did we *ever* think this would work, collaborating on a collection?’ I start to pace. ‘I mean, what were we thinking? What were *you* thinking? Were you ever going to explain why you broke off all contact after you left London? Were you ever going to *apologise*? Or did you think we’d just work side by side, merrily going along and ignoring the GIANT FUCKING ELEPHANT in the room?’

I stop pacing and glare at him. ‘Well?’

He takes a deep breath then looks up to meet my eye. ‘You’re right – about all of it. I do owe you an explanation – *and* an apology – but I’ve been too...’

He pauses, as if searching for the right word.

‘...*cowardly*,’ he says eventually. ‘I was worried that if I said anything, it would dredge up all these awful feelings and you wouldn’t want to work with me – or even *see* me. I completely fucked that up – I get that now.’

His contrition activates an emotional pressure valve. Even without an apology, without an explanation, the tight coil of fury inside me starts to unwind.

‘*And* I was right,’ he jokes feebly. When I don’t respond, he inches forward, his expression softening. ‘I *am* sorry, Elle – about all of it. You have no idea how many times I wanted to contact you over the years.’



‘Then why didn’t you?’ I ask, hating how small and sad my voice sounds.

‘Because I worried that I’d left it too late, that you wouldn’t want to talk—’

A blaring ringtone cuts him off. ‘Sorry, just a sec.’ He retrieves his phone from his jeans pocket and, without thinking, my eyes flick to the screen. Franzia. Oh my god. A wave of nausea overcomes me and I suck in air to stave it off.

‘Fuck,’ he says to himself. He looks up. ‘Sorry, it’s Franzia. I completely forgot we were supposed to talk this afternoon. Time must have gotten away from me.’

‘Are you going to answer?’ I ask, still woozy.

‘Uh, I’ll call her back.’ He starts gathering sketches and shoving them into his satchel.

‘Leo—’

‘Sorry, Elle – I promise we’ll circle back to... well, all this, but I need to go.’ He shoots me a hollow smile. ‘But a great start, hey?’

He shoves the last of the designs into his satchel – some of which are mine, I realise – and starts towards the door.

‘Wait.’ He does, rounding on me so quickly, I step back, startled. ‘I just... When are working together next?’

The question pops out before I recognise what it means: I’m prepared to continue this collaboration – despite having just spewed a decade’s worth of anger and hurt at him, or that he’s left so much unexplained...

And despite that Leo is now rushing off to speak to his fiancée.

‘Oh, right.’ He blinks at me as if he’s as shocked by my question as I am. ‘Uh, how’s tomorrow?’

‘Really? But it’s Satur—’

‘Keep the momentum going, don’t you think?’

‘Okay, yes, all right.’

He starts towards the door again.

‘So, here?’ I ask.

‘Sure, yeah – probably best, ’cause my workroom’s still, you know...’

‘Right, still under construction. And what time?’

I hate that I’m keeping him – his desire to leave is plainly evident – but I don’t want to spend all day tomorrow waiting for him to arrive. Because waiting for Leo Jones would be a very Eloise Bliss thing to do, as demonstrated by the past ten years.

‘Eleven work for you?’ he asks. I nod, unsure of what else to say. ‘Cool.’

He’s about to leave, but spins around as if he’s suddenly remembered something. He walks back to me, leans down, and kisses my cheek – a cold, dry peck and a far cry from THE CHEEK KISS. ‘See ya tomorrow.’

And then he’s gone, and I’m left staring after him, my insides in knots and my knickers very much in a twist.

A week after the *Nouveau* photoshoot, Cassie makes an appointment with me and Nasrin at the agency.

Most of her updates have come via text message or phone call, including Elle's admission that she's falling for Leo again – a huge win for us – so I can only imagine what kind of update an in-person meeting warrants.

But when I greet Cassie at reception, she doesn't seem stressed or upset, so maybe this is good news.

'Come on through,' I say, leading the way into a meeting room. Nasrin is already seated at the table and looks up from her tablet when we enter.

'Hiya, Cassie.'

'Hello. Look, I'll get straight to the point,' she says, taking a seat. I sit opposite her. 'I've been doing a little digging.'

'Into?' asks Nas.

'Leo. Now I know you've got Marie and she's made some brilliant finds – that video of Franzia being a diva, for one – oh, and his publicist's list! But this is more about what's going on with *him*.'

'How do you mean?' Nasrin asks.

'Well, after Elle met up with Leo last month – that first meeting at the restaurant – she told me he was dressed head-to-toe in denim, like Ken from the *Barbie* film. And, Poppy, you saw what Leo wore for his show.'

Nasrin looks to me.

‘Think a stripper dressed as a cowboy.’

‘Bang on,’ Cassie says with a chuckle. ‘He was definitely giving “cowboy stripper” vibes. And if you search for him on Google— Actually,’ she says, pointing to Nasrin’s tablet. ‘Do you mind? It might be easier to explain with that.’

Nas hands over the tablet, then looks at me and mouths, ‘What the...?’

I shrug. I’m as much in the dark as she is.

Cassie makes fast work of her search and holds up the tablet. On the screen are a dozen or so photos of Leo at various events, and in each photo, Leo’s outfit is... well, out there.

‘So, in these photos, he’s “Lorenzo”,’ she says, ‘up-and-coming shoe designer and new darling of the fashion world. And now that he’s become engaged to one of the world’s most famous women... Look what happens when I add “Franzia” to the search.’

She shows us the results and the screen is *filled* with photos of Leo and Franzia, and in most of them, Leo’s hand is raised to block his face from the camera.

‘Okay,’ says Nas, ‘but where are you—’

‘Where am I going with this?’

‘Yeah.’

‘*This*’ – Cassie takes out her phone and taps on it, then holds it up – ‘is Leo working with Elle at Bliss Designs. I took it when he wasn’t looking.’ She scrolls to show us two more slightly blurry photos.

‘See what he’s wearing? Jeans, T-shirt – the basics. Elle calls it his “Californication” look, like in that American TV show.’

‘And that’s what he was wearing on the Eurostar,’ I say, thinking I might finally understand Cassie’s point.

‘Exactly, he was dressed like a normal person.’

‘So, he’s in disguise,’ I say. ‘When he’s dressed as *Leo*, it’s to disguise his public persona.’

‘And because of his relationship with Franzia – whatever that really is – the paps are clamouring over themselves to get his photo,’ says Nasrin.

‘Exactly,’ says Cassie.

‘So, to escape all that, he’s hiding in plain sight,’ I add.

Cassie grins. ‘Yes! I’m so glad you came to the same conclusion.’

I let this information sink in. Is it further proof that the engagement is a sham? Or would Leo shy away from the paparazzi regardless? He didn’t seem *entirely* at ease with all the notoriety, but then I’ve barely spent any time with him.

‘There’s something else,’ says Cassie mysteriously, and Nas and I lean in. ‘After Elle finally agreed to collaborate with Leo, he was *very* quick to invite himself to Bliss to work. I mean, he’s *Lorenzo*, with this beautiful shop in Soho and a workroom above it, yet he’s insistent about coming to us *every* time?’

‘That’s a *little* strange,’ I offer. ‘It could be that he’s trying to make amends to Elle – be respectful of her process... her space...’

‘Except that he made up a story about the workroom being under construction,’ she replies.

‘Wait, how do you know it’s a story?’ asks Nas.

‘Because I went there today while he was at Bliss, and I snuck upstairs to have a look.’

‘You did what?’ asks Nasrin.

‘I needed to know if I was imagining it, or if he was actually being cagey.’

‘And?’ I ask.

‘Fully kitted out.’

I sit back, tapping my nails on the table while I think. ‘So, he doesn’t want Elle there. Why?’

‘Maybe he’s trying to compartmentalise,’ Nasrin suggests.

‘Yeah, that tracks,’ I reply, meeting her eye. I look to Cassie. ‘So, it could be that he’s deliberately keeping his two worlds apart. Lorenzo of the Soho shop-cum-design-house is engaged to Franzia, and Leo is collaborating with his first love in East London.’

‘Where he’s rented a flat,’ Cassie adds.

‘Oh, that’s right. He’s moved into your ’hood,’ I say.

‘Yes and, Poppy, you should *see* them together. They’re *firing*, just zinging off each other...’ She mimes this with her hands. ‘He did leave rather abruptly one day while the rest of us were at lunch. Elle was fairly rattled by that, but all good since then from what I can tell. So, what do you think? Is this something? All Leo’s sneaking about?’

Cassie looks to me, her eyes filled with hope.

‘It’s perhaps a little misguided, his behaviour, but all things considered, I’d say this is a positive, yes.’

Her eyes glint with delight as she looks between us.

‘That said,’ I add, aiming to temper her excitement, ‘we still don’t know for sure that the engagement is fake. It’s likely that it is, but until we have proof, or Leo tells Elle that it is, then we proceed with caution, okay?’

This is a reminder to myself as much as Cassie, as I’m having to report on the status of the Lorenzo–Franzia engagement every morning. I suspect Saskia is close to pulling the pin on this case if Marie doesn’t deliver soon – or, as I’ve just said, Leo confesses to Elle.

Cassie nods. ‘I understand.’

Only, having seen the typically restrained Cassie in this new light, I’m not certain she does.

\* \* \*

I'm on the Tube on my way home, reading and listening to music (as usual), when Shaz calls.

'Hey, Shaz, what's up?'

'Lauren's going to Finland,' she says, skipping niceties.

'Okay.' I wait for additional information but I'm met with silence – something's up, besides the obvious. 'So, why's she going to Finland?' I prompt.

'For work.'

'*And...*?' This is like pulling teeth, but I suspect I know what's going on.

'She's going for a month, Pop.'

'Oh, well a month apart is doable. Hey, you could go visit her! You've never been to Finland.' More silence. 'Shaz? What's really going on?'

'She wants me to move in.'

'I know that.'

'As in, now, before she goes away – or at least before she gets back. She says she loves me and can't imagine a future without me and wants us to share a home like a proper couple.'

It's unclear whether Shaz needs Poppy the friend or Poppy the psych, so I wait.

'I love her, Pop, but... I'm not sure I'm ready – actually, I know I'm not. What should I do? I don't want to lose her.'

Right, so she needs both Poppys.

'When does she leave for Finland?'

'Next Wednesday.'

Yikes, that's soon, but I don't say that to Shaz. 'Are you genuinely afraid she'll end your relationship if you don't move in right away?'

'I don't know – probably not, but there's already this undercurrent, you know, like this great unspoken thing

between us, only now it's spoken – more than once – and I'm feeling all this pressure...'

Poppy the psych comes to the forefront. 'Let's take a step back – timing aside, because next week is, well, only a week away...' She chuckles at that, which I take as a good sign – hopefully, she'll be receptive to my next question. 'What's really holding you back; what's at the root of the fear?'

'You're not going to believe this, but that question came up with one of my patients today,' she says.

'I do believe it and good, because it means you know why I'm asking.'

She sucks in an audible breath and expels it noisily. 'Essentially, I'm terrified that if we live together, she'll see the real me and she won't love me any more.'

'Astutely put.'

'You say that like you knew all along why I've been hedging.'

'I'm your best friend. Of course I've known all along – and so have you.'

'But I needed to admit it.'

'Yep.'

'Great. So, now what?'

'Now you tell Lauren you need more time and why.'

'But what if—'

'Nope. No what ifs. This is what it means to be with someone who genuinely loves you – you have to be honest and you have to be your whole self.'

She chuckles again. 'You should be a professional matchmaker or something.'

'Now, there's an idea. I'll look into it.'

'Thanks, Pop. I owe you.'

'Don't thank me yet – I may be completely wrong.' Oops – I realise as soon as I've spoken what I've done.



‘What? What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Nothing! Sorry, just joking. Talk to Lauren. It’s the right thing to do.’

She groans. ‘Well, if it isn’t, I’ll blame you.’

‘Hey, what happened to “I owe you”?’

‘You did a one-eighty!’

‘Fair. Anyway, keep me posted. Oh, hey, should we have a send-off this weekend? You two, us, Ravi, and Jass?’

‘If Lauren and I are still together, then sure.’

‘Ha-ha, very funny.’

‘Byeee.’

As soon as the call ends, I message Jacinda:

Lauren off to Finland next week for a month – send-off this weekend?

She replies almost immediately:

Booked solid. Monday at ours?

Done. Will bring wine.

How’s the other thing?

Shaz moving in?

Yes

Complicated

I don’t want to say more, as this is Shaz’s news to share with Jacinda – and only if she wants to.

May need to stage an intervention

Bahahaha

Am serious

God, I certainly don’t want to commit to anything as drastic as that, especially over text message. And what would an intervention entail exactly? I don’t get a chance to ask because her next message says:

Talk later x

I've known Jacinda almost as long as I've known Tristan and I adore her, but I suspect that when she has her mind set on something, like meddling in Shaz's love life, she'll be difficult to dissuade. Though, that did play to my advantage when Tristan and I had fallen for each other, but I'd pushed him away because of the professional implications. It was Jacinda who talked him into making a grand gesture, which was showing up at the agency to propose to me.

Maybe she's onto something with this intervention thing.

I've never been one to dread Monday mornings – especially not since we opened Bliss Designs – but this morning comes with oodles of apprehension.

Leo texted last night:

Up for a field trip tomorrow?

Intrigued, I replied:

Where to?

Those three blinking dots tormented me for at *least* twenty seconds, then:

It's a surprise. Meet me here.

He added a link, which led to a café in SE1. Investigating further, I learnt it was equidistant from several London landmarks, including the Tate Modern. I said yes, we agreed on a time – 11 a.m. – and now I'm pacing in front of my wardrobe trying to decide what to wear. Any other workday, I'd select a pair of trousers and a shirt – often my own designs – and leather sneakers. Simple, stylish, and comfortable.

But today?

With Cassie at Bliss, it's left to me and my mounting nerves to select an appropriate look for an excursion (and definitely *not* a date) with my sexy, talented ex-boyfriend to an undisclosed location on an unseasonably warm day of 21°C!

It's the ultimate wardrobe dilemma. What if he's taking me on a tour of the London sewers?

‘Eloise Bliss!’ I chide myself, rifling through my wardrobe yet again. ‘Choose a look!’

Eventually, I opt for high-waisted, straight-leg linen trousers, a flowing silk blouse, a waistcoat (one of mine), and platform sandals. Regarding myself in the full-length mirror, I decide that the blouse is too formal and swap it for a white T-shirt. Finally dressed, I look in the mirror again, turning this way and that and trying to imagine myself through Leo’s eyes.

Leo, who is engaged. To a flipping supermodel! One who just happened to fly into London last night, something I know because I have been torturing myself by following her movements on socials.

It’s been over a week since Leo and I started working together and, after that first afternoon when I shouted at him and he apologised, but we were interrupted by Franzia’s call before we fully resolved anything, it’s been going well.

Well, mostly. The work side of things is. We’re making progress and although it’s early days, this collection has the potential to be the best work I’ve ever done.

The part that isn’t going so well is my too-frequent erotic thoughts about Leo.

We’ll be sketching or discussing fabric options and my mind will start drifting off and before I know it, I’m imagining Leo’s hands on my body or his mouth on mine or him taking me on the workbench. On Friday, he had to ask me three times to pass him the tailor’s chalk.

There’s also that Leo and I both seem to be suffering from ostrich syndrome, burying our heads in the sand. It’s obvious that another big talk is coming but neither of us are brave enough to go there.

All this means it’s been an intense week and a half – and that’s without my new hobby: stalking the supermodel who’s engaged to my ex.

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake,’ I say, giving myself a mental slap. What am I *doing*, obsessing like this? Leo is my *colleague*.

This is not a date. This is simply a research excursion for our collection.

I grab my favourite handbag and leave the flat before I make myself late.

\* \* \*

Leo is standing outside the café when I arrive, looking annoyingly cool and sexy. The baseball cap has made a return appearance and he's in his 'uniform': a black T-shirt and jeans. He's also wearing sunglasses, something I wish I'd thought to bring, as it's not only warm, but the sky is a brilliant blue and the sunshine is bright.

'Hey,' he says, 'you look...' He pauses for far too long, making me self-conscious about what I'm wearing. '...good,' he says eventually, which makes me laugh.

'Really? For a fashion designer, you need to work on your vocabulary.'

He chuckles self-deprecatingly. 'You got me. Hi, by the way,' he says. He leans down and we end up in one of those awkward are-we-hugging-I'm-not-quite-sure-pat-on-the-back hugs. We step back and smile at each other – also awkwardly.

'So, are we going inside?' I ask, indicating the café.

'Oh, if you want to.'

'It's just—'

'I thought we'd—'

'Oh, that's fine—'

We're talking over each other, which is silly because we don't do that in the workroom. Maybe that's it – take us out of the working environment and we don't know how to be together.

*Be together... Oh god. Not a date, not a date, not a date.*

'Start again?' he asks with a shy smile.

'Please.'

‘I chose to meet you here because I wanted us to be in the vicinity of our destination without revealing what it is.’

‘Right. But you don’t want a coffee or a pastry?’

‘Only if you do—’

‘No, I—’ I expel a heavy breath. ‘We’re doing it again.’

‘Talking over each other?’ I nod. ‘You go,’ he says, smiling.

‘Okay, I’m not hungry and I had three cups of tea this morning.’

‘Cool, so we can go?’

‘Looks like it.’

‘This way,’ he says, pointing away from the Thames. Right, so we’re *not* going to the Tate Modern. We walk side by side as much as possible on the busy London street, dodging oncoming pedestrians and the odd pushchair. When we turn onto Bermondsey, I immediately know where we’re going, and I’m amazed it didn’t occur to me before.

‘Fashion and Textile Museum?’

He grins at me, and I catch myself reflected in his sunglasses – *almost* seeing myself through his eyes. Strange that I was pondering that only an hour ago.

We arrive at the striking pink entrance of the museum and Leo asks me to wait outside while he buys us tickets – refusing my offer to pay for mine – so he can keep the exhibit a surprise until the last moment. I even avoid looking at the marketing banners, so I don’t spoil it.

‘Ready?’ he asks a few minutes later.

I nod and follow him inside. I *love* this museum – the industrial feel of the space, with its polished concrete floors and high ceilings – even the lighting rig above our heads. And the colours and patterns that adorn the array of surfaces! Dame Zandra Rhodes is imprinted in the DNA of this museum.

‘This way,’ says Leo.

I follow closely, keeping my eyes on his back so I don't accidentally ruin his surprise.

'So? What do you think?' he asks as we enter a cavernous gallery, and I finally lift my gaze. Set on plinths around the gallery, with a multi-tiered display at the far end, are several dozen mannequins dressed in clothing from the mid-20th century.

With my mouth open, I do a slow spin, taking in the dresses and gowns, the suits, the *hats* – men's *and* women's.

'And check this out,' says Leo, lightly touching my elbow to guide me to the back of the gallery. We stop in front of a display, and I understand immediately that *this* is why he's brought me to the museum.

'Pretty awesome, huh?'

My eyes rove the tableaux of mannequins dressed as travellers – the outfits, the travel accessories, the scarves and shoes and hats. A plaque at the front of the display reads:

#### A Mid-20th Century Retrospective on Travel

'This is incredible. I mean, it's in here, of course...' I say, touching the side of my head – our education on the history of fashion was extensive and rigorous, and this era is the inspiration for our collection. 'But *seeing* it in person...' I lean closer, taking in the tiny stitches on a satin cape. 'Can you imagine wearing clothes like this for a long-haul flight?' I ask, turning back to him with a grin.

He chuckles. 'It was a different time, for sure.'

'I'll say. This is a far cry from leggings and Uggs.'

'Hah! There's no way you travel in Uggs,' he teases.

'Well, no, but you know what I mean.'

I return to the display, scrutinising each piece while simultaneously thinking of our sketches. Excitement courses through me; our collection is going to be brilliant.

'We should get some photos, yeah?' I ask, whipping out my phone.

I start snapping away, Leo joining in, and we take the kind of photos only designers would take – closeups of buckles and stitching and lapels and bows. I even kneel on all fours in front of the dresses and skirts at the front of the display to look at the hems and lining.

‘Silk lining,’ I say about an A-line skirt as I stand and dust off my trousers.

‘Would you expect anything less?’ Leo asks.

‘*Patterned* silk lining.’

‘Impressive.’

‘Or overkill.’

‘Or *sexy*,’ he says. I look up at him and his eyes lock with mine, the air between us instantly charged.

‘Maybe the designer was thinking about what that skirt would look like on the bedroom floor,’ he says, his voice raspy.

‘Or bunched up around someone’s waist in the aeroplane toilet,’ I add, throwing fuel on the fire. My mind instantly teems with thoughts of Leo and me joining the Mile High Club.

He clears his throat and looks away and I inhale deeply through my nose. Right, so we’re going to pretend that didn’t happen.

‘Got all the photos you want?’ he asks. Translation: that was intense, and I’m engaged to someone else.

‘Um, yes, I think so.’ Translation: what’s the fastest way back to your flat so we can consummate this?

Because now I know this isn’t just one-sided. Leo’s feeling the current of attraction too.

We hastily make our way to the exit – maybe the glaring light of day will douse these feelings – but when we step outside, we’re met with more than sunlight.

‘Lorenzo, who’s the girl?’



‘Where’s Franzia?’

‘Are you cheating on your fiancée?’

The questions come thick and fast as the clump of photographers shove each other for the best vantage point. To photograph me with Leo! As if we were doing something wrong!

‘Lorenzo! Who’s the dolly bird?’

*Dolly bird?*

It’s only been seconds but it feels like longer when Leo grabs my hand and drags me away from the museum.

‘This way,’ he says, and I trot to keep up with him. The paps follow, shouting questions and commands at us.

I spot a black cab half a block away and tug free from Leo’s grasp to hail it. The cabbie flashes his lights and stops next to us.

The paps continue their onslaught as we climb inside.

‘Who’s the slapper?’ one of them asks.

The slam of the car door plunges us into silence and the cab zips into traffic, leaving the paparazzi behind.

I resist the urge to look back, instead resting heavily against the seat. Leo takes my hand again, gently this time, rubbing his thumb along the back of it.

‘I’m sorry,’ he says quietly.

But it’s too much. The moment in the museum, the paps, being called horrible names... Leo holding my hand.

I snatch it away and rest it in my lap, staring straight ahead.

‘Where to?’ asks the cabbie.

I rattle off my home address without thinking but Leo talks over me, giving a W1 address I don’t recognise. I look across at him. His lips have disappeared between his teeth and he’s frowning behind his sunglasses.

‘Is that the address to your shop?’ I ask.

He turns to me and takes off the glasses, answering my question with a nod.

I watch him closely. Do I want to go to his shop, or fashion house, or whatever it is? *Lorenzo* – is it a label? A persona? And whose brainchild was it, anyway? Seems wildly out of character for Leo to have created something so flashy.

I add these to the hundreds of questions I have for him, questions I've been accumulating since he left London. We could talk for the rest of the day, all through the night, and into tomorrow and I still wouldn't have all the answers I want – answers I *need*.

But if I don't go with him now, while I'm emboldened by adrenaline and – let's face it – the leverage of having just been papped in the name of *Lorenzo*, I may never have this opportunity again.

'Will you come?' he asks, vulnerability evident in his eyes. 'I still owe you that explanation, and now seems as good a time as any.'

*That's a casual way of putting it, an autopsy of our breakup, I think.*

I look out the side window. 'Yeah, okay.'

I sense him relax beside me as I watch out the window and wonder how much a cab ride through Central London will end up costing. No matter, as it will definitely be on Leo.

The cab stops next to the kerb and Leo taps his phone to pay the enormous fare. I get out and wait for him, looking up at the beautiful Soho shopfront. He's soon standing beside me and I resist the urge to gush about how proud I am that he's reached this level of success. Because I am. Beneath everything else, I always had faith in his talent and only ever wanted him to succeed – for both of us to.

'Come on inside,' he says. He enters first, and every staff member glances at the door, even those tending to customers, smiles alighting on their faces at the sight of Leo.

I look around, my eyes devouring every detail of the shop floor. And I thought the *shopfront* was incredible! In my wildest dreams, I've never imagined something this... *swanky*.

A woman of around fifty – uber stylish with the most glorious long blonde hair – crosses to us and she and Leo exchange air kisses.

'Linda,' he says, 'meet my new design partner, Elle Bliss. Elle, this is Linda, my second-in-command here in London.'

She reaches past him, her hand extended, and I shake it.

'Hello,' I say.

'Nice to meet you,' she says with a clipped inner-London accent. 'And he's exaggerating. I essentially manage a shop.'

Leo shakes his head, a grin spreading across his face. 'Not even close.'

‘It’s true,’ Linda says to me. I suspect they’ve had similar exchanges before. ‘So, you’re here to see the workroom?’ she asks. ‘It’s extraordinary.’

‘Oh, I thought...’ I look to Leo, who’s now wearing a tight, uncomfortable smile.

‘Should we...?’ he asks, gesturing towards a staircase at the rear of the store. I go first, climbing the narrow staircase, and two storeys up – the middle floor is taken up by offices – I emerge into a workroom so modern and well-kitted out, it takes my breath away. I stop abruptly, taking it all in, and Leo bumps into the back of me.

‘Sorry,’ we mumble together.

I make my way between the workbenches towards the bank of sewing machines and overlockers, admiring the latest models. Slowly, I spin in wonder. Two of the walls are lined with pegboards, shelves, and cubbies filled with everything a fashion designer could want or need. The third is for pinning up inspiration boards and storyboarding – the visual depictions of the design process – and the fourth wall is floor-to-ceiling bolts of fabric.

I stray over to the twin dormer windows, lean against the exposed brick between them, and peer out at the street below us.

‘Not even close to the light you have in your workroom,’ he says.

‘You don’t need ambient light when you have those.’ My eyes dart towards the industrial lights overhead.

‘No, I guess not. Still—’

‘Why did you lie to me?’ I ask, interrupting him.

‘About this?’ he asks, looking about.

‘Yes. Unless there are other lies you’ve told me.’

‘No, I...’ He sighs with frustration and takes off his cap, running a hand through his hair. His dark roots have started to grow out, giving him an even edgier, almost rock-star look.

Literally hat in hand, he faces me. ‘There’s so much to tell you... Now that we’re here, I don’t know where to start.’

‘Hah!’ I laugh dryly. ‘I feel the same way about all the questions I have.’

‘Why don’t you go first then?’

‘I already have and you haven’t answered me. You told me – *and* Cassie – that your workroom was under construction. Why?’

He lifts his chin and looks me square in the eye. ‘Because ever since Paris, the paparazzi have set up shop’ – he points towards the windows – ‘right out there. And because I knew how it would look to them if I brought you here.’

‘Because you’re engaged to Franzia and us being seen together could end up being a PR nightmare.’

He bites his bottom lip for a moment before releasing it. ‘Yes.’

‘I suppose that makes sense,’ I concede. ‘Wait – no it doesn’t, because it was your publicist who got us together in the first place, for the collaboration. Well, her and Cassie.’

‘Yes, but that’s not the whole stor—’

‘So, what are you saying? That Ser doesn’t know we’re working together? Of course she bloody does!’

I push off the wall and start pacing. He remains silent, so I stop, fixing my eyes on him. ‘Are you going to help me understand or not?’ I *don’t* ask the burning question that’s front of mind: are you really in love with Franzia?

‘Yes! I’m trying.’

‘Try harder.’

We scowl at each other as he breathes audibly through his nose, an affectation he’s had ever since I’ve known him. It’s ‘Leo’ for, ‘You are doing my head in.’ Well, good because he’s doing the same to me!

‘Ser is...’ he says, his gaze dropping away.

He struggles to finish the sentence, so I supply, ‘Hard work?’

That makes him smile, his mouth quirking, and he meets my eye again. ‘She’s done a lot for me. Before I started working with her, I...’ I suspect he’s about to reveal something important and resist the urge to interrupt with some smart-arse comment. ‘I was lost, you know? I’d spent six years – no, seven – *seven years* in the cattle industry before I could finally hand over to Brandy.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘The family business. Brandy always wanted it. She has a brilliant mind for business – always has, even from a young age – and I never did. I wanted to be a fashion designer, which to my father was the equivalent of running off to join the circus.’

Pieces of the puzzle start slotting into place – what Brandy said about Leo sacrificing for her, that Lorenzo is a reasonably new label – a new *persona*. I still have dozens of questions, but they can wait.

‘My old man... He was the epitome of the word “bastard” – old school, misogynistic... You know why he wanted me to run the company and not Brandy?’

It’s obviously a rhetorical question but I shake my head anyway.

‘Because she was “the daughter” and I was “the son” – line of succession, you see. In his mind, a business that had been in the family five generations – something that had started as a humble ranch with a hundred head of cattle – gets passed down from father to son, not father to daughter.’

‘Oh my god. That’s archaic.’

‘Mmm-hmm. And boy, he made her work for it – both of us. If I hadn’t agreed to run the business while Brandy got her degree, his will stipulated that it would go to his brother and we wouldn’t see a penny.’

‘Wait, not even your mum?’

‘Nope.’

‘Oh.’ So it wasn’t just for Brandy; he sacrificed for his mum as well.

‘And he was so *cruel*... He’d go on these tirades... And how he treated my mom...’ Leo leans against one of the workbenches and crosses his arms, then stares at the floor for some time, his expression pained.

Eventually, he meets my eye and says, ‘This is going to sound awful, but I was glad when he died.’

He doesn’t look away and I know it’s so he can judge my reaction. If I’m appalled by what he’s said, then the connection between us – barely more than a filament, at this stage – will be severed. But I’m not appalled, I’m saddened. What a horrible way to live, hating your father like that and having to sacrifice what you so desperately want.

‘It freed us, his death,’ Leo continues. ‘Even me. It may have forced me to take on something I didn’t want to do, but in a way, I was still free of *him*... you know?’

He blinks back tears, and sniffs and shakes his head, rubbing his hand over his mouth and jaw. ‘Sorry.’

‘No – don’t be. *I’m* sorry. I had no idea how hard it must have been for you.’

We don’t speak for a while, and I look away to give him privacy. Peeking out one of the windows again, I discover a man ‘hiding’ behind a post box. And by ‘hiding’, I mean, ‘boldly leaning against it and smoking while his camera dangles from his neck’. I withdraw from the window so he can’t photograph me, then scan the block for more paps. I don’t see any, but that doesn’t mean anything. They may *actually* be hiding.

I’ve always wanted to be a successful designer – to be invited to show at the most prestigious fashion events and be featured in magazines like *Nouveau* – but I have never wanted the kind of fame that comes with paparazzi and tabloids.

Leo comes up behind me and peers over my shoulder.

‘Fucker,’ he says, hitting the ‘R’ sound hard.

‘Total fucker,’ I agree. ‘Utter tosspot fucking asshole bastard.’

Leo chuckles and I turn and catch his eye.

‘You have quite the potty mouth, Miss Bliss.’

‘I can swear like a longshoreman on command,’ I reply.

He smiles at that, his eyes creasing at the corners, and I look away. Having him this close to me, looking at me like that... I can’t bear it.

I wander over to the fabric bolts and crane my neck, gazing up at the top shelf. I look for a ladder, and tucked away in the corner is the kind found in bookshops or libraries, one on rails.

‘I have workroom envy,’ I say, turning back to him.

He gives me a tight-lipped smile. ‘An advantage of being backed by my sister.’

‘Oh, Brandy invested in *Lorenzo*?’

‘Yep. She says it’s payment for keeping her seat warm all those years.’

‘Seems fair. Plus, she believes in you – she was so proud when I talked to her in Paris.’ He tilts his head from side to side, clearly unconvinced.

So, I’m not the only one who suffers from imposter syndrome. Perhaps we can unpack that together – but another time.

‘So, where does Ser fit in? How did *you* get connected with... with... I’m sorry, I’m trying to find a way to describe her that isn’t mean or rude.’

‘She’s my mom’s best friend – they were roommates in college. I grew up calling her Aunt Serena. Actually, I still call her that.’

I laugh, nodding as I absorb this new information. ‘Okay, all right... So she took you on as a client as what, nepotism



once removed?’

‘Hey!’ he says with a grin. ‘She didn’t *have* to. But I reckon she and Mom got to talking around the time Brandy was finishing college and, essentially, they decided for me. I’d move to New York and get to work on my designs and when I was ready, Aunt Serena would launch my label. She’s kind of a big deal in the New York PR scene, so...’

‘Wait. You said they decided for you – why’s that?’

‘I don’t know,’ he says, fidgeting with a tape measure, the only object in the workroom that’s not in its place. ‘I’d lost my mojo. My head was still in the cattle game, I hadn’t designed anything for, well, *years*, and I just...’ He looks at me. ‘I guess I still had my old man’s voice in my head, telling me that fashion was a worthless pursuit, that I had no talent, that *I* was worthless.’

‘You’re not worthless and you are a wonderful designer. You deserve your successes – no matter how much help you had starting out,’ I say emphatically. ‘I mean, look at me. I wouldn’t be where I am without Cassie. She’s like Brandy – a brilliant business mind – *and* she keeps me in check when I get all...’ I flap my hands about to demonstrate ‘wobbly’.

‘It’s awesome that you have her support.’

‘Yes, it is. Just you like you have Brandy.’

‘The major difference is that my family backed me financially.’

‘Well, you’re wrong there. If it weren’t for our nana, there wouldn’t be a Bliss Designs and I’d still be a pattern cutter for a third-tier athleisure-wear label, earning a pittance and being miserable.’

‘Really?’

‘She gave me my inheritance early. That’s how she explained it. She wanted me to follow my dream and what was the point of her sitting on Grandad’s retirement fund until she passed away if she could see her granddaughter succeed as a fashion designer instead?’

‘Wow, that’s... that’s awesome.’

‘It is. *And* a lot of pressure to make that happen. So, you see, we are not so different, Leo Jones. We’re both where we are because our families have supported our dreams.’

*Something else we could have experienced together had you not disappeared from my life.* I dismiss the thought; contemplating a life that could have been is moot now that he’s engaged to someone else.

‘That’s true,’ he says, his eyes narrowing slightly as he regards me. ‘You’re very wise, you know that?’

‘Hah! I don’t think that word has *ever* been used to describe me.’ Something else comes to mind. ‘Can I ask? That first night, at the restaurant, when you showed up late and all... tosserfied.’

‘Tosserfied?’ he asks, amused.

‘Well, come on. What was that outfit? And you were all’ – I cross the floor in an exaggerated swagger, then turn back to him – ‘I mean, what *was* that? You looked like a right prat. You *behaved* like a right prat.’

He laughs. ‘Wow, don’t hold back on my account.’

I cross my arms and blink at him, waiting for an answer.

‘Okay, well, the outfit was for a photoshoot – something Aunt Serena set up – and it ran long, and I didn’t want to be late, so I just got in a cab and came to the restaurant.’

‘Okay, fair. But what about the rest of it? Your behaviour?’

He presses his lips together, then sighs, and I sense yet another revelation coming. ‘Armour, I guess,’ he says.

‘Armour? How do you mean? Against what?’

‘Against you. I knew I was meeting you. I figured it out as soon as Aunt Serena put the meeting on my calendar.’

‘Wait, what? But you were surprised – when you saw me, I mean.’

‘I *acted* surprised.’

My mouth falls open as I struggle to find my words. The only one that comes is, ‘Why?’

‘Why the ruse?’ he asks. ‘Because I didn’t know how you’d feel about seeing me and I wanted to protect myself in case you—’

‘In case I shouted at you, then stormed out.’

Which, of course, is exactly what I did.

He nods, and frustrated tears prick my eyes, blurring Leo and the workroom, as dozens of questions fly through my mind, questions I *still* don’t have answers to, including why he felt the need to ghost me. Family duty, I can understand. Cutting off all ties – not so much.

And then there’s the pervading question, one that has elbowed its way to the forefront: what the fuck is going on between us? That moment at the museum earlier – there’s no way I imagined that.

I blink back the tears – I will not cry in front of Leo Fucking Jones. And as I glare at him, another question comes to mind: is Leo’s engagement to Franzia just another ruse, a publicity stunt? And that brings me full circle to the original question. What the fuck *is* going on between us?

Nope. I can’t do it. I can’t be here. There’s too much confusion, too much *history*. I push past Leo and run down the stairs, him calling, ‘Ellie, wait!’ at my back.

‘So, Shaz,’ says Jacinda, ‘with Lauren off to Finland, what will *you* be up to?’

It’s Monday night and the four of us – Tristan and me, and Shaz and Lauren – are around at Jacinda and Ravi’s for Lauren’s send-off, and we’ve just sat down to Jacinda’s famous chicken biryani.

‘Uh, the usual...’ Shaz replies. ‘Work, mostly... Hanging out at Poppy and Tristan’s to play with Saffron.’

‘No other plans?’

*Oh my god, Jass, leave it,* I think, willing her to drop it. Only Jacinda isn’t paying any attention to me; she’s too busy putting Shaz in the hotseat.

Shaz smiles lovingly at Lauren. ‘Well, I’ve booked a trip out to visit Loz one weekend.’

‘It’s gonna be great, babes. It’s the first time either of us has gone to Finland,’ Lauren tells us. ‘We’re going to explore, do some touristy stuff.’

Oh, I adore these two together. They complement each other perfectly, while being exact opposites in appearance. Shaz: tall and curvy and blonde with the kind of natural beauty that screams ‘Norwegian shower gel advertisement’ and Lauren: petite and dark-haired with delicate features that remind me of nineties-era Winona Ryder – or today’s Winona, come to think of it. They’re perfect for each other – and that’s my professional opinion.

‘And that’s *all?*’ Jacinda presses.

Okay, biryani can wait. I need to save my bestie from an inquisition, and I leap in to change the subject.

‘So, who’d like to hear about Paris Fashion Week?’

Ravi groans, which Tristan sniggers at, Lauren sits up taller, giving me an I’m-all-ears look, and Shaz sends me a grateful smile. The twitch of Jacinda’s mouth reveals she’s on to me, but remains undeterred. I’m going to have to be on my toes tonight.

Recounting my Paris trip, I stick to what I *can* tell them – as in, nothing about the match but all about the H&M party and the fashion shows.

‘Ugh, I don’t know what sounds more boring,’ says Ravi, ‘watching a bunch of models parade up and down or having to pretend to enjoy it.’

‘Don’t be such a grouch, Rav,’ says Jacinda with more than a little annoyance.

‘And I believe the collective noun for models is “Nouveau” – watching a Nouveau of models parade up and down,’ quips Lauren.

‘*Touché,*’ he says, pointing his fork at her. She smiles, which lights up her pretty heart-shaped face.

‘Poppy’s actually written a piece for *Nouveau,*’ says Shaz, revealing something that very few people know. ‘It’s coming out in the September issue.’

Lauren turns to me. ‘Oh my god, really?’

‘Ahh, yes.’ My eyes flick towards Shaz, who looks away. ‘Just something that came along. It happens sometimes when I’m working on a case.’

‘Oh! Is it about Lorenzo?’ she asks, getting more excited by the second.

Argh! I could kill Shaz. A shared byline as ‘P. Dean’ in a magazine no one will expect to find my name – fine – but Shaz telling someone I know to look out for it! Even telling

*Lauren*, who I pretty much trust by proxy, is skirting the edge of what I'm comfortable with. She'll get an earful later.

'Actually, yes. Lorenzo's in the article,' I say, hoping she won't ask more about it. 'That's why I was at his show,' I add, really selling the Lorenzo angle to direct Lauren away from who my client is.

'That's brilliant,' she says to me. 'And I have a confession,' she tells the others. 'I, Lauren Amici, am addicted to celebrity gossip.'

We all have our vices and quite often, the more intense a person's profession, the more 'frivolous' their vice – something I discovered when I was a practicing psych.

Lauren is a chemist for a cancer research organisation. She is literally saving lives by developing life-changing treatments for cancer patients, so of *course* she loves celebrity gossip.

'It's true,' says Shaz with a laugh, 'she's *addicted*.'

Lauren doesn't seem to mind the teasing. 'Hey, I have my guilty pleasures, you have yours,' she says, gently turning the tables on Shaz.

Shaz's is romance novels. She must read fifty a year – I have no idea how she keeps them all straight in her head. And she reads *everything* romance, from Regency to romcoms to sagas – subgenres I had no idea existed until Shaz schooled me on them.

'Anyway,' says Lauren, coming back to me, 'I have a question for you – and I completely understand if you can't tell me – but were you the matchmaker behind the Lorenzo and Franzia engagement?'

'What?' I ask, nearly choking on a mouthful of rice. I commence a bout of coughing *so* extreme that Tristan leaps up and gives me several thumps to my mid-back.

When the coughing finally subsides, I clear my throat and drink some water.

'All right, darling?' Tristan asks, looking down at me. My face must be purple from the coughing but there he is,

regarding me adoringly. I give a thumbs up and he returns to his seat.

‘Sorry, everyone,’ I say, catching the worried looks around the table. ‘So, you were asking about the big celebrity engagement,’ I say to Lauren.

‘Uh, yes.’ She doesn’t seem as keen about it now; though, witnessing someone nearly choke to death *can* tend to dampen one’s enthusiasm.

‘Well, neither of them is my client,’ I say, leaning heavily into the truth. ‘But I *was* there when it was announced at the H&M party.’

‘What? Are you serious?’

‘Completely.’

‘Wow, that’s brilliant. You must tell me everything.’

While we eat, I recount the engagement story for Lauren, dwelling on details like the party’s theme and which celebrities wore what (or rather, *who* as we say in the fashion biz), padding out what essentially boils down to: they stood on a platform and Franzia shouted out they were engaged.

I also omit that Leo was horrified by the announcement and that the engagement is likely fake. Even Ravi and Jacinda aren’t in the inner circle of (matchmaking) trust I share only with my husband and bestie.

As the meal winds down and most of us are patting our overly full bellies – okay, that’s just me – Jacinda taps on her wine glass to get our attention. ‘What’s up, love?’ Ravi asks.

She glances mysteriously at him, and they commence a short but intense conversation with low murmurs and frowns. Jacinda eventually turns to the rest of us. ‘I have a confession as well.’

‘Ooh.’ I lean in, and so do Shaz and Lauren.

‘I didn’t cook this meal. My mum did.’

‘What?’ I ask, incredulous. ‘But this is your famous biryani – or it was before we scoffed the lot!’

Jacinda shrugs, lifting her wine glass to her lips and taking a sip. After she swallows, she says, ‘I work fifty-hour weeks—’

‘Sixty, more like,’ interjects Ravi.

‘Thank you, darling. So, it’s a Monday, and that’ – she nods towards the nearly empty serving dish – ‘takes hours. When I told her you were coming over, Mum offered to cook and I said yes. Otherwise, we’d be eating takeaway.’ Her bravado falls away. ‘Are you cross with me?’

A chorus of, ‘No!’ erupts around the table.

‘I’d like to propose a toast,’ says Ravi. Most glasses on the table are empty and Tristan quickly splashes a toast’s worth of wine into each. ‘To my beautiful, clever wife. Thank you for outsourcing this meal.’

By now, we’ve all had enough wine to find this hilarious, and in the middle of the resulting mirth, my phone rings. I spring to my feet and scramble to get it out of my handbag before it goes to voicemail. ‘Hello, Poppy Dean speaking.’ I didn’t have time to check who’s calling, figuring it’s probably a work call, as pretty much everyone I’m friends with is in this room.

‘Poppy, it’s Cassie.’

I turn away from the table and head into Ravi and Jacinda’s lounge room. ‘What’s going on?’ From the tone of her voice, there is no way this is a social call.

‘I’ve sent you a link,’ she replies. ‘Actually, it’s all over the bloody internet.’

‘Hang on.’ I take my phone from my ear and check my messages, clicking on the link Cassie has sent to a tabloid I make a point of never reading unless absolutely necessary – like now.

The ‘article’ is essentially a sensationalised headline – one of those awful puns the tabloids favour – and two lines of text.

**Lorenz-No! Just Engaged and Already Cheating**



Barely just engaged, Lorenzo is already cheating on his fiancée, supermodel Franzia, with a mystery blonde. Seen canoodling at the Fashion and Textile Museum, the couple left hand in hand, heading to their love nest in Soho.

As I scan the article, phrases leap from the screen: *cheating on his fiancée, mystery blonde, canoodling, and love nest*. There are six photos, which were obviously taken in quick succession. In three of them, Leo and Elle are holding hands as they rush along the footpath and in the last one, they're in the backseat of a black cab, arms raised to cover their faces from the photographer.

I look up, my eyes taking in the crown moulding on Ravi and Jacinda's ceiling as I determine whether this works for or against us.

'Poppy?'

'Hi, sorry – just thinking.'

'And?'

'I may need Nasrin to weigh in – my boss as well,' I add, wondering if Saskia will allow the case to continue. 'Can we meet at the agency tomorrow morning?'

'Uh, all right. I'm supposed to meet with Tom and Hilde's production company at eleven – Elle's confirmed as a guest judge next season – but I could postpone—'

'No, no, don't do that. How about you come into the agency beforehand?'

'I can make that work.'

'Sorry. I haven't even asked how Elle is. How's she taking this?'

'She's pretty upset.'

'I can only imagine,' I say, glad I'm not the sort of person who's hounded by the paparazzi.

'Well, it's not just being chased by the paps and the tabloids... Apparently, Leo told her about his sacrifice for

Brandy, how he kept her seat warm for all those years – that was how he put it.’

‘Well, that’s good, right?’

‘Yes, except now Elle’s even more conflicted. He’s essentially the same Leo from her past *and* he had a good reason for leaving so abruptly, but he also cut her out of his life and happens to be engaged. Plus, they’re now working together.’

‘I understand. It is messy.’

‘Yes... messy.’ A heavy sigh comes down the line. ‘Poppy, did I do the right thing?’

This isn’t great timing for Cassie to doubt herself, especially as it sounds like we may be close to a breakthrough.

‘Come in tomorrow morning and we’ll talk everything through, okay? If you want us to pull the pin, we will, but let’s talk first. How does that sound?’

‘All right, Poppy. I’ll text when I’m on my way.’

We end the call and I wander back into the dinner party, which is winding up.

‘Go!’ says Jacinda, shooing Shaz and Lauren out the door. ‘This is your second-last night together for weeks. You’re not hanging about doing dishes.’

‘If you’re sure,’ says Lauren.

Jacinda flicks a tea towel in their direction. ‘Go on, you two.’

After hugs and kisses goodbye, along with well wishes for Lauren’s work trip, they leave and it’s just the four of us. ‘Everything all right?’ Tristan asks me quietly.

‘I’ll fill you in on the way home,’ I reply.

‘So, Poppy and I will be off too,’ he says.

‘Hah, not so fast,’ Jacinda replies. She hands him a pair of rubber gloves. ‘You’re on pots and pans while Ravi loads the

dishwasher.’ To me, she says, ‘Let’s retire to the lounge. I want to hear more about this shoe designer.’

And that right there is one of the many reasons I love Jacinda Sharma. I cast a smile over my shoulder at a bemused Tristan and follow her into the next room.

‘What to wear, what to wear?’ I mutter to myself. For the second day in a row, I’m standing in front of my wardrobe, indecisive – and apprehensive – about choosing the perfect outfit. Yesterday, I wanted to make a good impression on Leo (and perhaps make him fall madly in love with me and dump Franzia so we can build a fashion empire together).

And look where that got me! Splashed all over the bloody internet *and* on newsstands across Britain. Today’s outfit needs to be the exact opposite of yesterday’s. I need to disguise myself to elude any paps who might be skulking about. But if I opt for the usual work uniform, I’ll (of course) look like *me* – easily recognisable, fresh meat – and potentially induce a paparazzi feeding frenzy.

Cassie’s no help. Yesterday, she was at Bliss Designs, like a respectable professional grown-up, and this morning, she has a meeting with Tom Finn and Hilde Klein’s production company – also like a respectable professional grown-up. I just hope being at the centre of a scandal isn’t enough to scare them off – something else to stew over.

I back up several steps and flop onto my bed so I can feel sorry for myself properly, lying flat and staring at the ceiling. Maybe I should just work from home today. But then, I was already off yesterday on my ‘research excursion’. What sort of (not-so-fearless) leader skives off work two days running?

I skived off work last week too, after we got back from Paris. I’ve become a skiver!

‘What are you about, Eloise Bliss?’ I ask the air.

We should get a cat. At least then I wouldn’t be here talking to myself. Talking to a pet is far more normal than talking to yourself, right? I eye the half-dead plant on the windowsill, realising I can’t recall the last time I watered it. If I can’t keep a plant alive, I have no business adopting a feline.

God, my mind wanders to odd places when I am avoiding *facing the world*.

I push myself up onto my elbows and scan my open wardrobe again. I may not like baseball caps, but I have one tucked away somewhere; it’s from a charity event I volunteered at a couple of years ago. To go with the cap, which I find in a bag of clothes I’ve yet to drop off at Oxfam, I choose dark glasses, jeans, and a T-shirt – about as far from ‘Elle Bliss’ as I can get.

It’s only when I’m fully dressed and look in the mirror that I discover I’m dressed as Leo. I roll my eyes at myself. But I’m now incredibly late for work and don’t have time to change. On the way out of the flat, I grab a (very brown) banana from the otherwise empty fruit bowl and eat it on the walk to work.

It’s obvious when I arrive that the team has been watching both the clock and the door.

‘Oh, hi, Elle,’ says Gaz, pretending they *didn’t* just flap their hand at the others to ‘subtly’ announce my arrival.

‘Hi, everyone. Sorry I’m late but I went the long way to shake off the paps.’

Gaz feigns astonishment. ‘Really? Why would the paps be stalking *you*?’

Zara and Prue, who are doing a rubbish job of acting normal, peer at me with obvious curiosity.

‘Well, they weren’t – at least not today,’ I say, waving Gaz off.

I decided on the way over here that the only way to move on from being tabloid fodder is to call it out, clear the air, then

get back to work.

‘Elle, I...’ Zara starts, stepping closer. She shakes her head. ‘Never mind.’

I *could* never mind and do the very British thing of pretending everything’s fine and never speaking of it again.

‘No, go ahead, please,’ I say instead.

‘It’s just, well... Are you and Lorenzo together? Isn’t he supposed to be engaged to—’

She stops suddenly, her mouth falling open and her eyes bulging as she looks past me. In fact, all three of them are looking past me, gawking as if they’re extras in the latest Jurassic Park film and have just spotted a dinosaur.

I pivot slowly and there he is – of course he bloody is! – standing in the doorway, one hip cocked and grinning.

‘Good morning, y’all,’ he drawls, sounding particularly Texan today. Maybe he spent the evening watching Matthew McConaughey films. I wouldn’t be surprised if he launched into a round of ‘all right, all right, all right...’

It’s annoyingly sexy and I’m torn between sending him away and grabbing the front of his T-shirt and yanking him towards me for a kiss. I do neither, as I am rooted to the spot, mortified. There is every chance he heard what Zara just said.

Also, what the hell is he *doing* here, anyway?

It’s not like we parted on good terms yesterday afternoon – or at least, I didn’t. I parted in frustration, confusion, and anger, with a side of ‘what the actual fuck?’

And as soon as I got home, I drowned my sorrows like any woman in my situation would: I drank cheap wine while scoffing a family-sized bag of crisps and moaning to my sister.

Not that it’s likely there *are* other women in my exact situation. Surely, the universe isn’t that cruel.

There’s also the (very real) concern I might become front-page news for the second day running. It won’t take long for the tabloids to connect the dots and determine that the

‘mystery blonde’ is actually ‘Elle Bliss – ex-girlfriend’, especially when he’s currently standing in my fashion house!

And where’s Ser, the odd bod publicist, in all this? Oh god, what if *she* was the one who set us up?

‘Sorry, am I interrupting?’ Leo asks, snapping me back to the present.

‘Yes,’ I reply right as the others say, ‘No,’ in unison. Note to self: sack all traitors.

‘Actually,’ says Zara, stepping forward, ‘we were just talking about you.’

‘Oh?’ He flashes that cocky Lorenzo grin I should hate but secretly find sexy (damn him). ‘You don’t say?’

If Zara *does* tell him what we were saying, I will actually sack her.

‘Um, it’s more of a “show” and not a “tell”,’ she replies cryptically. I literally have no idea what she’s talking about. ‘Come on, it’s back here,’ she says, leading the way. All right, now I’m intrigued.

Leo and I follow – I don’t so much as look at him, though his scent infuses the air between us, which is maddening. If he could stop being so flipping sexy all the time, that would be wonderful.

It’s when we get to the end of the studio that the consternation between us, all the embarrassment of being reduced to ‘mystery blonde’, and all the heartache at (probably) loving a man I can’t have, fall away. Because, while I was off galivanting around London, then wallowing in my flat, my team were working. In fact, they were absolutely smashing it.

Zara, Prue, and Gaz have taken our sketches and arranged them on inspiration boards, which are pinned up along the wall. To each, they’ve added colour swatches, motifs, and other images and graphics to begin fleshing out the vision for the collection, and for several designs, they’ve even added fabric swatches.

Their incredible efforts have given us a massive head start on our storyboarding.

‘Oh, you brilliant, brilliant loves,’ I say, awash with pride.

‘Holy shit, you guys,’ says Leo, his fingers lightly trailing over the nearest inspiration board. He looks over and meets my eye and this smile, *this* is Leo. ‘Your team...’ He shakes his head with joyful disbelief, then turns back to them. ‘You guys are incredible. The way you’ve understood our vision’ – his eyes meet mine again for a microsecond and I remind myself I’m still cross with him for multiple reasons, even though my thumping heart says otherwise – ‘you’re amazing,’ he tells them.

They beam under his praise but who wouldn’t? *I’m* beaming; I do have an amazing team and this is exactly why I hired them. They are brilliant and creative (and not traitors at all).

New note to self for the post-season celebration: change the spa booking to the deluxe package. Surely Cassie won’t mind when I show her what they’ve come up with.

‘So,’ says my collaborator, ‘should we get to work?’

*I can do this*, I tell myself. I can be a professional and ‘get to work’ – I just need to channel my very together and highly professional sister.

*What would Cassie do in this situation?* I wonder. Well, she’d never be in this situation, as she’s never been in love.

Gah! These thoughts are not helpful.

I look up at Leo and smile brightly – fake it till you make it, right? – and say, ‘Absolutely.’

\* \* \*

*Poppy*

‘So, that’s where we’re at,’ I say, casting my eyes around the conference room table.

The silence is deafening, which isn’t surprising. I’ve just revealed that a client of our (purposefully covert)



matchmaking agency is all over the tabloids, adding a layer of complexity to an already complex case.

Of course, some of my colleagues knew before the meeting – George, who devours tabloids daily over breakfast (no judgement), Mia, who watches closely for any mention of the agency in the press or social media, and Nasrin.

Saskia and Paloma are at opposite ends of the table, as always, and I look between them to gauge their reactions. Paloma looks like she's just sucked on a lemon, but Saskia is her usual stoic self. She finally breaks into a smile, one that says, 'Everything has gone to shit but we will sort it out.' A 'hopeful pragmatist' she calls herself, and I'm witnessing that ethos in action right now.

She turns to Mia, who is tapping away on a tablet, her brows knitted together.

'Mia, any sign that the press has made the connection?'

Mia shakes her head. 'Nothing in my daily sweep this morning,' she says in her Irish lilt, 'and it looks like nothing has popped up since.' She looks up with a satisfied smile, then turns to me. 'You mentioned that Lorenzo has a publicist?'

'Yes, that's right. Ser Robbins out of New York. And that's S-E-R.'

Mia nods, then goes back to her tablet.

'Are we working with Robbins directly?' Paloma asks. In this instance, 'directly' means that Ser has been read in and is aware of the aim to reunite Leo and Elle. She hasn't – we rarely do that.

'No, not directly,' I reply. 'Our only contact with her was to set up the initial meeting between our client and the love interest, and that was handled by Cassie, the sister.'

'But you believe that Robbins is behind the engagement to the supermodel?' asks Saskia.

'I'm almost positive. Marie is still working on getting irrefutable proof—'

‘That the engagement is fake, a publicity stunt?’ Paloma interjects.

‘Yes.’

Her expression sours again, but I’ve worked with Paloma long enough to know this is her ‘thinking face’. Before joining the agency, she was an executive in a multi-national PR company, so perhaps she’s untangling this snag from that perspective.

‘You thinking what I’m thinking?’ Saskia asks Paloma. ‘Read her in?’

This is *huge* – I’ve never read an external person into a case before.

‘Mmm,’ Paloma replies after a moment. She must still be mulling it over.

The rest of my colleagues remain silent, listening intently as glances ping between them, which is completely understandable.

Our morning staff meetings are usually a quick whip around of case updates, then back to work. We’re not even the type of workplace that indulges debriefs about *Love Island*, *Strictly*, or *Bake Off* during staff meetings – those interactions, as well as sharing pet photos and weekend plans, occur at our desks or in the kitchen.

And we rarely end up this far into the weeds of a specific case with everyone present.

‘Poppy. I think perhaps we should wrap up here, then meet with you and Nasrin,’ Saskia says, meaning her and Paloma.

There’s a soft groan of disappointment as our colleagues are subtly dismissed and I have no doubt that Nas and I will be bombarded with questions later. This is an especially juicy case.

It’s also not lost on me that Nasrin has been extremely quiet during this briefing – she’s always happy to leap in and share the glory, but where’s my second when I really need her? *And* she’s the one who brought this case in.

For a moment, I thrum with annoyance, but then I remind myself that the person I'm most annoyed with is me. *I've* let this case get away from me – or at least parts of it.

The others clear out of the conference room and Nasrin and I stay put.

‘Actually,’ says Paloma, ‘let’s move this to my office.’

Saskia and Paloma are the only two at the agency with offices, and while they have comfortable seating areas, each with a sofa and armchairs, there is nothing comfortable about being called into Paloma’s office and put in the hotseat.

‘Make yourself comfortable,’ she says as she leads us inside, and I almost laugh at the irony.

The four of us sit and Paloma gets straight to the point, her dark eyes boring into mine.

‘Have you met this person?’

‘Ser?’ She nods. ‘Not really. She was at the H&M party, where the engagement was announced, but we weren’t introduced.’

She props her chin on her forefinger and stares at the bookshelves behind me. I surreptitiously glance at Nas and she lifts her shoulders slightly in a tiny shrug.

After at least a minute, Paloma finally speaks – this time to Saskia. ‘I think we vet her, then consider reading her in. We don’t want her at cross purposes with us.’

‘*Or...*’ says Saskia, and just the tone of that one drawn-out syllable makes my stomach churn. ‘We drop the case.’

I press my lips together, holding my breath.

These are the exact words I’ve been dreading since this new development. As with most of my cases – there *have* been a handful of duds over the years – I am completely invested. I’ve *seen* Elle and Leo together and there’s love there, I’m sure of it. And with the additional information that Cassie’s feeding us, I believe there’s a strong possibility we can get Elle and Leo their HEA.

It was difficult talking Cassie around when she came in earlier, but maybe convincing her to continue was moot. Nas nudges me with her knee, but I dare not look at her, as I suspect she may agree with Saskia.

Paloma and Saskia have one of their silent eye conversations as Paloma mulls over Saskia's suggestion.

'No,' says Paloma eventually, turning back to me, 'I don't think we need to drop it – at least not yet.'

I exhale loudly and she gives me an amused look.

'Are you all right?'

'Yes, I just...'

'You're invested in your client's happiness,' says Saskia, rescuing me – *and* echoing my exact thoughts.

'Yes, that's it.'

'Well, we appreciate that,' she says, magnanimous as always.

'Right, now, Poppy,' says Paloma, back to business, 'you and Nas—'

There's a knock at the door, interrupting her. 'Come in.'

Mia opens the door and pops her head in. 'Sorry to interrupt, but there's been a press release from Lorenzo – the company.' She holds up her tablet.

Paloma calls her in and takes the tablet, her eyes scanning the screen. As she reads, her mouth lifts at the corners.

'Good news,' she tells us. 'We don't have to read in the publicist – well, not for the time being.' She hands over the tablet and we pass it between us, quickly reading in turn.

Thank god. We're still on the case and it's no longer headed for disaster. Well, at least for now.

Several hours fly by in what feel like minutes, which is what happens when I'm in the flow. I didn't think I'd be able to forget everything that's happening outside the workroom, but designing with Leo... It's quite magical how in sync we are. I'm getting even more excited about this collection.

'What do you think?' he asks, showing me a sketch of a man's hat, a nod to the *Mad Men* era when men wore hats every day.

'I love the design, but are our customers going to want hats?'

He regards the sketch. 'I don't know. Maybe. It's all cyclical, isn't it? I mean, consider the current fashion – even mom jeans are back.'

'Not according to Lorenzo,' I quip, glancing at the low-slung jeans he's wearing today. I do love wearing high-waisted trousers, but with denim, I prefer a lower cut, a look that Leo wears well. Too well. When I stop staring at his arse, I discover he's caught me. His mouth twitches and I clear my throat.

'Maybe Lorenzo is ahead of the curve,' he says, bringing us back to the conversation.

'That's why you're the next big thing,' I reply.

'I thought *you* were the next big thing.'

'No, I'm the wunderkind.'

‘But we’re the same age.’

‘Yeah, but you look older than me.’

‘Hey,’ he says with a grin.

‘I’m just speaking the truth.’

He holds my gaze longer than is comfortable and I look away.

‘So, we need to decide,’ I say, redirecting the conversation. ‘Do we want to incorporate hats into the collection? Put them back into the fashion rotation, so to speak?’

‘Hmm.’ He adds some more strokes of the pencil to the sketch.

‘Well, let’s think about it this way – in your “Off the Beaten Track” show, the hat was a singular point of reference, one design as the thread connecting each look.’

‘Right.’

‘And it will sell – the hat – because it’s you and people seem to think your style is cool—’

‘*Seem to think?*’ he asks, interrupting.

*Oops.*

‘You know what I mean,’ I say, sidestepping the slip. ‘*Anyway*, if we really do want to feature hats in this collection, then we need to decide: one design to act as a thread or different designs for different looks.’

‘The distinction being that the second option will be us “bringing back the hat”? Or attempting to.’

‘I think so. Don’t you?’

‘Excuse me, Elle,’ says Zara. I’ve been so caught up with Leo, I didn’t even notice her standing there.

‘What’s up?’

She’s grasping her phone as though it holds the secrets to life, the universe, and everything. She holds it up. ‘Just wondering if you’ve seen this?’

I take the phone from her, and Leo leans in to read over my shoulder. It's some sort of article with the headline:

### Announcing a Collaboration Between the World's Hottest Young Designers

The first two lines mention me and Leo and how we're working together. I'm about to read on when Leo steps away, sighing loudly and cupping the back of his neck with both hands.

'Thank god,' he says. He expels another loud breath.

It's obvious Leo had something to do with this but before I ask, I turn back to Zara. 'You've read it?'

'Yep. It's about how you're just working together – that nothing's going on between you,' she says, glancing at Leo. 'Nothing *romantic*,' she adds unnecessarily.

This brings instantaneous relief – I've hated being painted as 'the other woman'. But it also highlights the crux of my dilemma: that the more time I spend with Leo, the more I *want* there to be something romantic between us.

'What site is this on?' I ask her, hoping this will set yesterday's tabloid readers straight.

'It's everywhere – *Fashion Now, Today in Fashion, First Looks*.'

'Oh,' I reply, disappointed.

'It should have gone out wider than that,' Leo pipes in.

So, this *was* his doing.

'Wait, I think it has,' says Zara, navigating on her phone. 'Look,' she says, holding it up for us to see, 'it's on the BBC site.'

'Well, if *they've* picked it up...' says Leo, voicing my exact thought.

'Thank you, Zara,' I say.

'Sure,' she replies with a cheerful smile. I suspect she might be a *tiny* bit disappointed that I'm not embroiled in a

love triangle with Leo and Franzia – she can get in the queue – but I do appreciate her bringing this to me.

‘So, the clearing of Mystery Woman’s name...’ says Leo, coming back to the workbench.

‘Indeed. Your doing, I presume?’

‘Joint effort. I called Aunt Serena this morning. Super late her time, but she’s a night owl. Anyhoo, we agreed to confront the rumours head on, get out in front of them, and clarify that you and I are simply colleagues, pooling our talents in a collaborative collection – *and* that we were close back in college, in case that comes up at some point.’

The ‘simply colleagues’ stings, as does the ‘close back in college’ remark, especially after our moment yesterday in the museum, but I let it go – for now.

‘And “World’s Hottest Young Designers”?’

‘Aunt Serena’s idea, to build the hype.’ I nod. ‘You can read the whole thing, if you like,’ he says, taking his phone out of his front pocket.

‘Oh really? Why, thank you so much!’

‘Wait, are you pissed at me or something?’

‘No! Well... *yes*, actually.’

He visibly flinches. Clearly, he expected me to be grateful. And part of me is, I suppose, but I’m also tired of this constant turmoil. Ever since Leo Jones came back into my life: turmoil, confusion, *havoc*... My mind is ready with a plethora of adjectives to describe how it feels being with him – or *not* being with him – tossing up words like a thesaurus on a trampoline.

Because other than when we’re working and I can focus on our designs, I’m wildly lurching between attraction, anger, and confusion. I look past him to find my team watching us from the other end of the workroom. Cassie’s still at the production meeting offsite, so the office is empty, and I stride towards the door, waving for him to follow. He does.



When he closes the door behind him, we end up staring at each other, him looking confused and me unsure where to start.

‘You can begin with why you’re pissed at me,’ he says, somehow reading my mind. ‘I thought you’d be pleased.’

‘I am.’

‘Right, of course, so you’re *pleased* but you’re also pissed at me. I can’t win with you, Ellie.’

‘It’s *Elle*, and what do you mean, you can’t win with me? What are you trying to win exactly?’

‘I just want—’

‘*What?* What do you want?’

‘Oh my god, will you let me speak?’

So, it’s not just me who’s cross then.

‘Go on,’ I say.

‘I just want us to be able to work together in peace – I mean, we’re really good together.’

And there’s the (flipping bastard bugger arsehole) rub! Well, since he brought it up!

‘I have a question for you,’ I say.

He squares his shoulders, as if steeling himself.

‘Yesterday, at the museum... What *was* that?’

Now he’s obviously even more confused. ‘You mean, why did I take you there? Because I—’

‘No, not that. That was... that was very thoughtful, taking me there,’ I concede. ‘That exhibit was *inspiring* and it ties in nicely with our— Never mind. I’m not asking about that. I’m asking about the *moment* – you know, when you and I— Gah! Why is this so hard to say, and why are you looking at me like I’ve gone mad and you have no idea what I’m talking about?’

‘Because I have no idea what you’re talking about,’ he replies steadily.

I regard him closely for any signs he's being duplicitous and decide he's not lying, he's just obtuse. And then his entire countenance shifts.

'Oh, right,' he says, his voice low. 'I think I know what this is.'

'You *think*?'

He locks eyes with mine and we're still for so long, this could be a showdown in an old Western – apt, I suppose, for a stand-off with a bloke from Texas.

'Okay, I felt it too,' he whispers hoarsely.

I step back involuntarily, as if this revelation has invaded my space. It's certainly sucked all the oxygen from the air – or it feels like it has, as I'm having trouble breathing.

'What?' I say – an inane question but my mind, so quick to prove my vast vocabulary just moments ago, has gone numb.

'You heard me. I felt it – of course I did.'

'What do you mean, "of course"?'

'Come on, Ellie.' He drops his head and shakes it. I don't even mind that he called me Ellie again. In fact, I kind of like it. But I would like this conversation a lot more if we could get to the crux of what's going on between us.

'Leo?'

'I mean, of course I'm attracted to you. I always was, from the second I saw you...'

'At the restaurant?' I ask, puzzled.

'On the quad... at college. You asked if I needed help finding my class and I was dumbstruck. I could barely get any words out, I was so taken aback by how pretty you were.'

This isn't how I remember it – if anything, it was the other way around – but I guess you never truly know what's going on inside another person's head.

'And, of course, you're even hotter now,' he says with a grin – *that* grin, Leo's grin.

Only I don't return it, because he's making light of what's going on, which is that, once again, I'm falling for him – between bouts of being infuriated and frustrated – and he's feeling nothing more than attraction.

Being hot for someone is a thousand miles away from wanting to have a relationship with them. But at least I have my answer. It's shit and I will likely eat my feelings later – actually, I *will* do that – but it's an answer.

'What's wrong?' he asks, finally realising we're not on the same page.

I shake my head. 'Nothing. It doesn't matter. We should get back to work.'

'But...'

'Look, we have a history, and that history includes us being mad for each other. You're still attractive – even though you're going through some sort of Witcher phase with your hair' – I don't mention that I quite like him as a platinum blond – 'and apparently, I'm still attractive. Or even more so, as you've just said. Glad we've cleared the air.'

I go to walk past him, but he grabs my wrist, just like he did that night in the restaurant. Only this time, I don't snatch it back. He's so close to me and smells so good, heat blooms between my legs. It would be *so* easy to lean against him, stand on my tiptoes, and press my mouth to his.

Easy but disastrous.

'Let me go,' I whisper, wanting the exact opposite. Brilliant. I've become one of those women who says one thing while meaning the opposite. Cassie would never end up in this situation.

'You've got it wrong,' he says, his voice low in my ear. I bravely meet his eye – and I say 'bravely' because this office has a glass door and glass walls and I *know* my team is probably watching us and I am *this close* to throwing myself at Leo.

The way he's looking at me doesn't help either.

‘It’s not just attraction.’

*What?!* my mind screams, but I remain perfectly still save for swallowing the lump in my throat.

‘It’s not, Elle, but I’m eng—’

‘Engaged,’ I finish. The word is a metaphoric cold shower and I step away from him. He lets me, his grasp on my wrist releasing.

‘Yeah. And we already dodged yesterday’s bullet with the press release. We can’t risk fanning the flames,’ he adds, mixing his metaphors. ‘At least not right now, because Franzia is—’

‘Where *is* she, anyway?’ I ask, interjecting. ‘Franzia?’

I look around as if she might pop her head into the office any moment.

‘What do you mean? She’s working. In Paris.’

‘So, she *didn’t* arrive in London two days ago?’

‘Sorry, yeah, London. I meant London. Wait, how do you know tha—’

‘What sort of man loses track of which city his fiancée’s in?’ I ask, interrupting again. I am not about to admit to stalking Franzia on socials.

‘A busy one,’ he replies, a sharp edge to his voice.

‘Right. And do you *talk* to her?’

‘Well, yeah – of course. I talked to her just last night about the photos of you and m—’

‘No. I mean do you *talk*? At the end of the day, do you... you know: “Hello, darling, how was your day?” That sort of thing.’

‘I don’t—’

‘I mean, where *is* she, your fiancée, if you’re so in love? Shouldn’t she be here, sharing your excitement about your next collection?’

‘You’re being hurtful.’

‘I’m being hurtful? You just told me you have feelings for me when you’re engaged to someone else!’ I’m bordering on shouting now – not only carelessly indiscreet but also highly unprofessional. I take a deep breath and exhale slowly. ‘I’m sorry. That was...’

‘It’s okay. I get it.’

‘It’s not and you don’t.’ I sigh, resigned with what I am about to say. ‘I don’t know how this can work, Leo, us designing a collection together. I had my doubts when Cassie first raised the idea – actually, I *knew* it was a terrible idea and I was right.’

He starts to speak, but I stop him with a raised hand.

‘Please let me finish.’ He dips his chin, indicating for me to continue. ‘I never got over you. I was *broken* by what you did. It took months before I could even design again – the one thing I *live* for and I couldn’t even *look* at a sketch book. And I’ve spent a decade living with this spectre of you, going on rubbish first dates with the wrong men, discarding them almost immediately because none of them lived up to you – to what I had with you. To what we had.’

‘And these past few weeks have been brilliant and infuriating and exciting and *miserable*. Because there have been many times – *too* many times – when I’ve thought – *hoped*, rather – that you would explain why you left London the way you did – *and* why you cut off all ties – and then we’d reconnect’ – I cough out a derisive laugh – ‘and get back together! How fucked up is that?!’ I ask, throwing my hands in the air at the absurdity of the thought.

‘So, how about this?’ I ask, lowering my voice. ‘We call it good, our misguided partnership, Ser waves her magic wand to smooth things over in the press, and we never have to see each other again?’

His face falls. I’ve clearly hurt him, which stabs at my heart. But I can’t keep working with him, especially now. My already bruised heart would completely shatter – *again* – and what sort of collection would that yield?

‘I *am* sorry, Elle, about how abruptly I left London. *Truly*. It all just happened so fast – the old man’s heart attack... my mom begging me to come home right away... It killed me to see her like that, so lost... She needed me, but I had you and I didn’t know what to do. I *wish* I’d had more time with you. I wish I’d been able to say a proper goodbye... I wish a lot of things, but I never wanted to hurt you like I did.’

‘Oh,’ I reply, the wind thoroughly knocked out of my sails.

‘And as for the other thing, breaking off all contact... In hindsight, that was fucked up and hurtful and... Look, I could try to explain my reasons – as stupid as they were – but I guess it doesn’t matter any more, does it? I’ll just get my things,’ he says, and my breath catches in my throat. He’s leaving – like I told him to – and this might be it: our final moment together. Ever.

But there’s something else, something niggling at me, and then it comes to me.

‘Wait.’

He turns around.

‘Before, you said “we can’t fan the flames” or something like that, and then you said “at least not right now”. What did you mean by that? The “not right now” part?’

He runs a hand over his mouth, clearly conflicted, then drops his hand to his side. He lifts his gaze, and those dark-grey eyes bore into me.

‘The engagement has got to seem real for at least another month, possibly longer. That’s the arrangement.’

‘What?’ I gasp.

‘It’s not real. We were never together. It’s all been orchestrated. I didn’t even know about the engagement side of things till Franzia made the announcement. I thought it was just going to be a few dates over a few weeks, but now... now it’s become this whole fucking thing.’

My knees buckle – actually buckle – and I grasp the edge of my desk to steady myself, so I don’t drop to the floor.

‘I’m fine,’ I say.

Cassie happened to arrive immediately after Leo’s revelation, witnessing the moment my legs gave way beneath me. But in the ensuing commotion, during which Leo fled with a feeble excuse about calling New York and a promise to ‘be in touch’, Zara wouldn’t stop saying that the word ‘swooned’. Swooned! As if I’m a character in *Bridgerton*!

Cassie’s clearly unconvinced by my assertion that I’m okay and peers down at me, her lips pressed together and brows knitted. She even tuts intermittently as she stuffs cushions behind my head. There are so many, my chin is now touching my chest and I’m anything but comfortable.

Zara returns with a glass of water, which I take even though I don’t want it. I sip, then swallow and smile for my fussy nursemaids.

‘Happy now?’ I ask them.

‘I’m not bloody happy,’ says Cassie, close to shouting. ‘You nearly collapsed.’

‘Oh, for god’s sake.’ I swing my feet over the edge of the sofa and plant them firmly on the floor, making a grand display of *sitting*. ‘See? I’m fine.’

‘Zara, can you please give us a minute?’ Cassie asks.

I adore Zara but right now, I could throttle her. She’s blown this all out of proportion, egging on my usually sensible sister, who appears moments away from calling triple nine.

Zara reaches out and squeezes my hand, then leaves the office before I can squeeze the life out of *her*.

I flop back against the sofa and emit a big, ugly, frustrated yowl.

‘This office isn’t soundproofed, you know,’ says Cassie, retreating to her desk.

‘Oh, yes, I’m well aware. The entire team was listening in on my argument with Leo. I could see them’ – I wiggle my fingers – ‘pretending to work but hanging on every word.’

‘Elle, *what* is going on?’

‘Well, you should know – haven’t you orchestrated this entire thing?’

‘What?’ She recoils as if I’ve slapped her, visibly paling – either in indignation at the accusation or guilt.

Well, in for a penny and all that... I prop my elbows on my knees and fix her with an inquisitory look. ‘Even after we discovered that Lorenzo was Leo, you pushed me to collaborate with him. “It’s good for the label – it’ll be our big break”,’ I parrot. ‘At every turn, at every roadblock, *you’ve* called the shots,’ I say, standing, as I’m too agitated to sit any longer.

Our office is rather small, but I pace the width of it anyway.

‘Even when I had to watch a fucking supermodel announce to the world that they’re getting married, you wouldn’t take no for an answer. It was all aboard the Cassie Bliss Collaboration Train! You haven’t seemed to care at *all* that this has been torture for me – working side by side with *Leo*, having to ignore everything that happened between us, knowing I couldn’t have him, yet really, *really* wanting him.’

‘Elle, I’m so sorry.’

And she genuinely is sorry, I can tell. A tear escapes and rolls down her cheek; she wipes it away with the back of her hand.



Well, now that I've had my rant *and* made my sister cry, I feel even more awful. And deflated. I sit on my office chair, staring at the floor, swinging it from side to side. The movement is soothing.

'Can I ask something?'

I look up and in true Cassie fashion, she's composed herself – well, mostly. I nod. 'What was it Leo said that made you swoo—'

'*Please* don't say that word,' I beg with a raised hand.

It most certainly wasn't a Regency-era swoon, no matter what Zara says, but I'm still mortified – especially as Leo was there to witness all the ensuing fuss. Or part of it, until he left – *again*. What is it about that man and leaving?

'Elle?'

My mind has wandered – and no wonder.

'Sorry. Go on, ask me again,' I say, resigned, 'because you are never going to believe it in a million years.'

\* \* \*

*Poppy*

I'm reading through the finished article Bex, the assistant editor at *Nouveau*, sent over, oddly proud that in a small way – *very* small considering how many edits she's made – I contributed to this, when my phone pings with a message from Cassie. It takes me less than ten seconds to read it.

'Nasrin, emergency meeting!' I call out.

Her head pops up from behind her monitor. 'Two minutes?'

'Okay.' I leap out of my seat and, bringing my phone, head to my favourite meeting room, the one with the view of the Thames. Nas will know where to find me.

When she joins me a few minutes later, I have a plan – or at least half a plan.

‘Sit,’ I say, and she does. ‘Are you ready for this? The engagement is fake.’

‘We already knew that.’

‘We already *suspected* that but now we have proof.’

‘Okay,’ she says, a slow smile breaking across her face. ‘So, what is it, the proof?’

‘Leo confessed to Elle.’

‘No. Way,’ she says, folding her arms across her chest. ‘I did not think that would happen.’

‘I know. I thought Marie would come through before Leo spilled.’

‘And this came from Cassie?’

‘She walked in on Elle and Leo at Bliss Designs. Elle appeared to be mid-swoon, Cassie said.’

‘Oh, I love a good swoon,’ she says. ‘So, what’s next? Are we meeting with Cassie?’

‘One better. I’m going over there.’

‘To Bliss Designs?’ I nod. ‘How?’

‘I’ll probably take the Tube.’

‘I’m not talking about your mode of transportation. I mean, for what reason, under what guise?’

‘I was—’

‘Please tell me you’re not just going to pop over and ask, “Hey, what’s up?”.’

‘I’m Poppy Dean, fashion journalist, don’t forget.’

‘Only you’re not and it will seem odd.’

‘I’ve already figured it out. It’s a welfare check. I show up because *Nouveau* is worried about them and—’

‘*Are* they worried about Elle and Leo?’

‘How would I know? Possibly.’

Nas snorts out a laugh.

‘Anyway, Cassie called’ – I check my phone – ‘seven minutes ago and if I leave now, I should catch them before they leave for the day.’

‘Not via the Tube, you won’t.’ She signals for me to hand her my phone, which I do. ‘There you are,’ she says, handing it back to me. ‘A car will be waiting for you downstairs in five.’

‘Oh, thank you.’

‘Don’t thank me – it’s on your Uber account.’

I swallow the acerbic retort that’s on the tip of my tongue.

‘Better get your arse in gear,’ she says. ‘Don’t want to mess with your rating.’

I task Nasrin with updating Saskia and Paloma, then rush out of the office, making it to the kerb seconds before the Uber arrives.

On the ride over, my phone rings, and I’m about to answer and tell Cassie I’m nearly there – though I’m not really, as their fashion house is all the way across London – but it’s Jacinda.

‘Hi, lovely, what’s up?’

‘We need to stage that intervention.’

‘You mean meddle?’

‘Isn’t that what you do for a living?’ she quips. ‘Meddle in other people’s love lives?’

‘Hilarious,’ I say dryly, and she sniggers. ‘Besides, when it’s your best friend, it is *definitely* meddling.’

‘Look, if we don’t do something – and soon – Shaz and Alfie will renew their lease for another year and Shaz will lose Lauren for good.’

This is a *slight* exaggeration. Lauren doesn’t strike me as the type of person to drop her girlfriend – the woman she’s in love with – because Shaz needs time to process the idea of cohabitation. Still, it’s not just Shaz’s relationship at stake.

Alfie is champing at the bit to move in with his boyfriend and doesn't he deserve his HEA as well?

'What exactly did you have in mind?' I ask.

She outlines her plan for this Saturday.

'What, no blindfold or rope?'

'We'll only resort to kidnapping if she resists,' she deadpans.

'Remind me never to get on your bad side.'

At that, she chuckles and ends the call.

I gaze out the window as we zip through Central London and it dawns on me that there *is* a flaw in my (somewhat hastily designed) plan.

Journalists from glossy magazines probably don't show up at their subject's place of work unannounced, even for a welfare check. I re-jig my cover story, then make a quick call.

\* \* \*

*Elle*

'But *why*?' I ask.

'I thought you liked Poppy,' says Cassie.

'She's... I don't know... *fine*, but that doesn't mean I want to talk to her, especially now.'

'It shouldn't take long.'

'But I thought we were finished with all that. Can't you call her back and tell her not to come?'

'Well, no. *Nouveau* is sending her. They want to be assured that nothing untoward is going on between you and Leo.'

'Hah! If only.'

'Nothing *has* happened, right?' Cassie peers at me closely.

'Sorry, what? Are you really asking if I've shagged Leo?'

'Don't be crass.'

‘Well, then don’t ask stupid questions. Until today, I thought he was engaged to someone else! You know I’d never do something like that.’

She drops her eyes. ‘You’re right, I’m sorry.’

‘Not that I haven’t *wanted* to – he’s so bloody *sexy*. It’s infuriating. And now his engagement’s fake – oh and, surprise, it turns out he had an excellent reason for leaving so abruptly after uni – he was being a dutiful son! God, Cass, can you imagine if *Nouveau* knew what was *really* going on? If I wanted to blow up all our lives, including Franzia’s, I would spill the tea to Poppy and call it good.’

‘*Elle.*’

‘What?’ I ask, sitting heavily in my chair.

‘I’m sorry it’s been so hard on you, working with Leo.’

‘Well, it hasn’t been *all* bad,’ I admit.

‘I’m glad to hear that. And the collection’s coming along beautifully – those storyboards!’

Now is when I should confess to Cassie that before Leo’s big reveal, I sent him packing, and as of an hour ago, there is no collection. Only I can’t bring myself to tell her just yet.

Because, what if...

No, I shouldn’t hold out any hope.

Leo’s engagement may not be real, but it’s not like we can run out the clock on his fake engagement by sneaking about. We couldn’t even fly under the radar when we *weren’t* sneaking about.

And he said they need to keep up appearances for at least another month – but then what? An announcement that *I’m* the reason he broke off his engagement? That could be career suicide – for both of us.

No, there’s no way we can be together in the foreseeable future, I realise, awash with anguish. Tears prick my eyes but I blink them back.

He also didn't tell me why he agreed to pretend in the first place. I'd ask him but, true to form, Leo dropped his bombshell, then disappeared. Do I even *want* to be with a man who can't stick around when everything goes to shit? Now *or* then?

And if all that weren't enough to worry about, Poppy's on her way over here to ask if I'm about to break up a celebrity couple.

The press even have a couple name for them now: Lorenzia. Ugh. Though, better than 'Franzo', I suppose. *That* sounds like a brand of pasta sauce.

'What's going through that head of yours?' asks my sister, dragging me from my thoughts.

'Pasta sauce in a jar.'

'That's... odd,' she says with an affectionate smile.

'Yes, I know. *And* it's made me hungry. Do we *really* have to talk to Poppy? Today has been a total *mare*! Can't we just go home and lie about on the sofa and eat pasta and watch rubbish television?' I ask, already knowing the answer.

'No, Bean. She's on her way. Besides, we don't want *Nouveau* to cancel the feature.'

'Fine,' I say, wondering if I still have that emergency bag of crisps in my desk drawer. I open it to check when there's a tap at the door. Zara cracks it a few inches and peeks in. Now, I love Zara – *love* – but today...

'Yes, Zara,' Cassie asks, her tone tinged with impatience. So, it's not just me then.

'I thought you might want to see this,' she says, cringing. She's holding up her phone and my gut clenches. What now?

Cassie calls her in and comes around her desk, taking Zara's phone. She peers at the screen, blinks slowly, and exhales loudly through her nose. 'Well, fuck.'

Cassie swearing is like an alarm bell, and I leap out of my chair and snatch the phone from her, then stare in horror at the screen.

‘How? *How?*’ I screech.

As much as I want to, I can’t tear my eyes from the screen.

Arriving at Bliss Designs, I'm annoyed, but not particularly shocked, to find a small clump of paparazzi outside, chatting amiably and sharing cigarettes.

'Excuse me,' I shout, waving my hand passive-aggressively as I push through the cloud of smoke.

'All right, love, don't get your knickers in a knot,' one says.

I round on him with a glare so potent it could strip paint. He raises his hands in conciliation, and I hold his gaze a moment longer. But, of course, as soon as I turn around, he mutters, 'Must be that time of month,' to his peers and they all snigger. Toads.

Inside the fashion house, it sounds like I've wandered into a wildlife sanctuary. There's wailing (Elle), cooing (Cassie), and bleating (Zara). Two other staff members I've yet to meet are chattering at the back of the workroom like a pair of budgerigars.

My appearance in the doorway silences everyone, including the two budgies at the back.

'Poppy!' Zara bleats. 'What are you doing here?'

I can only imagine where her mind has gone – amid the media mayhem, here comes the journo from the world-renowned fashion magazine.

'It's all right, Zara,' says Cassie, ushering her past me. 'We were expecting Poppy.'



Zara's panicked eyes ping between me, Cassie, and Elle, who is slumped on the sofa, her head in her hands. I flash Zara my warmest smile but that seems to make it worse. Seeming bereft, she wanders over to her colleagues, who gather her into a group hug.

You'd think someone had died.

I face Cassie. 'Mind if I...?' I ask. She stands aside, then closes the office door behind me.

'You may as well show her,' says Elle, her voice muffled by her hands.

'Show me what?' What could *possibly* have happened in the hour it took me to get here?

Cassie holds out her phone.

'From today,' she says.

On the screen is a series of poor-quality (but irrefutable) photos of Elle and Leo in this very spot, taken through the front window of Bliss Designs – close proximity, intense eye contact, and in one, they appear to be holding hands.

Fuck me, this case has more twists and turns than Nemesis at Alton Towers! (I will never forgive Shaz for making me ride it. 'It'll be fun' my arse!)

I hand back the phone to Cassie and we lock eyes. The very first time I met her, she said that Elle could never know she'd engaged the Ever After Agency. If successful, Elle's reunion with Leo had to seem organic, happenstance, *kismet*.

But we appear to be way past pretending this is fate. For the first time in my career as a matchmaker, I might have to lift the curtain. But before I can ask Cassie for a word in private, there's a knock at the door. One of the staff I've yet to meet is standing there, seeming apologetic but determined.

'Yes, Prue?' Cassie asks wearily as she opens the door.

Poor Cassie. After this case is closed – no matter which way it plays out – I hope she's planned a long and luxurious holiday.

‘Um, we were just thinking, with the paps outside and all...’ Cassie blinks at her, waiting patiently for her to get on with it. ‘What if me and Elle swapped clothes? I’m the closest to her in looks, see? A bit taller but we wear the same size and we’re both blondes and all.’

I glance between Prue and Elle, weighing up their similarities – *and* their differences, namely Prue’s outfit, a Harajuku-style, wildly patterned pair of pyjamas (or what look like PJs) worn with mid-calf, light-purple Dockers.

They could actually pull this off. The paps may be wily, but Elle wouldn’t be the first person to deceive them with a decoy.

Elle lifts her face from her hands. It’s blotchy and red and she’s obviously been crying – tears of frustration, no doubt, as my experience of Elle Bliss is that she’s no wilting violet.

‘Elle?’ asks Cassie. ‘What do you think?’

Elle snuffles and her expression brightens. ‘I think you’re a genius, Prue. But do you really want photographers following you home?’

‘I’m not going home, see. Me and my mates are heading out.’ She then walks us through an itinerary for the evening that’s so extensive, I’m exhausted just hearing about it. ‘And then my mate, Zsa Zsa, is DJing at this club in Camden but their set don’t start till one, see, so I won’t be home till at least three.’

*On a school night?* I think, appalled – mostly because at thirty-six, I already think like my mum.

‘But do you really want to go out looking like this?’ Elle asks, gesturing at her outfit: jeans and a T-shirt with a baseball cap perched on her head.

‘Might be fun to go out as a “normal”,’ Prue replies, as if she hasn’t just insulted three people. ‘We just need to switch outfits and I’ll borrow Gaz’s dark sunglasses. We’ll be right as rain.’

Elle leaps up and hugs her.

‘You’re the best.’

They leave the office to swap outfits in the fitting room, leaving me with my client – my *actual* client.

She falls into her office chair. Again, I hope she has something nice planned for herself after all this is settled.

‘So...’ I say, knowing that we have minutes at best, but I also need to couch what I’m about to propose carefully.

‘Remember when I asked you if it was worth it?’ she says, unwittingly pre-empting what I was about to say.

‘On that...’

She looks me square in the eye. ‘You think we should tell her, don’t you?’

Something I appreciate about Cassie Bliss: she always gets straight to the point.

‘Yes.’

‘She’s going to hate me.’

‘She won’t hate you. You’re her closest person.’

‘All right, she’ll be furious with me.’

‘Very possibly.’

In reality, this is almost definite, but agreeing may make Cassie decide against telling her sister what she’s done – what *we’ve* done.

She glances through the glass wall towards the back of the workroom – clearly, like me, she’s aware we have little time. But it’s her call and I won’t rush her. Besides, if she does agree, I’ll need approval from either Saskia or Paloma – likely both.

Cassie looks at me, her eyes heavy with sadness, and nods.

‘All right. So, how do we—’

‘Before I walk you through it, I need to talk to my higher-ups – get their sign-off.’

She nods again and I excuse myself to make the call, heading to the only place where I'll have privacy – the loo.

Saskia answers her mobile immediately. 'Poppy, brilliant timing as we were just about to call you.' Uh-oh, that does not bode well. 'Right, you're now on speaker.'

'Poppy, it's Mia,' she says. '*Spill the Tea* and *The Juice* have both published new photographs of your client with the love interest.'

Wonderful – just two of the biggest gossip sites in the world. This means that in little over an hour, this story has already gone global.

'Nasrin updated us that the engagement is a publicity stunt,' says Paloma, 'but even so, this doesn't look good.'

Bugger. They're going to ask me to close the case. The last time I stepped in it this badly, I'd fallen in love with the client.

'Poppy?' Saskia prompts when I don't respond.

'Uh, sorry. I'm here. Two things. First, this latest... uh, development... it's not surprising. The paparazzi are currently camped outside Bliss Designs.'

'Do you need an extraction?' Paloma offers. These are so rare, there hasn't been one since I joined the agency and I'd forgotten we offer them as a service.

'All good in that department – we're going with a decoy – but thank you.'

'A convincing decoy? Because I could have a team there in twenty minutes,' Paloma responds.

Before Paloma goes all 'Impossible Mission Force' on me and puts in a call to Tom Cruise, I leap in. 'No, no, we have a convincing decoy. And the paparazzi will be going on the wildest of goose chases, I promise.'

'Good,' says Saskia. 'So, what was the second thing, Poppy?'

Before I continue, I inhale a long slow breath through my nose. This is it – either the only thing that can get this case

back on track or the end of the line.

‘I think we need to read in the client,’ I say, my tone measured.

‘Sorry, did you say—’ Saskia starts.

‘You mean the *publicist*?’ Paloma asks to clarify.

‘I mean the client – not Cassie Bliss, who engaged us – but Elle Bliss. I’m asking to read her in and, after she proceeds as I suspect she will – revealing all to Leo – we regroup and determine a way forward.’

I love it when ‘Professional Poppy’ takes over and I sound all... well... professional.

‘And Paloma?’ I add before they can respond. ‘My best guess is that from tomorrow, we’ll need to PR the hell out of this.’

‘Oi, Poppy,’ says Nasrin.

‘Uh, yes?’

‘You forgetting that *I* brought in this case – *and* I’m your second. You should have—’

‘Nasrin,’ says Saskia, interrupting her rant, ‘those are both salient points but let’s revisit them when we’re all back in the office.’ Great, can’t *wait* for that convo.

Other than a muffled harumph, which sounds like Nas, the line goes quiet. I suspect that Saskia and Paloma are having one of their ‘mind-meld’ chats through the air.

‘That’s sorted then,’ says Saskia a few moments later. ‘Poppy, read in the client.’

Relieved, I exhale with a ‘phoof’ that echoes around the toilet – oops.

‘And don’t forget the NDA,’ says Paloma.

Right, so potentially blow up my client’s world *and* have her sign a non-disclosure agreement. Got it.

‘Oh, and Poppy, can you be in by eight tomorrow?’ she asks.

‘Yes, absolutely.’

‘Good,’ she says. ‘Then we’ll get started on the PR campaign – you, me, Nasrin, and Marie.’

‘Cool.’

*Cool?* I must be more rattled than I thought.

I end the call, thrilled but stunned I got the green light, and when I get back to the office, Prue has already left on ‘Project Decoy’, and Zara and Gaz, the third staff member, have gone home for the day.

‘Are you all right, Poppy?’ Elle asks.

‘Uh, yeah, why?’

‘Just wondered if you were sick or something. You were in the loo for an age.’

‘Oh,’ I say, laughing loudly at myself. ‘Dodgy curry,’ I lie. I flick a glance towards Cassie, who’s staring at her desktop, then meet Elle’s eye and smile broadly.

The poor woman – she has no idea what we’re about to tell her.

I open my mouth to speak but nothing comes out.

Cassie cringes at her desk, shrinking before my eyes, but when I look to Poppy, she steadily meets my gaze. She must break this sort of news all the time.

I cannot think of one thing to say. And I have no idea how to feel. Just a few minutes ago, I was riding the high of tricking the paps and now...

Snapshots of the past few weeks begin to flicker through my mind at an alarming rate.

Leo at the restaurant looking like a tosser... Him bringing my favourite flowers to my show... Acknowledging me at the end of his show... 'Coincidentally' sharing a berth with him on the Eurostar... The photoshoot! Oh my god – wrapped up in Leo's arms like that, wanting him...

Fuck.

Every moment Leo and I have shared in the past month has been part of a big, ugly, fucked-up lie. And that's not even taking into account *Leo's* lie – him pretending he didn't know who he was meeting that night.

'Elle, say something,' Cassie pleads.

'What exactly? What can I possibly say?' The brain fog starts to lift, and one question pops into my head. 'Actually, I do know. How could you lie to me like that?'

'It wasn't a lie—'

I glare at her. ‘Well, you’re right about that. It wasn’t *a* lie; it was a whole *pack* of them.’

‘I was trying to help...’ she adds feebly. ‘I just wanted you to be happy.’

‘Elle,’ Poppy interjects, her voice soft and calm.

When I turn on her, there it is, that steady gaze. Her tone, that look... It’s infuriating! I’m not a spooked horse that needs soothing. She’s not the bloody Elle whisperer.

I stare at her, waiting for this magical explanation that will make everything okay, including that my sister – the one person on the entire planet who I trust implicitly – has deceived me.

‘I’m sorry,’ she says. ‘We both are. And as misguided as it may seem right now, your sister engaged my agency to help bring you and Leo back together. She was thinking solely about your happiness.’

‘And then you manipulated me.’

‘I’m not going to play semantics. It’s fair for you to characterise what I did as manipulation. But when it comes to Cassie, please remember that her motives were pure.’

I cast a sidelong look at Cassie. She’s miserable – her face drawn, her shoulders slumped... It pains me terribly to see her like this. It will be difficult to stay cross with her – she’s my *sister*.

Poppy on the other hand...

‘Which parts did you orchestrate?’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Don’t be coy. Which parts were you personally responsible for? Is there even going to be a feature in *Nouveau* or was that part of the lie? If it was, then bravo, what a *masterful* ploy. You even got a world-famous photographer involved.’

‘Yes, there will be a feature – well, as far as I know. This latest development might impact—’



‘Latest development? You mean how I’m being portrayed as the harlot of the fashion world who’s hellbent on breaking up a celebrity couple? That?’

‘Yes.’

‘Brilliant. Career over before it properly got started.’

Ignoring Cassie’s protestations that my career *isn’t* over, I drop onto the sofa and stare at the hardwood floor, picking out the knots that look like things: there’s the apple and there’s the sheep... I’m searching for my favourite, the one that looks like a birthday cake, when a horrible realisation floods my veins.

I sit back and grab a throw pillow, dragging it onto my lap and hugging it tightly. I don’t want to ask this, but I need to know.

‘Bean? Are you all right?’ I barely register that Cassie is making her way over to me.

I steel myself, then look at Poppy, who is peering at me with a mix of curiosity and concern.

‘Was Leo in on it?’ I ask, barely able to choke out the words.

‘No!’ cries Cassie, now kneeling before me.

Poppy shakes her head. ‘Leo has no idea – even now.’

The relief is palpable and the air rushes from my lungs in an audible sigh.

‘Bean, I’m so sorry. I just... I ran into Tova, see – you remember her? My work wife at my last job? Well, she asked after you and I made some joke about how many first dates you go on and then I mentioned Leo and she has this school friend at Poppy’s agency and before I knew it, she’d referred me, and I had an appointment. It all sort of snowballed from there.’

It’s unlike Cassie to rattle off a litany of details like this – all rushed and panicked. I grab her hand to shush her.

‘I think I understand. And I know you were just trying to help. *You*, however...’ I say, glowering at Poppy. She seems to

take my fury in stride, which instantly punctures my resolve. I sigh, exhausted by the peaks and troughs of the past month.

‘So, what now? How do we get out of this mess?’

‘My colleagues and I are formulating a plan,’ Poppy replies matter-of-factly.

I laugh. ‘Brilliant. Hopefully, it’s not as fucked up as the rest of this mess.’

‘*Elle*,’ says Cassie.

‘Sorry, Poppy,’ I say, even though I’m not. After all this is sorted, I hope I never have to see Poppy Dean again. Even if she is just doing her job.

I push off the sofa and smooth out my clothes – well, *Prue’s* clothes. I never really wear street fashion, but it’s a great outfit and extremely comfortable. Prue’s feet are bigger than mine, so we had to raid our shoe storage for alternatives – no sense in sending a decoy into the world wearing plain clothes and lilac Doc Martins – a dead giveaway. So, white sneakers for Prue and I’m now teetering on a pair of orange block-heeled boots with socks stuffed in the toes – as good as we could do in a pinch.

Cassie stands and wraps her arms around me. With the boots on, I now come past her shoulders. I return the hug, holding her tightly. Poppy respectfully looks away, giving us our sisterly moment.

When Cassie releases me, I cross to my desk and retrieve my handbag from the drawer.

Hmm, probably best if I don’t take it – there may still be paps about who’ll recognise it from yesterday’s photos – so I grab my phone and my keys and stuff them into the left trouser pocket. Actually, the pockets are huge, so I take out a few other necessities – lip balm, tissues, and breath mints – and with great satisfaction, slip them inside the other one. Never underestimate the pleasure of a decent-sized pocket.

‘Where are you off to?’ Cassie asks.

‘I’m going to see Leo,’ I declare.

‘Really?’ she asks, clearly caught unawares.

‘Yep. I know it’s a risk, but my career may already be in the toilet. Besides, I need to know.’

‘You need to know what?’

‘If *any* of this is real,’ I reply simply. Because right now, I can’t sort truth from fiction, and I won’t know for sure until I see him.

And if it is... Can we possibly be together without it blowing up in our faces? Doubtful.

\* \* \*

I stop walking a block away from Lorenzo and scout about for paps. From my (brief) experience with the paparazzi, they don’t care who sees them, blatantly strutting about, cameras slung around their necks. I can’t see any, so I continue.

I had the whole Tube ride over to figure out what to say but I still don’t know.

‘Hello, Leo, you may or may not know this, but my sister set us up through a matchmaking agency and now I can’t tell my arse from my elbow, but I think I might love you again. Do you love me?’

Perfect. I chuckle to myself, which is either a sign that I’m coming to terms with the absurdity of this situation or I’m losing my mind. It’s probably both.

I cross the road and enter the shop, which induces enough envy to knock me sideways – even worse than last time I was here. I’ve always wanted my own shop. In truth, I don’t need anything this grand – a cosy boutique would do. Just one. I also don’t need multiple locations or to become a chain. Just one boutique on a high street somewhere in London with ‘Bliss Designs’ above the door.

It was the top of the list for when we made it big. Now that may never happen, which is probably why my envy is mounting by the second.

‘Hello, madam, how may I help you today?’

I turn in the direction of the voice and it's Linda, who I met last time I was here. Her warm expression cools in an instant.

'I'd like to speak to Le— Lorenzo,' I say, skipping niceties.

'Ellie, isn't it?'

I bristle, even though it's close to 'Elle' and I only met her that one time, but I'm probably reacting to the hint of condescension rather than her getting my name wrong.

'I'm sorry, but Lorenzo is not to be disturbed.'

Well, he's about to be disturbed, perturbed, and very possibly incensed if I can just get past this bastion of polite officiousness.

'Thank you, Linda, but I'm positive he'll want to see me.'

Before she can reply, I turn on my orange heels and march purposefully towards the bottom of the staircase at the back of the shop. She clip-clops rapidly behind me, calling, 'Ellie, Ellie, please.'

Ignoring her, I take the stairs two at a time, hearing her dainty stilettos running up behind me. When I reach Leo's workroom two storeys up, I'm out of breath and a sheen of sweat slicks my skin.

'Elle,' says Leo, leaping off a stool by one of the workbenches.

'I'm so sorry, Lorenzo, she pushed past me and—'

Linda is laying it on a little thick – I didn't even touch her.

'It's all right, Linda, thank you,' he says to her.

She purses her lips again, shaking her lustrous blonde mane with annoyed arrogance, then retreats, her footsteps echoing up the staircase.

'That was quite the entrance,' says Leo. I meet his eye and his gaze sweeps the length of me, taking in my appearance. 'And quite the outfit.'

‘Long story.’

His eyes lift and we stare at each other, a dozen emotions playing across his face and just as many coursing through me.

‘It’s all my fault,’ I say, right as he says, ‘I’m sorry about before.’

‘You go,’ he says, interrupting my offer for him to go first. We share an uneasy laugh. ‘You go,’ he says again, his voice soft.

For the umpteenth time today, I have no idea how to articulate what’s going on inside my head – *or* my heart.

‘You could start with the outfit,’ he offers, uncannily reading my mind again.

‘Decoy,’ I reply. ‘To trick the paps.’

He nods, obviously impressed. ‘Do you think you shook ’em?’

‘Who’s to say? I suppose we’ll know in an hour.’

‘Yeah, good point.’

‘I’m assuming you saw the latest photos then?’

He nods. ‘I reckon Taylor Swift would kill for this much publicity.’

We share another gentle laugh, which helps ease my nerves. But I still have no idea what I want to say to this man – besides explaining that I’m the reason we’re in this mess.

‘Hey, look, I’m sorry I took off like that,’ he says before I have a chance to explain. ‘I wanted to get back here as fast as I could to put in a call to Aunt Serena, but it was only after I got off the call that I realised how it must have looked to you, me leaving right when the shit hit the fan. Especially after...’

So, it’s hard for him too, dredging up the past.

‘You’re right, that did occur to me. And I did hate you a little for it.’

‘Just a little?’ He’s joking, but I nod, and the smile falls from his face – his gorgeous face, which I can’t stop staring at.

How have I never noticed before that there's a small bump on the bridge of his nose? Was that always there or did it happen after he moved back to Texas?

I should ask about his call with Ser.

'So, what did she say?'

'Aunt Serena? She called it a "shit show".'

'She's not wrong. Does she have a solution?'

'You won't like it.'

'Try me.'

'She wants me to fall on my sword and publicly beg for Franzia's forgiveness.' I suddenly feel as if I weigh fifty stone. 'You have to understand,' he rushes to add, 'she's worked so hard for me, making me who I am, building the label. The engagement was supposed to be the cherry on top of the publicity sundae and—'

'Just...' I hiss, raising my hands.

I can't listen to any more of this. If Leo is going to kowtow to Ser and continue to go along with her (evil) plan, then what am I even doing here?

'This was a mistake,' I say, making my way to the stairs. As I reach the top step, it occurs to me that now *I'm* the one who's running away.

'Wait, what?' He rushes after me and grabs me by the arm, his fingers gripping firmly. I'm about to wrench it free of his grasp when he adds, 'I told her no.'

Time stands still and the only sound is our ragged breaths mingling between us as we lock eyes. His gaze drops to my mouth and in an instant, he pulls me to him, encircling me in his embrace and lowering his mouth to mine.

This kiss – the taste of him, the touch of his tongue, how his lips caress mine, the soft moan that escapes his lips, sending shivers hurtling down my spine, the feel of his touch at the nape of my neck, his body pressed against me, breathing

in his scent – it is *everything*. Familiar, yet electrifying – our past, our present, and our future in one perfect moment.

I never want it to end.

It could be minutes or hours or days – I’ve lost all sense of time – but eventually, the kiss draws to a close, and we ease apart just enough for our eyes to meet and share a grin.

‘That was...’ he says breathlessly.

‘Uh-huh,’ I reply.

‘You have no idea how much I want to make love to you right now, Ellie.’

His words rocket through me, quickening my pulse and sending tingles between my legs.

‘I have some idea,’ I say with a soft chuckle, feeling his erection pressed against me through our clothes.

‘Do you think it’s safe?’ he asks with a jerk of his head.

‘Out there? In the world?’ I suspect he’s thinking about us heading to his flat – or mine.

‘Yeah,’ he replies.

‘Hard to say.’ I eye the workbench – it doesn’t look *too* uncomfortable.

‘Hold on,’ he says, his eyes alight with mischief, ‘I have a better idea.’ His eyes dart towards his phone, which is upright on the workbench. ‘The store closes in five. If I tell my staff I’ll close up, we’ll have the place to ourselves.’

I laugh.

‘Why’s that funny?’ he asks.

‘Not funny, just... I was dreading a cab ride back to East London.’

‘Oh, sweetheart, can you imagine that poor cab driver...?’ We chuckle together. ‘Give me five and meet me on the second floor – the office on the left.’

He’s gone before I can reply so I head to his office to wait out the longest five minutes of my life.

Five minutes turns into twenty, giving me enough time to poke around Leo's beautifully decorated office while second guessing if we're doing the right thing. By the time he returns, I'm close to leaving.

'Sorry about that. Couldn't convince Linda you weren't some sort of... Never mind. She's gone now. They're all gone.'

'Have they seen all the stuff in the media? Your team?'

He shrugs, seemingly unbothered – or maybe, like me, he's wearied by it.

'Lovely office,' I say, looking about – my feeble attempt to change the subject.

'Elle...' Leo draws nearer and despite the kiss we shared just a short time ago, I feel self-conscious being here like this. I'm also overcome with a strong sense of foreboding, as if consummating this... this... *whatever* this is will blow up in our faces and lead to our ruin. Professionally, yes, but also emotionally.

I don't know if I could bear losing Leo a second time.

I also haven't told him about Cassie and Poppy and the Ever After Agency. There's so much we haven't talked about and right now, it's a lot – *unbearable* even.

I should go.

'It's a lot, isn't it?' Leo asks.



‘How do keep doing that?’ I whisper hoarsely.

He comes even closer. ‘Know what you’re thinking?’

I nod.

‘I know you.’

Three simple words, yet the most complex of sentiments. In many ways, Leo does know me – even after all this time apart because, at my core, I’m still me.

And he’s still Leo.

‘I’m scared too,’ he says, his body barely an inch from mine.

‘Why are *you* scared?’

‘Because...’ He looks away for a moment, a small furrow appearing between his brows, then meets my eye. I home in on the gold flecks in his large, grey, soulful eyes. ‘I don’t want to lose you again.’

He’s scared of the exact same thing I am.

His frown intensifies. ‘But we don’t have to if you don’t wa—’

I grab the back of his neck with both hands, pulling him to me and landing a kiss. It’s rough and wanting. Our teeth clash and my lips will be bruised later but I don’t care. I want him, I’m desperate for him. He returns the kiss, just as hungry for me, and enfolds me in his arms, making me feel both desired and safe.

We move awkwardly to the sofa, still in our embrace, me shuffling backwards. I wait for him to lower me onto it, but instead he stops, easing away and looking down at me, his breath rapid.

‘Ellie...’

‘Oh,’ I say, understanding immediately, ‘I’m on the pill.’

‘Oh, good. I mean, I have something, but...’ He *has* something? Does he regularly bring women up here? Oh god. I

attempt to withdraw, tugging against the confines of his embrace.

‘Hey, not like that... Sorry, I feel like I shouldn’t have said anything.’

‘No! It’s me. My mind plays these tricks where it imagines the worst or thinks I don’t belong...’

‘You do belong. You belong here with me.’

I look away, deflating. ‘I’ve ruined the mood now, haven’t I?’

He jostles me gently and I peer up at him through my lashes. He drops a soft kiss on my lips – a perfect, beautiful, romantic kiss.

‘Before...’ he says, lifting his lips to my cheek and gently kissing it. ‘When I stopped us...’ His lips lightly trail across to one eyelid then the other, where he presses two more kisses. ‘I just wanted us to take our time...’

My eyes now closed, I bask in the timber of his voice, the feel of his hands against the small of my back, his woody, masculine scent. The next kiss lands on my forehead, inducing a soft mewl of a sigh.

He cups my cheek, and my eyelids flutter open. He’s watching me.

‘You are so beautiful,’ he whispers. And then his mouth is on mine again, and we clasp each other tightly. Holding me, kissing me, he lowers me onto the sofa. I’m consumed by longing and knowing and mystery all at once, the pleasure of familiarity and the excitement of the new converging.

A thousand moments pass as we kiss and caress each other, locking eyes, then squeezing them tightly as the pleasure takes hold. We share a chuckle at his particularly stubborn jeans, which refuse to lower over his hips. And then it’s just the two of us, our bodies entwined, skin to skin, and it’s almost enough just like this. Almost.

‘Leo,’ I say, my voice infused with want. He slips inside me and a moan escapes – his, mine, I couldn’t say – but it

expresses everything – the past month together, a decade apart, four years of loving each other, and very possibly our future.

\* \* \*

### *Poppy*

I arrive home before Tristan, and our automated system has already turned on the lights and set the temperature to 23°C. I dump my handbag on the hallstand, toe off my shoes, and call for Saffron.

She wanders into the main room, a combined living–dining–kitchen, blinking and stopping for a downward-dog-style stretch. She’s obviously been sleeping on the bed in the guest bedroom – something we gave up trying to train her not to do by day four. We’re fairly certain she thinks she’s a person and that it’s *her* bedroom.

I scoop her up, which she barely tolerates.

‘Sometimes, it’s not about you, Saffy,’ I coo at her when she starts wriggling in my arms. ‘Mama’s had a shit day and needs a furry cuddle.’

She responds by contorting herself into a pretzel, and I set her down. It’s time to feed her anyway.

‘You are the most spoilt cat in the world,’ I say affectionately as I prepare her dinner of high-end kitty kibble and raw rabbit. If we were living in Australia, this would be kangaroo.

Of course, now that I’m about to feed her, she’s doing figure eights around my legs – the suck-up.

The key turns in the lock – my darling is home! Saffron must think the same thing, because as soon as Tristan appears, she trots over to him, the tip of her tail flicking. He lifts her up one-handed while setting his keys and wallet on the hallstand. I can hear her purring from here.

‘She is such a little flirt,’ I say. ‘Barely tolerates my affections, but leaps into your arms the moment you get home.’

Tristan chuckles and, still holding a smug-looking Saffron, comes to kiss me hello. And even though he's got an armful of cat, and my hands are covered in rabbit goo, it's hot. Tristan's kisses are always hot. He must have gone to kissing school or something.

Saffron tires of our spousal affection and leaps to the floor. I set down her dinner, wash my hands, then give my entire attention to my husband, who snakes his arms around me and squeezes my bum with both hands.

'You're very sexy when you're in the kitchen,' he says, his voice low and gravelly.

This is a long-running joke between us because, at best, I *assemble* food – salads, sandwiches, putting the cat food in the bowl. Tristan is the one who cooks. Apparently, pre-me, he rarely bothered making anything more exciting than steamed veggies and a plain chicken breast. But with Jacinda's encouragement – and a few of her recipes – he's become quite the home chef.

On that...

'I, husband, have had a rubbish day,' I say, peppering my words with kisses, 'and am absolutely starving.'

He pulls away, clearly concerned.

'Why was it a rubbish day?'

I shake my head, not wanting to burden him with my failings as a matchmaker.

'Darling, tell me.'

I'm about to say I'd rather put it out of my mind – at least until I get to the agency tomorrow morning – when he shifts into Tristan-the-perfect-husband mode.

'How about this? You run a nice hot bath, I'll put together a little tray for you – something to nibble on, a glass of wine – and while you're relaxing, I'll make us a yummy dinner?'

'I don't deserve you,' I say.

‘You absolutely do. Besides, you always look after me when I’ve had a rubbish day.’

‘Except the cooking part.’

‘Yes, no need to pile on and make a day worse,’ he teases.

‘Hey, not nice.’

He grins at me and shoos me off to the bathroom, giving my bum a pat as I go.

An hour later, after I’ve soaked my worries away while nibbling on olives and drinking a glass of Pinot, we sit down to plates of steak and homemade chips – *and* steamed broccoli, because (Tristan’s) old habits die hard.

But even though this is one of my favourite meals, my appetite has disappeared. Unable to put work out of my mind any longer, unease flows through me unfettered. In just over twelve hours, I will be facing the music. It won’t be pretty.

‘Work still on your mind?’ Tristan asks as he cuts into his steak. It’s perfect: medium rare – exactly how we both like it.

‘We had to tell the client today – the one who didn’t know I was a matchmaker – that her sister was working with Ever After.’

‘Oh, I see. Is it—’

‘Yes, it’s as bad as it seems. I’ve never had to do that before. Paloma’s called an early meeting tomorrow to formulate a PR plan, but there’s still the chance Saskia will shut down the case entirely. I’ve put the agency at risk. Well, the case has. If anyone connects my client and the love interest and all the shit that’s going on in the press to the agency, it’s... I don’t want to catastrophise, but...’

‘It could have dire repercussions,’ he says.

‘Yep. And there’s the impact all this has had on my client. *Her* career is on the line as well – not just mine.’

He reaches for my hand and gives it a squeeze. ‘Sorry, Poppy. I hope Paloma’s solution does the trick.’

‘Me too,’ I say with a sigh. I’m about to cut into my steak when my phone chimes, notifying me of a message.

‘You should go ahead and check that, darling,’ he says. Even though Tristan and I have a ‘no phones at the dinner table’ rule, it ends up being more of a guideline, as we both need to be reachable after work hours.

I retrieve my phone from the hallstand, dreading what this might be. Seeing the message, I break into a relieved smile. I hold up the phone as I walk back to the dining table. ‘It’s Jass,’ I say. ‘She’s got it in her head to stage an intervention for Shaz.’

‘An intervention?’ he asks, clearly baffled.

‘To move her into Lauren’s place before Lauren gets back from Finland.’

Tristan’s mouth quirks. ‘Jacinda missed her calling – she should have been a matchmaker.’

‘I’ve told her that too. Anyway, it’s Saturday. You and Ravi are the brawn.’

‘Making Jacinda the brains and you the beauty.’

‘Hah! Flattery will get you everywhere, Mr Fellows,’ I say with a coquettish smile.

‘Oh, I hope so, Ms Dean, because after dinner, we progress to phase three.’

‘Phase thr—?’

His eyebrows raise suggestively.

‘Oh, I like phase three already. And phases one and two,’ I add, thinking of the bath and dinner. My appetite has now returned, and I cut into my steak.

I love being married to Tristan. He’s my soft place to land on nights like this. My thoughtful, clever, super-hot soft place to land.

I get to the agency before 8 a.m. but I'm still the last to arrive for our PR-the-hell-out-of-this-mess meeting.

Paloma has commandeered my favourite meeting room, even wheeling in a rarely used whiteboard, which she has already covered with writing and sticky notes. Nasrin is seated at the table glowering at her tablet, and Marie is standing by the window taking a drag of an unlit cigarette. If we were in a movie, we'd call this the war room.

'Oh good, you're here,' says Paloma, looking my way fleetingly. As I enter, she scribbles something on a sticky-note, then affixes it to the whiteboard. She stands back to regard the board, then swaps the position of two sticky notes.

I walk around the table, distributing the takeaway coffees I got from the café downstairs: a skim flat white for Paloma, a mocha for Nasrin, and a long black with three sugars for Marie.

'Poppy, you're a gem,' says Paloma before taking a sip.

I'm not sure I'm a *gem*. Surely, it's expected that when you've landed the agency in hot water and your colleagues come in for an early meeting, you bring coffee – *and* pastries. I set a paper bag brimming with croissants in the middle of the table and tear it open, releasing the most delicious aroma. I take one and after prying my cappuccino from the carry tray one-handed, I take a seat next to Nasrin.

‘Hey,’ I say quietly, ‘I’m sorry about yesterday.’ She sips her mocha and grunts softly. ‘You were right; I should have spoken to you first. It’s *our* case and I messed up. Forgive me?’

I look her way and the corner of her mouth twitches.

‘It’s okay,’ I say. ‘I promise not to tell anyone you accepted my apology.’

She smothers a grin and, head shaking, takes another sip of her coffee. ‘Dag,’ she says, lobbing an Aussie-ism at me.

‘Muppet,’ I quip back and we snigger together, collegial again.

Paloma checks the time on her phone and calls the meeting to order, but Marie stays put until Paloma shoos her towards the table with a whiteboard marker.

‘All right,’ Marie protests. She sits opposite me, rolling her eyes in Paloma’s direction. But I’m already on shaky ground with this case and I need Paloma’s help, so I don’t join in. Marie flattens her lips, judging me silently. That’s fine – I’d rather be in her bad books than Paloma’s.

I’m taking in the contents of the whiteboard when Saskia, typically graceful and unflustered, enters less-than-gracefully and extremely flustered. ‘Soz,’ she says to the room. ‘Total mare getting into Richmond this morning.’

Shit, what is Saskia doing here? When we spoke yesterday, Paloma made no mention of Saskia attending this meeting.

Panicked, I wonder if I have time to pop downstairs and buy her an oat-milk latte.

But I don’t. With a nod towards Saskia, who opens her planner, her pen poised to take notes, Paloma kicks off the meeting again. For twenty-five minutes, she walks us through a comprehensive and well-thought-out PR plan, using the whiteboard as a (surprisingly) useful visual aid.

She ends by pressing the cap onto the marker with a click. ‘Questions?’



‘Poppy,’ says Saskia, angling towards me, ‘do you think the client will agree to this?’

When Paloma asked if there were any questions, I figured she meant for her, so I’m caught a little off-guard. *Will* Elle go for this? From my experience of Elle, she *avoids* the spotlight. This plan will require the exact opposite from her – *and* Leo.

‘It’s possible,’ I say carefully. It’s a very clever plan – open, honest, appealing to the public’s empathy, their love of romance... I’m just not sure how appealing it will be to my client, even if it is the only way she and Leo can be together without damaging their respective careers. It’s a big ask.

Paloma cocks a hip and crosses her arms, pinning me with an intense look.

‘It’s a brilliant plan,’ I blurt, hoping to appease her.

‘Well, yes,’ she replies immodestly. ‘I’m not just here to organise congratulatory gifts for our clients, Poppy.’

Oh god, it really is easy to get on Paloma’s offside.

‘Oh no, of course not,’ I reply, ‘and I will present this to my client as soon we wrap up the morning staff meeting.’ Nasrin clears her throat beside me. ‘Sorry, *we’ll* present it to *our* client.’

‘Excellent,’ says Saskia as she stands. She closes her planner, sliding the slimline pen into its holder on the side.

‘Wait,’ says Marie, ‘I have a question.’ Saskia remains standing but indicates for Marie to proceed. ‘Where is Lorenzo’s publicist in this plan?’

Paloma appears a little ruffled, but regains her composure almost instantly. ‘I’ve determined that it’s best to proceed without her input.’

Marie sucks in a long breath through her cigarette, nodding slowly. She lowers the cigarette. ‘I am not convinced.’

‘Well, I don’t need for you to be convinced,’ Paloma replies coolly.

‘But her fingerprints are all over this mess,’ says Marie.

‘I’m actually inclined to agree, which is why I’d like to keep her out of it.’

Interesting. This is a one-eighty from yesterday when Paloma wanted to read Ser in on the case. Maybe something else came to light overnight. If it did, she’s playing it close to her chest.

She and Marie eye each other warily, a stand-off between the head of client relations and the agency’s investigator. Nasrin and I glance at each other, our expressions silently conveying, ‘Oh my god!’

‘Marie,’ says Saskia, breaking the tension, ‘was there something specific that’s troubling you?’

‘*Oui*, but it is just a hunch for now.’

‘Care to share?’ Paloma asks, her tone laden with annoyance.

Marie leans forward, propping both elbows on the table. ‘A connection between the publicist and Franzia. Something is there, I wonder?’

There’s a beat of silence and I glance at the others, who seem as intrigued as I am – even Paloma.

‘Go on,’ Saskia prompts.

Marie shrugs. ‘As I say, it is just a hunch, but I will look into it.’

‘Please do – and quickly,’ says Paloma, with a (teeny) trace of conciliation. ‘Poppy, you and Nasrin meet with the client after the staff meeting and report back. I’ll leave this here for now,’ she says, indicating the whiteboard.

The meeting disbands, but Nasrin tugs on my arm and I stay.

‘What do you think? Will Elle go for it?’ she asks.

‘I really don’t know. It’s a lot to ask of her.’

‘Not if she loves him,’ says Nas, revealing her rarely seen romantic side.

‘True, but there’s no guarantee this plan won’t make things worse. It’s all about tone and timing...’

‘Mmm.’

‘And there’s the other issue – what Marie said. I’d hate to think that Leo’s publicist is working at cross-purposes with us but—’

‘She might just be an evil mastermind.’

I smirk at that, enjoying the momentary reprieve the levity brings.

\* \* \*

*Elle*

I’ve slept so soundly that for the first few seconds after I wake, I forget where I am.

Then it all comes flooding back and when I turn my head, there he is, smiling at me.

‘Good morning, sweetheart,’ he says, leaning in for a kiss.

I hold up a finger then take a swig from the water next to the bed.

‘Now you can kiss me,’ I say, nestling into the crook of his arm.

He chuckles, then encircles me in his arms and kisses me softly. Leo’s kisses are so dreamy they could be bottled and sold; he’d make squillions. I wish we could stay like this forever – or at least for the foreseeable future. But reality pokes at me from the corners of my mind.

*You still haven’t told him what Cassie did.*

*The public thinks he’s engaged.*

*He is technically engaged, even if it’s just for show.*

*The press is painting you as homewrecker.*

*There will be dire repercussions for Leo refusing Ser’s plan.*

*There’s no way you can collaborate now.*

*Or even be together.*

I stiffen in his arms and he leans back, studying me intently. ‘Elle, are you okay?’

‘Uh-uh.’ I wriggle out of his embrace and sit up, folding my knees into my chest. I’m starting to shiver but it’s not from being cold. It’s warm inside Leo’s office – *and* his sofa bed. The shivers are a physical manifestation of the fear that everything is about to implode.

*What have we done?*

Leo sits up and scooches over, wrapping his arms around me again. He rests his chin on my head as he rubs my arm.

‘It’ll be okay,’ he says, his voice low.

‘You don’t know that.’

‘Not entirely, but we—’

‘There’s something I need to tell you,’ I say abruptly, cutting him off.

His hand stops moving. ‘Okay. What is it?’

The trepidation in his voice reverberates through me, and I almost chicken out. But I’ve already burst our little bubble, so I may as well lay it all out.

Staying exactly where I am so I can avoid making eye contact, I tell him about Cassie and the agency. Admittedly, it doesn’t sound as bad when I’m explaining it to him as when Poppy told me about it yesterday, but that may be because I keep emphasising that Cassie was doing it for me, for my happiness.

I finish with, ‘So, if it weren’t for my sister, we probably wouldn’t be in this mess...’ trying to inject a bit of lightness into what I’ve revealed.

Leo shifts beside me and lifts my chin with his finger, so I’ll meet his eye.

I expect him to be cross but if anything, he seems *pleased*.

‘If it weren’t for your sister, I’d still be pining for you and too terrified to do anything about it.’

‘What? You were *pinning* for me?’

‘Of course. After Brandy took over the business and I was able to raise my head and breathe again, I wanted to reach out to you more than anything.’

‘Why didn’t you?’

‘As I said before, I was terrified you would turn me away.’

‘Why would I do that?’ I ask.

‘I don’t know – because you’d moved on or were angry with me or something.’

‘I wasn’t *angry* with you, I—’

‘Really? Are you sure about that? Because you’ve given me a tongue lashing more than once since that night at the restaurant – actually, *including* that night at the restaurant,’ he teases. Only I’m not in the mood for being teased – not even a little bit. Besides, he’s right.

‘I thought you didn’t care about me.’

‘Ellie, I *did* care. I *do* care. I always have. You don’t know that you were on my mind the whole time we were apart?’

‘Well, no. How would I know that? You ghosted me.’

‘I know but that wasn’t because I stopped loving you. I was just drowning under my obligations to my family and I thought the best way not to break your heart any more than I had – or *my* heart, ’cause I had a really shitty time of it being apart from you – was to cut all ties. I did it for your sanity and mine, because I knew I couldn’t come back here, and what was the point in dragging it out?’

‘That’s idiotic. We could have made it work.’

‘How?’ he says with a wry laugh. ‘Texas is five thousand miles away and I was running a multi-million-dollar cattle ranch while you were launching a design career. And even if the logistics hadn’t been a factor, I certainly was. I wasn’t the same person when I was back home. I was so resentful, furious

that, even from the grave, my old man was holding Brandy's happiness – and my mom's security – over my head. Let's just say I wasn't the guy you fell in love with. I would have been too ashamed to see you. You would have hated what I became.'

'I don't know that I would have *hated* you,' I mumble.

'Really? You never once cursed my name in ten years?' he teases, and this time I'm a little more receptive than before.

'Once – in a moment of weakness,' I reply with a smirk. 'But seriously, Leo, you didn't even let me be part of the decision. You just broke the news, then the next day you were gone and I never heard from you again.'

'I know, sweetheart. And in retrospect, you're right, it was idiotic. But I was a dumb kid, blinded by my hatred for my old man.'

'And now?'

'I'm a not-so-dumb man who's grateful for a second chance. Or at least hopeful of a second chance,' he adds, capturing my hand in his.

'And what about the rest of it?' I say, my voice strained with apprehension.

'The rest— Oh, right. Yeah, there's a lotta shit to deal with.'

In anticipation of what I'm about to say, a lump lodges in my throat. But I need to get these words out – it's the mature, professional thing to do. 'Leo, maybe we need to... I don't know... *Wait*.'

'On the collaboration? Maybe, but—'

'No, I mean wait on us... being together.'

'No,' he says emphatically. 'I'm not doing that. I spent ten years without you because I was a coward and a fool and I'm not wasting any more time.'

'That's... that's a lovely sentiment but it's not realistic. Ser has a plan for you, for your career, and like you said, you only

have to pretend to be engaged for another month or two.'

He fixes me with a penetrating gaze. 'Ellie, no. We're not doing that. We'll figure something out, but I am not going to keep pretending I'm engaged to Franzia when I want to be with you.'

'Well, I suppose there's one possibility. Poppy said that she and her team at the agency were working on a plan to help us.'

'See? There's still hope.'

'Easy for you to say – you're not public enemy number one.'

He tightens his arms around me and kisses the top of my head. 'If you're number one, then I must be number t—'

He's interrupted by a loud thumping sound coming from downstairs. We break apart and look at each other. He's obviously as baffled as I am.

'Is that—'

This time, the thumping cuts *me* off and there's also muffled shouting, a woman's voice.

'That's not... That wouldn't be *Ser*, would it?'

'No,' says Leo, climbing out of bed and slipping into his jeans. 'Aunt Serena was pissed, but she wouldn't come all this way without telling me.' The thumping continues, becoming more ferocious. 'They'll break the fucking door down at this rate.' He leaves the office, his footsteps loud on the wooden stairs. 'I'm coming,' he shouts as he descends.

There's a moment of silence when he gets to the ground floor, which, somehow, is worse than the thumping. And then he says something that turns my blood to ice.

'What the fuck are you doing here, Franzia?'

There's nothing like getting a frantic phone call from a client during a staff meeting.

As soon as Elle's name appeared on my screen, I excused myself and headed back to our 'war room', Nas hot on my heels. I answered and put the phone on speaker, barely getting out 'hello' before Elle rattled off a confusing list of events and details, culminating in a revelation that could explode this entire case, not to mention Paloma's carefully thought-out plan.

'Franzia is *there*? At Leo's shop?' I ask, just to make sure I've got this right.

'Yes! Leo just let her in because she was about to bang the door down. She's been carrying on about how he's ruining everything for her, how if they end the engagement, she won't be named brand ambassador. Brand ambassador for *what*? Ranty bitches dot com?'

'Elle, listen,' I say calmly, hoping to soothe her escalating emotions. She stops talking but her uneven breathing is audible over the line.

'We'll figure this out,' I say right as Paloma joins us. Nasrin quietly fills her in. 'What time does the shop open?' I ask Elle. The last thing this case needs is Leo's staff and a shop full of people witnessing the Leo-Elle-Franzia love triangle blowing up.



‘Er, ten-thirty, I believe. But that’s less than an hour away. Poppy, what do I do? I’m up here cowering under a bloody duvet.’

‘Just give me a sec.’ I put the phone on mute and address my colleagues. ‘The shop opens at ten-thirty. Thoughts?’

‘They’re in Soho?’ Paloma asks. I nod and her eyes go to the clock. ‘Hmm. The only thing I can think of is an extraction. We could get someone there in about ten minutes.’

‘But who are they extracting?’ I ask. ‘We can’t just bring in Elle and Leo and leave Franzia at Leo’s shop. She’d wreak even more havoc.’

‘Right,’ she agrees.

‘And we can’t kidnap a supermodel,’ Nas chimes in. ‘Or can we?’

‘No!’ Paloma and I say together.

‘Poppy?’ It’s Elle. ‘Poppy, are you there?’

Looking defeated, something I’ve never seen from her before, Paloma shakes her head, one shoulder lifting in a half-hearted shrug.

‘Sorry, I’ve got nothing either,’ says Nasrin.

I take the phone off mute. ‘Hi, Elle, sorry – just conferring with my colleagues about the best way forward.’

I’m about to tell her we failed to find one when she says, ‘Hang on.’ There’s a muffled conversation between her and a male voice, presumably Leo, but I can’t make out what they’re saying.

‘I’m back,’ she says a few moments later. ‘She’s gone – Franzia left.’ The relief in her voice permeates the air of our meeting room.

‘That’s good, Elle, but we’ll still want to control the fall-out,’ I say.

‘How do you mean? Can’t I just go home now?’

‘Elle, this is Paloma Martinez-Pérez, head of client relations at the Ever After Agency.’ I’m all for Paloma jumping into the conversation, but she’s introduced herself as if this is an actual war room and she’s about to brief the president.

‘Er, hello.’

‘We think it’s best if you and Leo come to the agency right away – before the staff arrive and the shop opens.’

There’s another muffled conversation, then, ‘You want Leo to come too?’

‘Yes. We need you here together to brief you on our plan.’

A beat of silence. ‘Okay. Send the address and we’ll be there as soon as we can.’

‘Be ready in ten minutes,’ says Paloma. ‘We’re sending a car – a black Bentley and your driver is called Carl.’

Wow – first the offer of an extraction team, now we’re sending a luxury car? Why not a helicopter? It’s clear that Paloma does a *lot* more at the agency than organise congratulatory gifts. This is just the first time I’ve had to delve into her bag of not-so-magic-money-buys-anything tricks.

I end the call with reassurances for Elle and Leo and am about to thank Paloma when she says, ‘Let me know when they arrive. I’ll be in my office.’

Right, so I’m no longer lead on this case – Paloma is. It’s the first time *this* has happened to me as well.

I fall heavily into a chair and Nasrin sits next to me. ‘That was intense,’ she says.

‘What do you think Franzia will do?’ I ask.

She shakes her head. ‘No idea, but we should ask Mia to keep a close watch on socials, yeah?’

‘Mmm, good point.’

My phone rings again and I snatch it from the table, expecting Elle with another update. But it’s Tristan.

‘Hi, Tris.’

‘I’ll leave you to it,’ says Nasrin. She closes the door behind her.

‘Hello, darling. I just wrapped up a meeting and wondered how yours went.’

I lean back against the chair, once again grateful for having this man in my life. ‘Well, I didn’t get fired, so there’s that.’

He laughs. ‘I doubt you were in danger of being fired. They love you there.’

‘Mmm, Paloma may not. She just took over my case.’

‘Oh, Poppy – sorry, darling.’

‘Eh, she’s right to. Anyway, the client is being brought in shortly, so I should probably go.’

‘All right. Fill me in at home. I love you.’

‘I love you too.’

I’ve got my HEA. Now it’s time for Elle to get hers.

\* \* \*

*Elle*

Ten minutes is not a long time to get ready, especially when you can’t find your knickers.

‘Found ’em,’ says Leo, tossing them my way. I slip them on. ‘Somehow, they ended up in there.’ He points at the mechanism that converts the sofa from sitting to sleeping.

The ‘somehow’ is that Leo and I had sexy time on the sofa twice before he converted it into a bed and then once again after that. I’m amazed we found them.

Knickers on, I scout about for the rest of my clothes. Oh, that’s right – Prue’s candy-pink outfit. I stoop and collect the items from the floor with a grimace. They’re wrinkled and I’d rather not wear them a second day, but what choice do I have?

‘I might have something better, if you like,’ says Leo, ever the mind reader.

He crosses to a narrow cabinet and inside are two pairs of jeans, three T-shirts, and a white dress shirt. 'For when I'm working late and end up staying here,' he explains with a shrug.

I already know about the bathroom that's adjacent to the office and stocked with emergency toiletries. It even has a shower, something I'm glad I used before we went to sleep, as there won't be time for one this morning.

'Take your pick,' he says, giving me first choice. I choose a pair of jeans and the dress shirt while Leo puts on his Hank Moody outfit.

'Umm...' The jeans are swimming on me, of course, and if I don't hold them up, they'll fall off.

'Wait here.' He runs upstairs and in no time, he's back bearing a box. 'Samples from the US,' he says. He rifles through it and takes out a Kelly-green belt that will fit me perfectly.

'The cactus leather?' I ask, slipping it on.

'Yep.'

'I love the colour.'

'It's my favourite.' He checks his watch. 'Shit, three minutes.'

'Enough time to brush our teeth,' I say, which we do side by side at the small sink, much like we used to do when we were students and in love.

*In love.* I almost choke on the toothpaste. Are we back in love? I regard Leo in the mirror and he meets my eye and gives me a wink that sends a surge of warmth hurtling through my body. Who knew teeth brushing could be so romantic?

He spits and rinses, then I do – not as romantic – then it's a frantic rush to put on our shoes, gather our belongings, and run down the stairs.

When we get to the front door, Linda is about to put her key in the lock. She blinks at us in bewilderment, then her mouth does that judgey thing again. So far, I've made a

terrible impression on her. Leo unlocks the door and swings it open.

‘Good morning, Linda,’ he chirrup as though it’s not plainly obvious we’ve spent the night together.

‘Er, good morning,’ she stammers.

‘Excuse us,’ Leo says, ushering us through the door and onto the footpath right as a black Bentley pulls up kerbside.

Leo opens the door for me – he always was a gentleman – and I get in, scooching across to the other side.

‘Hello, Carl,’ I say as Leo gets in.

‘Howdy, Carl,’ he adds.

Carl nods at us politely via the rearview mirror, then waits for us to buckle up before heading into traffic.

‘Phoof,’ I sigh, leaning back against the seat. ‘That was...’

‘Exciting?’

I look across the backseat and raise my eyebrows at him. ‘I was about to say “harrowing”.’

‘Hey, we made it in time.’

‘Linda hates me.’

He reaches for my hand and holds it tightly in his. ‘She doesn’t hate you.’

‘Disapproves of me then.’

‘Linda doesn’t know you. And she’s just trying to be a good manager.’

‘Mmm,’ I reply tartly as I turn my head and look out the window.

‘You know,’ he says, leaning close and murmuring in my ear, ‘you look super sexy wearing my clothes.’

My lips curl up despite myself and I gaze back at him flirtatiously. And why not? If he can flirt with me, I can flirt right back.

Unfortunately, my mind has other ideas, homing in on the question I asked myself at the bathroom mirror: are we back in love?

\* \* \*

*Poppy*

It's not often that a secret client and their love interest come to the agency. You'd think that we were matching Miley with Harry with the amount of interest my colleagues show when Elle and Leo arrive. George especially! His efforts at surreptitious gawking stick out like dogs' balls (as my dinky-di dad would say).

Anita is the exception, but then, she's a pro. Even if they *were* Miley and Harry – 'Harley'? – she'd greet them the same way: as if they're *people*. Fancy that!

She guides them over to me and Nasrin and heads back to reception after both decline a beverage – although Elle looks like she could do with a hit of caffeine. They both do.

I rush through introductions and lead them out of the line of prying eyes into the conference room – the room *without* the whiteboard that's covered in their personal details. No need to share how the sausage is made – or, rather, the HEAs.

'So,' says Nasrin, kicking us off. 'First off, just want to say I'm a *massive* fan,' she tells Leo.

The professional that I am, I resist the urge to roll my eyes, flick her under the table, and say, 'For fuck's sake, Nas!'

He offers her a guarded smile. 'Uh, thanks.'

'Now,' I say to redirect his attention. 'I understand Elle filled you in on who we are and how we're connected to... well, *you*.'

He nods and takes her hand, and they share a glance laden with affection. And from this brief exchange, I *know*. A match has been made. Typically, I'd be rejoicing, but we're so far from being out of the proverbial woods, we could build a log cabin from where we're sitting.

‘Good,’ I say, and their eyes return to me, both sets wary but tempered with hope. It’s now up to me to instil confidence that Paloma’s plan – the *agency’s* plan – will work.

‘Here’s what we’re going to do.’

Just as Poppy says, ‘Here’s what we’re going to do,’ the door opens and in walks a striking raven-haired woman.

‘Hello, I’m Paloma Martinez-Pérez,’ she says, shaking our hands in turn, ‘head of client relations. Thank you for coming in.’

I look over at Poppy, who seems momentarily startled. ‘Right, so, Paloma has been working with me and Nasrin to solve your predicament,’ she explains.

‘Yes,’ says Paloma as she sits at the head of the table, ‘and we’re thinking we should lean into the long-lost lovers angle, dip into your past, post some old photographs, do an interview or two... all of which will be to gain sympathy from the public before we promote your joint collection.’

With every strategy she presents, every word out of her mouth, my nervousness intensifies. The last thing I want is for our past relationship to become fodder for the press, especially the tabloids.

‘What do you thi—’

Two sharp knocks interrupt Paloma and a twenty-something woman with a bright-green fauxhawk pops her head in the door.

‘Yes?’ says Paloma.

‘Sorry to disturb you, but I think you’ll want to see this,’ she says. From her accent, I’d say she’s a Dubliner.



She enters the room and reaches for the remote in the centre of the table, pressing a button and turning towards a screen that descends from the ceiling. Seconds later, a television studio appears onscreen, a familiar pair of morning television hosts sitting upright on their custom sofa and looking at the camera.

‘And as promised,’ says Lydia Torrent, a plastic smile on her plastic face, both framed by her blonde helmet of hair, ‘we’re joined by supermodel, Franzia, who has an update on her love life. Welcome, Franzia.’

The image freezes. ‘Before we watch the interview,’ says the woman with the green fauxhawk, ‘just a heads up that Franzia has been all over socials for the past hour. Apparently, after she left Lorenzo’s shop, she live-streamed her Uber ride to the studio and is saying that you’ – she looks straight at me – ‘are an interloper in her engagement to you,’ she says, looking at Leo.

Leo and I exchange a worried look and I feel the swell of nausea. How likely is it that the agency’s plan has accounted for a supermodel going on a social media rampage?

‘Fair warning,’ she adds, ‘this *could* be brutal. Oh, sorry, I’m Mia. I work here. I do socials and stuff.’

I lift my hand, giving her a limp wave.

‘Ready?’ she asks, and I nod, even though I am far from ready. I feel the squeeze of Leo’s hand and Mia unfreezes the playback onscreen.

It’s a short interview – maybe five minutes – but by the end of it, I feel nauseous. And not the vaguely queasy, lightheaded kind, but the I-am-properly-going-to-vomit-right-now kind. I pop out of my seat, my hand clapped over my mouth. Poppy seems to grasp what’s happening, because she stands and says, ‘This way.’ She flings open the door and quickly ushers me across the office to the loo.

I *just* make it, retching bile into the bowl, as I’ve yet to eat anything since lunchtime yesterday. Poppy waits discreetly outside the cubicle – I didn’t even have time to close the door.

Eventually, the stomach spasms subside. I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, flush the toilet, and stand slowly, my hands planted on the cubicle walls either side of me to steady myself.

When I exit the cubicle, Poppy is waiting for me, holding out a wad of paper towels. ‘You okay?’ she asks.

Not trusting my voice, I shake my head. How can I be okay when I have just been eviscerated on national television? Franzia did all but call me a whore and I’d bet there are a fair whack of people across Britain who now share that belief.

And why? For falling back in love with a man I never really stopped loving in the first place.

There was also the photograph. Somewhere in the middle of the interview, Franzia held up an A4-sized picture of me and Leo, half-dressed and enveloped in each other’s arms, his mouth – lips parted – a millimetre from my cheek. It was from the *Nouveau* shoot with Tally.

*Leaked or stolen?* I wondered in the moment. No matter. It had the desired impact – more evidence for Franzia’s brutal attack on my character, all in the name of furthering her own bloody career!

As if being uber wealthy, featured on every fashion magazine cover, and walking for all the major designers weren’t enough... Nope. Franzia appearing on *Hello Britain*, spouting her sob story, was simply to curry favour with Eternity Bride, the world’s most exclusive bridal fashion house. According to Leo, she’s ‘this close’ to being named their brand ambassador in a lucrative five-year contract.

Eternity Bride. Hah! Eternity *Bridezilla*, more like.

And there’s no way *Nouveau* is going to run that feature now, not after the bad press and certainly not after their photograph has been leaked six months ahead of publication.

At the sink, I rinse my mouth and dab my face with the paper towel. Looking at myself in the mirror, I’m shocked at how translucent my skin is. I look like I’ve seen a ghost. I look like I *am* a ghost.

There's a soft tap at the bathroom door.

'Elle?'

Oh god, it's Leo.

'I'll leave you two alone,' says Poppy, making her way to the door.

'Wait.'

She does, regarding me thoughtfully.

'I just...'

Her expression softens. 'It's a lot to take in, especially all at once,' she says, understanding completely.

'Yes.'

'I can stay if you like?'

I'd love to take her up on it, but this is something I need to do on my own. In the fucking loo of all places.

'That's okay. But thank you.'

She reaches out and gives my arm a squeeze. 'I'll be right outside if you need me.'

'Okay. And Poppy? Could you please call Cassie for me? I think I'm going to need my sister.'

'I texted her earlier,' she replies with a kind smile. 'She's on her way.' It bolsters me somewhat, knowing that Cass is coming, especially as my heart is about to be shredded into a zillion pieces. *Again.*

Because it's plainly evident that Leo and I can't pursue a relationship – *definitely* not right now and possibly not ever. Not if we want to come out of this with our careers intact, or even this side of 'in tatters'.

Poppy leaves and Leo enters, the space immediately feeling smaller now it's filled with his larger-than-life presence.

'Hey, are you okay?'

'No,' I answer honestly.

He comes to me in an instant, enfolding me in his arms. Leaning my head against his chest one last time, I listen to the rapid beat of his heart.

‘That was rough,’ he says, his voice burdened by the heft of what we’ve just seen.

*This is going to be even rougher*, I think.

‘Leo,’ I whisper hoarsely.

He releases me, his hands resting gently on my upper arms.

‘I don’t think I can do this,’ I say.

I *know* I can’t, but that’s so much harder to say out loud. We’ve only just found each other again.

‘Elle?’ Poppy is at the door. I huff out a sigh, frustrated that in the past twenty-four hours there has barely been enough time to breathe, let alone process a decade’s worth of feelings.

‘Yes?’ I call out.

‘Cassie’s here.’

‘Thank you,’ I reply noncommittally, because even though I want my sister here, I want her here for *after* – after the hearts are broken, when I need her to pick up the pieces.

‘Do you want me to go?’ Leo asks quietly.

‘No,’ I reply emphatically, my voice betraying my decision before I have a chance to stop it.

‘Elle?’ Poppy again.

‘Yes?’ I shout tetchily. Can’t she leave me be, even for a moment? Doesn’t she know what I’m trying to do in here? It’s hard enough without—

‘I think you need to hear this,’ she insists, slicing through my thoughts. ‘Leo too.’

He and I exchange a look.

‘Give us a minute,’ he calls. His hand lifts to my face. ‘Look, I know this is a shit show right now, but it’s *our* shit show, okay?’

A laugh bursts free.

‘Why is that funny?’ he asks, confusion and amusement melding on his face.

‘I have no idea,’ I reply. ‘This is just... bananas.’

‘It is fucked up,’ he says solemnly.

‘That too. Fucked up bananas.’

‘But, Elle, I mean it, I am not going anywhere. We’re in this together and we’ll work it out, okay?’

When I don’t reply right away, his gaze intensifies. I try to answer, but I can’t form the words – not when my head and my heart are locked in battle. The smart thing would be to walk away and do what I can to salvage my career. Same for Leo.

But my heart?

My heart wants Leo. It always has.

‘Hey,’ he says, ‘what’s going on in there?’ His eyes flick to my forehead, then meet mine again, and it’s clear he’s worried.

*Come on, Elle, be smart. You’ve worked so hard to get where you are – Leo has too. You don’t want to lose that now.*

I heave out a weary sigh. ‘I just don’t see how this can work.’

‘That’s what we have them for,’ he says, nodding towards the door. ‘It’s their job to help get us out of this mess.’

‘No, that’s— I mean *us*, Leo.’

‘What?’ He snorts out a sardonic laugh as if I’ve made a sick joke. A moment later, his expression morphs into realisation. ‘Wait, what?’ he whispers.

I swallow, wishing my throat weren’t so dry. ‘The only way we can come back from this professionally is to part ways – to say we’re sorry and end things – *publicly*. You know I’m right.’

‘Actually no, I don’t. Because you’re not right – not about this.’

‘Leo—’

‘No, I’ve told you, we’re not doing that. We not letting other people stand in the way of us being together – we’re not letting *anything* stand in our way. I did that once and I’ve regretted it ever since.’

‘Okay,’ I say, adamant that he just needs to see reason, ‘let’s say we do stay together and we both become fashion pariahs – we *never* live down the scandal – or, let’s be honest, *I* never live it down, because that’s the way these things usually go – and you end up resenting me for dragging you down or I end up resenting you because your career survives – or worse, *thrives* – and mine doesn’t. Either way, we end up resentful and miserable with our careers in the toilet. Is that what you want?’

By the time I’ve finished, I’m shouting, my voice reverberating off the tiled floor, but rather than cowering under the weight of my rant, Leo looks me in the eye and says, ‘I just want you.’

‘But... but...’ I splutter. ‘What if it all goes to shit? Like, properly to shit.’

‘But what if it doesn’t?’ he says, his eyes filled with love.

‘What if it doesn’t?’ I echo, my voice barely above a whisper.

*What if it doesn’t?*

‘Exactly.’ He moves closer. ‘I lost you once because I was a coward—’

‘You weren’t – you were young and just trying to do the right thing.’

‘I was a coward – young and good-intentioned, sure – but I still could have made better choices. Look, that’s water under the bridge now.’ He slips his arms around my waist and pulls me towards him, staring at me intensely. ‘I am never going to be that man again. I will never lose you again. I love you, Ellie. I always have.’

‘Really?’

Now he laughs, his eyes creasing at the corners. ‘Yes, really. I love you. And you and me together, we can face anything – whatever’s happening out there right now, whatever else comes our way. We’ve got this – *together*.’

I have no words to convey the rush of emotions engulfing me, so I stand on tiptoes and press my mouth to his.

It’s a soft kiss, gentle and sweet, and I’m so overcome, my eyes well up. Minutes ago, I was adamant we had to end things, and now... now he’s told me he loves me – in the loo. The most romantic moment of my life and we’re in the loo!

I start sniggering, only we’re still kissing, and Leo pulls away as I surrender to the laughter, enjoying how freeing it is.

‘Something you’d like to share?’ he asks, his brows raised.

I flap one hand about. ‘Look where we are right now.’

His eyes dart about.

‘Yeah, not the most romantic place for a declaration of love.’

‘No.’

‘I promise I’ll make it up to you,’ he says.

‘I’d like that.’

His gaze falls away and he suddenly seems shy. I stop laughing.

‘What?’ I ask softly, trailing my fingertips down his cheek.

‘It’s just... you know.’

‘Oh right, yes.’ I expel a sigh. ‘I suppose we need to find out what their plan is. Like you said, they’re professionals and it’s their job to help us out of this mess.’

He chuckles. ‘Well, yes, *that*, but I meant...’ He catches his bottom lip between his teeth, then releases it and I finally understand.

‘*Oh*, right – that!’

‘Yes, that.’

‘Mmm. So...’ I grin at him.

‘God, woman, now you’re just torturing me on purpose.’ He drops his hands from the small of my back and starts to pull away.

‘No, wait,’ I say, clasping his chin between my fingers. I look him square in the eye. ‘I love you too, Leo Jones.’

He sighs, his eyes closing for a moment, and when they open, they’re glossed with tears. I really cannot believe that minutes ago I was going to end things – what a muppet.

‘I just need to catch my breath for a sec,’ he says, holding me tightly. I lean my cheek against his chest, listening to his heartbeat again, only this time, I’m not sad or afraid.

I’m in love.

I know that now. I am totally and utterly in love with Leo Jones and, even with everything else that’s going on, it’s so much sweeter the second time around.



‘What’s going on in there?’ Paloma asks, stepping up beside me. I could pretend I have X-ray vision and retort like a smart-arse, but I don’t.

‘What I *hope* is happening is that Leo is convincing Elle to stick this out.’

Paloma looks at me, horrified. ‘You really think she’d call it off? The relationship, everything?’

‘Based solely on the past fifteen minutes? Unfortunately, yes.’

‘Well, bollocks,’ says Paloma, being uncharacteristically common. ‘I’ve become quite invested in these two.’

‘Really?’ The word is out of my mouth before I can temper my amazement.

‘Do you really think I’d work at a matchmaking agency if I didn’t champion our clients’ love stories?’ she asks, a smile twitching at the corners of her mouth.

‘Sorry,’ I say. And I am. Paloma and I may have been colleagues for five years, but this is the first time we’ve actually worked together on a case. I’ve clearly underestimated how much she cares about what we do here.

She shrugs. ‘It’s all right. With Sask being “The Swan” – always serene and magnanimous – I’ve had to be the tough one. Perhaps that makes me “The Crow”.’

If I were drinking something, this would be a spit-take moment.

‘Wait, so you know the rest of us call her “The Swan”?’ I don’t dare even *mention* ‘The Crow’ comment, but wait until I tell the others! George may wet himself.

Paloma’s laugh is low and throaty. ‘Of course, and so does she.’ She laughs again, louder this time. ‘Your face, Poppy.’

Elle’s raised voice draws our attention, although I can’t make out what she’s saying. Paloma and I exchange a worried look, both suddenly sobered. It’s a reminder that there’s far more at stake now than when we called Elle and Leo into the agency, barely an hour ago.

And what is *with* that, this case changing direction on an hourly basis? It’s certainly keeping me on my toes.

But it’s nothing compared to what Elle and Leo are dealing with – navigating their rekindled relationship *and* the risk to their careers. This could be a death knell if we don’t handle it exactly right. It was challenging enough when this was a ‘simple’ love triangle. But after the TV interview *and* the shocking news Marie just brought us, this case is careening towards the edge of a cliff.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Saskia leave her office and go into the conference room.

‘Do you think we should...?’ asks Paloma, indicating the toilet door.

I shake my head. ‘We should wait,’ I reply, sort-of pulling rank. Though, technically, this is still my case. I glance over to gauge her reaction, but she seems to have accepted my decision.

The truth is I’d *love* to barge in there and drag the two lovers out so we can get back to untangling this mess, but this is a critical moment for them and I’ve already interrupted them twice.

Eventually, the door opens.

‘Sorry to keep y’all waiting,’ says Leo. Elle is silent but gives me a close-lipped smile.

‘Poppy, we’ll see you all in there,’ Paloma says, stepping away.

‘Hey, you two,’ I say to Leo and Elle.

Looking between them, I’m reasonably confident what they’ve decided, but I’d like to hear it from them.

‘Before we go any further, I need to know where you’re at. And before you tell me, I’ll add that no matter what else happens, I’m on your side and I’ll work my bum off to give you the best possible outcome. Okay?’

\* \* \*

*Elle*

‘Thank you, Poppy,’ I say. ‘That’s very reassuring.’ When she and Cassie revealed yesterday that they’d been conspiring, I was livid, but now... Well, Poppy and the agency may be our only hope.

‘Yeah, that means the world to us,’ says Leo.

‘So, where are you at?’ Poppy asks, looking between us.

‘We want to be together, so we need your help to figure this out,’ says Leo.

‘Elle?’ she asks. ‘That’s what you want too?’

I nod vigorously. ‘Yes.’ I look up at Leo and he gives me a wink.

‘That’s brilliant,’ says Poppy, grinning at us. ‘I’m thrilled for both of you, really.’

‘She made me work for it, though,’ Leo teases.

‘Excuse me,’ I say, backhanding him lightly in the stomach.

‘You did, but you’re totally worth it.’ He holds me close with one arm and smacks a kiss on the top of my head.

‘Right, so...’ says Poppy, the smile falling from her face, ‘now that’s settled, new information has come to light.’

‘Since we were in the bathroom? For real?’ Leo asks.

‘Yes and it’s... it’s not good. Come on, let’s get you into the conference room so we can fill you in.’

As Poppy leads us across the office, I lean close to Leo. ‘God, now what? We’ve already been chased by the paps and eviscerated on morning television.’

‘I have no idea.’

‘Well, we weren’t in the loo long enough for aliens to invade,’ I quip.

‘Or for a plague of locusts to descend,’ he replies.

When we enter the room, conversation ceases and all eyes swing towards us. God, whatever’s happened in the past fifteen minutes, it must be terrible news. The mood in here is markedly sombre.

Cassie rushes over and hugs me.

‘You all right, Bean?’ she asks quietly. I nod inside her embrace and after a tight squeeze, she releases me, then scrutinises me closely. ‘Wait, you look *happy*.’ A grin breaks across my face, despite the gloomy atmosphere, and I nod vigorously. ‘Oh my god! Really?’

A loud, ‘Ahem,’ bursts our bubble and we both look towards Paloma. ‘Sorry to interrupt...’ She doesn’t seem particularly sorry. ‘If you could please take a seat.’

I sit next to Leo, Cassie sits beside me, and both reach for one of my hands. Whatever we’re about to discover, at least we’re in this together.

‘And just quickly, introductions,’ says Paloma. ‘This is Saskia, the founder of the agency.’ An attractive, stylish woman in her mid-forties smiles at me across the table. ‘And our investigator, Marie.’ Marie is a woman of about seventy who’s even tinier than I am and, belying her age, is dressed like a throw-back to the punk era. Curiously, she’s also

holding an unlit cigarette between her fingers as if she's smoking.

'Marie has made a pertinent – and timely – discovery,' says Paloma. 'Marie, over to you.'

Paloma sits next to Cassie and we all watch as Marie walks to the head of the table with a slight swagger. She may be diminutive, but she certainly knows how to command a room. She presses a button on the remote she's holding and the screen above her head fills with an image of Franzia on the catwalk at Leo's fashion show.

I draw in a sharp breath.

'You all know this person as Franzia,' says Marie in a thick French accent. After a brief dramatic pause, she continues. 'But you probably do not know that she is actually... Karen Whitehead.'

Marie advances to the next image: a high school-aged girl, pretty, plump, and fresh-faced, posing with a girlfriend, their school uniforms askew and both holding melting ice cream cones.

'What the hell?'

My head swivels towards Leo. 'You didn't know? About her real name?' I ask.

'Uh-uh,' he says, his eyes riveted to the screen. He blinks a couple of times and shakes his head, then meets my eye. 'To be honest, I've barely spent any time with her that wasn't staged.'

'Right, of course. And where is she from, Karen Whitehead?' I ask Marie, thinking of Franzia's all-over-the-place accent. 'Given her real name, I'm guessing it's *not* somewhere in eastern Europe?'

'Shropshire,' Marie replies.

I bark out a laugh. 'Oh my god. So that means "Franzia the supermodel" is a construct, essentially a *character*!' I say, my voice steeped in mockery. 'Oh.' I realise what I've said and

turn to face Leo, AKA Lorenzo. ‘Sorry, that was thoughtless of me.’

He gives me a tight-lipped smile. I *really* didn’t mean to disparage him *or* lump him in with the Franzias of this world.

‘*Oui, c’est vrai,*’ says Marie, replying to my rhetorical question. ‘And,’ she continues, ‘we have all seen the public Franzia, but how many have seen *this* side of her?’

She advances to the next image of Franzia, one in which she’s stabbing a finger at a cowering makeup artist, her face contorted in fury.

‘Oh my god,’ I say under my breath.

‘Oh, wow,’ says Leo. I glance over and he’s clearly bewildered. ‘I mean, she was pissed when she came to the store this morning, but *that’s* out of control. Do you think this is a one-off or...?’ he asks Marie.

‘My sources tell me that this’ – she points to the screen – ‘it happens all the time. But never in front of the designers or photographers.’

‘I’m *glad* you’ve never seen this side of her,’ Cassie says to Leo. ‘She sounds like a right mare.’

There’s something in the way Cass says this that troubles me, then realisation dawns. ‘Wait, did you know? About Franzia?’ I ask her.

‘I... Yes.’

‘For how long?’

Her eyes flick towards Poppy and Nasrin across the table. ‘Er, we found out after Paris,’ she says, ‘but it didn’t change anything about your situation, so—’

‘So, you kept it from me?’

Cassie nods, her shoulders stiffening – possibly bracing herself for a verbal blow. But how can I be angry with her? She brought me and Leo back together.

‘It’s okay,’ I say. ‘I think I understand.’

Cassie is visibly relieved. ‘Thanks, Bean,’ she whispers.

‘*Bon*, there is more,’ says Marie. I don’t know if I can take any more revelations. This has already been a *day*. Reluctantly, I return my attention to the odd little French woman.

She advances to the next photograph – one of a smallish balding man wearing an expensive suit and – wouldn’t you know it – a certain supermodel is hanging off his arm. ‘*This* is Franzia’s *real* fiancé,’ says Marie, ‘French financier, Jean Trudeau.’

‘What the fuck?’ Cassie and I ask in unison.

‘Wait, what?!’ Leo asks.

‘Ah, *oui*, Franzia is already engaged – for two years now. But, uh... Trudeau, he is married and until his wife agrees to a divorce, the engagement remains a secret.’

‘So, she announced she’s engaged to me to cover up her engagement to *him*?’ Leo asks. ‘What the actual fuck?’

‘Yes!’ I exclaim. ‘Why not just lay low with the French bloke until he’s divorced?’

‘Why else? Like most things in life, it is about money.’ I’m not sure I subscribe to Marie’s life philosophy, but she has me completely captivated.

‘A fidelity clause in the marriage,’ she continues. ‘He cheats, the wife, she gets an enormous settlement. *Mais*, she gets an even bigger one if they stay married for ten years. *Alors*... the wife, she has the control, *non*?’

‘So, when is the ten years up?’ I ask.

‘Six weeks from now,’ replies Marie.

‘Six weeks?’ I turn towards Leo again and the colour has drained from his face.

‘Leo,’ I say, ‘*six weeks*. This means all that rubbish about being a brand ambassador...’

‘It was a lie... She was just using me – well, I knew she was. We were using each other, but...’

‘I’m so, so sorry,’ I say, grasping his hand even tighter. ‘I mean, who *are* these people?’

‘Elle, Leo, there’s something else,’ says Poppy.

Leo and I exchange another look. ‘Oh god, it *is* aliens,’ I say, right as he says, ‘Can only be the locusts.’ Despite the gravity of the situation, we share a mirthless smile.

‘Okay, lay it on us,’ says Leo, dropping my hand and throwing his arms out wide.

Marie goes to speak, but Poppy cuts her off. ‘Before Marie tells you what else we’ve just learnt, I want you to know we have a way out of this.’

‘Yes, we are fully committed to helping you achieve your happily ever after,’ Saskia chimes in.

*Our happily ever after...* Right now, that’s difficult to envision. Though I suppose Leo and I *did* just declare our love for each other – even if it was in the loo. At least there’s that.

‘Okay?’ Poppy asks.

‘Like I said, lay it on us,’ says Leo. He inhales deeply, obviously girding himself for what’s to come. If only something as simple as taking a deep breath would help me, but my heart is racing and my throat feels like the Sahara.

‘Marie?’ says Poppy, handing back to her.

‘*Alors,*’ says Marie, raising her hands as if making an offering to the gods, ‘here, we have a faux engagement with the model, herself a fabrication, *and* she is already engaged to the billionaire.’

Good god. She could get a job as a psychic in a carnival with all these theatrics. Ladies and gentlemen, presenting *Madame* Marie! All she needs is a scarf and a crystal ball.

‘And who do you think is behind all this?’ Marie asks, pointing around the table with her unlit cigarette.

Leo raises his hand as if we’re in school. ‘Well, my aunt is – sorry, my publicist. She’s the one who arranged the engagement, but we all know that, right?’



Marie's expression sours. 'Ah, *oui*, of course – she arranged the engagement. But it is bigger, *non*?'

*Just get to the point!* My hands twitch with the urge to leap up and shake the little French woman by the shoulders. This isn't a theatrical production, this is my life! Mine and Leo's. Can't she just hurry the fuck up?

Thankfully, Paloma steps in, echoing my exact thoughts. 'Marie, if you could please just get to the point.'

She tosses an annoyed look towards Paloma, then presses the button on the remote to reveal a collage of photographs and graphics that can only mean one thing.

Oh. My. God.

There is complete silence in the room as we all stare at the screen, the elements clicking into place. But even when it seems irrefutable, how we've got to this point, I still can't believe it. Conspiracy theorists couldn't have dreamt this up.

And poor Leo!

'Does this mean...?' he says. 'So, Aunt Serena...?'

His questions dangle unfinished, and his brows knit together, his mouth hanging open in disbelief.

'Are you all right?' I ask.

His eyes remain fixed on the screen, but he manages to shake his head. 'No, no I'm not all right. Can someone please explain this to me because I'm having trouble getting my head around it?'

'But of course, you see—' Marie begins, but Paloma talks over her.

'Thank you, Marie, I'll take it from here.'

Paloma stands and crosses to the screen while Marie strolls over to the doorframe. She leans against it and inhales from her unlit cigarette. I'd thought it was merely a prop she was using to punctuate her points, but apparently not.

'Right,' says Paloma, and I shift my focus to her. 'We have three key players in this plot.'

It's unclear if she means 'storyline' or 'ploy' but both apply.

‘Karen Whitehead, or Franzia; the French financier, Trudeau; and Serena “Ser” Robbins. As we all know, Ser is Leo’s publicist. What we didn’t know until today – and thank you to Marie for this additional intel – is that she’s also *Franzia’s* publicist.’

Ah, so I have deduced correctly. When I glance at Leo again, he’s turned ashen, almost greenish. I cast my eyes about for a bin in case *he’s* about to vomit, spying one in the corner.

‘Hold on,’ he says, ‘that can’t be right. Aunt Serena would have told me.’ He looks to me. ‘She would have told me.’

Feeling helpless, all I can do is offer a commiserating smile.

‘It was hard to determine,’ says Marie from the door. She pushes off the doorframe and swaggers back to the head of the table. ‘But it is true. *Madame* Robbins masked the connection with a... How do you say...?’ Her hand flutters in the air as she tries to find the right word. ‘...an intermediate.’

‘Intermediary,’ chorus several people around the table.

‘*Oui*, as I said.’ Marie steps in front of Paloma and stands directly under the screen. ‘But *this* connection is at the heart of this arrangement,’ she says, drawing the line between Ser and Trudeau. ‘Robbins and Trudeau, they know each other for thirty years, possibly longer. She was acting in *his* interest all along.’

‘But she wouldn’t...’

Again, Leo’s words trail off, and no wonder – this woman is a close family friend and he’s known her his whole life.

‘She would and she did,’ says Paloma. ‘In fact, it was Serena Robbins who took an obscure girl from a working-class family, who had striking looks coupled with dogged ambition, and jettisoned her into the supermodel stratosphere.’

‘Wait, so how long has Serena been Franzia’s publicist?’ asks Leo, seeming even more baffled.

‘Six years, give or take...’ Paloma responds.

‘Oh my god. I was the ring-in. She was using me as a red herring. She didn’t give a fuck about furthering my career.’

‘Leo, that may not be the case,’ I offer.

‘You’re being too kind,’ he says, insistent. To himself, he says, ‘Deep down, I knew something was off and now I know why.’

‘And don’t forget: the real fiancé is Robbins’ lifelong friend,’ says Marie, brows raised. ‘She may even have introduced them.’

At this, she shrugs, her lips pursed, so I’m assuming this is conjecture, not fact – though it tracks with the rest of this morning’s revelations.

Serena Robbins better hope we never meet again. I may be little, but I am *fierce* when it comes to protecting my loved ones. I once kicked a much older boy in the bollocks because he made fun of Cassie’s boobs at school. Totally worth getting detention for.

‘*La situation,*’ Marie continues, ‘*est très compliquée.* This is why it takes me so long to untether the threads.’

‘Untangle,’ corrects Nasrin.

‘*Oui,* as I said. Many connections, many *lies.* It is a giant mess.’

‘A giant mess,’ Leo echoes wanly, and I rub a hand along his arm. I wish there was something more I could do. I can only hope the agency really does have a way out of this.

A phone starts ringing and, as often happens in a group when a phone rings, everyone checks theirs despite the distinctive ringtone.

‘Mine,’ says Leo feebly, reaching into his front pocket. He swallows hard when he sees who’s calling. He holds it up for us to see. ‘It’s Aunt Serena.’

‘Wait as long as possible, then answer it,’ says Paloma, already on the move and heading to the door. She signals for Leo to follow, and I instinctively rise from the table to go with him.

We follow her into the office next door, where she snatches a pad off the desk and scribbles something. She hands it to Leo as he answers.

‘Hello, Aunt Serena.’

I read the note over his shoulder.

*You have a new publicist – me.*

I look to Paloma and she nods assuredly. Leo is listening to Ser and although I can’t make out everything she’s saying, I detect her soothing tone and catch snatches of reassurances – ‘everything’s under control’ comes up at least twice. Eventually, Leo must tire of her shit, and he sets the phone on the desk, pressing the speakerphone button.

‘Aunt Serena,’ he says, interrupting her faux-soothing monologue about his ‘best interests’. She prattles on a few moments longer until he raises his voice. ‘Aunt Serena, *stop talking.*’ She does. ‘Listen to me. I’m in a meeting right now with my new publicist and you’re on speakerphone.’

‘But you can’t—’

‘Nope. It’s my turn to talk.’ His rage infuses the air in the spacious office and I’m barely aware that Poppy joins us.

‘I know what you did,’ he says, his voice a low growl. Ser is so quiet, I wonder if the call has dropped, but Leo continues regardless. ‘I know that Franzia is someone you created, just like Lorenzo, and all about the French billionaire *and* how they’re engaged. I know you *used* me.’

‘Leo, listen... *please.*’

He huffs out a breath from his nose, his complexion now red with fury. ‘Go on then. Make your excuses. How about I roll camera so we can submit your performance to the Oscars?’

‘That’s unfair—’

‘Is it?’

‘Hey, I worked my arse off to get you where you are.’ Ah, there she is – the cutthroat publicist who creates personas from

thin air. ‘And now you’re accusing me of collusion? What the f—’

‘Serena, this is Paloma Martinez-Pérez. I’m advising you that your former client has now engaged my services and will no longer be needing yours. We’ll have the paperwork to you by close of business today, New York time.’

‘So, you won’t let me explain myself?’

‘That won’t be necessary,’ Paloma replies. ‘My investigator has been particularly thorough.’

‘Your investigat—’

‘Yes, and fair warning, we are launching a counter campaign. You may want to warn Ms Whitehead and Mr Trudeau. Good day.’ She reaches across her desk and ends the call. ‘Right,’ she says with a broad smile, ‘let’s get to work.’

‘Wait,’ I say. ‘Are you okay?’ I ask Leo.

He nods, expelling a heavy sigh. ‘Yeah... yeah, I am. But, just one question,’ he says to Paloma.

She lifts her brows inquisitively.

‘You’re not *really* my publicist, are you?’

‘I absolutely am – that is, until you can find someone who won’t compromise your best interests *and* of the calibre you’ll require – you will *both* require – once we sort out this current situation.’

Leo and I share a glance and I suspect he’s thinking the same as me.

‘Paloma,’ I say, broaching the subject with caution, ‘it’s just that—’

‘Oh, forgive me,’ she says, that winsome smile making another appearance. It’s clear that on some level, she’s enjoying this. ‘Before the agency, I was head of European campaigns for Four Corners PR.’

Wowser – only one of the top PR agencies in the world.

‘Oh, wow. That’s awesome,’ says Leo.

Paloma chuckles at that and so does Poppy. ‘Shall we?’ she asks, indicating for us to vacate her office.

As we move next door to the conference room, I take Leo aside.

‘Are you sure you’re all right?’

‘About Aunt Serena?’

‘Yes.’

He rubs a hand along his jawline. ‘It’s a lot, and I’m going to have to talk to my mom...’

‘Yeah, of course.’

‘You’ve got to figure out stuff with Cassie, too. She kept quite a bit from you.’

‘Cass and I will be okay – we’re sisters. Sisters can forgive almost anything.’

‘I’m glad.’ His eyes twinkle as he dips his head for a quick kiss. ‘Because, if she hadn’t done all this, we wouldn’t be together.’

‘And there’s that. Your *aunty*, however...’

Anger clouds his expression. ‘I don’t know if I can think of her like that any more – as my aunt. I wonder how my mom will take it. Not well, is my guess.’ He stares past me, his scowl deepening.

‘Look,’ I say, hoping I can be *helpful* when I feel so *helpless*, ‘we just need to get through this “counter campaign”, whatever it may be, then you can take the time you need to process everything.’

He abandons his thoughts and fixes me with a piercing look. ‘I’m really glad you’re here. Not just ’cause you’re you and I love you, but it’s been rough and it’s probably going to get rougher for a while, and yes, I have my mom and Brandy, but with you... It’s just... I wouldn’t want anyone else by my side through all this.’

A thousand doubts and just as many niggling questions are swept away in an instant. I may have acknowledged I love

him, but now I know, without a single doubt, that I would never let him navigate something like this on his own.

And although I have my sister, like Leo has his family, I feel the exact same way about him. He's my *person*. Only the words don't come, as I'm engulfed by emotion. Instead, I stand on my tiptoes and wrap my arms around his neck and whisper, 'Me too.'

\* \* \*

*Poppy*

Giving Elle and Leo a few moments alone, I follow Paloma back into the conference room, finding a hum of activity. Cassie and Nasrin have their heads together, Marie is working on her laptop, sucking on her ever-present cigarette, Saskia is taking a call, and Anita has joined us and is taking coffee orders. I ask for a flat white.

Saskia waves Paloma and me over.

'Brilliant, Anjali, thank you. Speak soon and love to Gordon and the children.' She ends the call. '*Nouveau* is on board.'

Paloma, showing a minor chink in her typically flawless armour, is visibly relieved. 'Oh, thank god.'

'Anji loves the idea and has promised she can get Amelia Windsor to sign off.'

'And the leaked photograph?'

'Their website and socials have lit up since this morning. The leak actually works *for* us.'

'Brilliant. Thank you, Sask. That could have been the fly in the ointment.'

'Sorry, could you possibly fill me in?' I ask, taking extra care not to sound stropic. 'I feel like I'm missing something.'

I'm missing all of it, as I have no idea what they're talking about other than a new item on the recently wheeled-in whiteboard that reads '*Nouveau*' and is underlined three times.



‘Soz, Poppy,’ says Saskia. ‘Anjali is the features editor at *Nouveau* and our old school chum. She’s the one who’s been helping us on this case.’

‘Mmm-hmm.’ I knew that part. ‘And what exactly have we asked Anjali to do?’

‘*Nouveau* is changing their approach to the Bliss Designs–Lorenzo feature,’ Paloma explains. ‘They’ll embrace the long-lost love angle *and* they’re bringing forward the publication date. It will go out in the summer issue in June.’

‘Wow, nicely done.’

Paloma smiles, clearly chuffed. ‘Why, thank you,’ she says with a modest head tilt. ‘Now we just need *Hello Britain* to fall into line. We’ve asked for a spot on this Saturday’s show.’

‘This Saturday?’ I ask, thinking of Jacinda’s plan to move Shaz into Lauren’s (whether she likes it or not).

‘Yes, is that a problem?’ Paloma asks.

I give them my Poppy-the-Professional smile. ‘Not at all. I just need to move a couple of things around.’ As in, move the moving of my bestie into her girlfriend’s flat. Jacinda will not be pleased but, despite our new understanding, Paloma is still ‘The Crow’ and that makes her even scarier than Jass.

‘Sask,’ says Paloma, ‘I’ll need your help on a contract for Leo. He’s signing over his publicity management to me in the interim.’ Saskia was once a solicitor and I’m reminded yet again the breadth and depth of the skills in our small (but mighty) team at the Ever After Agency.

As I’m basking in thoughts of how very special we are, in walk our clients – accurate now that Paloma is signing *Leo*. ‘Hello, you two,’ I chirrup. ‘Let me fill you in.’

‘Fill us in?’ asks Elle, looking to Leo. ‘We were just with you two minutes ago.’

‘Ah, yes,’ says Nasrin, swivelling in her chair, ‘but things move quickly when we’re on the case.’

As if she’s been cued, Ursula pops her head in.

‘How are things with the “Elle and the Shoemaker” case?’ she says loudly. ‘Need anything?’

I can tell the exact moment she realises that both Elle *and* the shoemaker are present.

‘Oh, my apologies.’ Ursula’s face may be immobile, but her complexion is not impervious to blushing and she turns a fantastic shade of red before scuttling away.

I stifle a laugh right as Elle says, ‘Poppy, who was that woman and what did she say about a shoemaker?’

After Poppy explains the ins and outs of case names and Ursula's attachment to fairy tales (Elle and the Shoemaker – how clever!) she updates me and Leo on *Nouveau*.

‘Really?’ I ask, barely believing it. She nods, a satisfied smile on her face. ‘That’s brilliant.’ I look to Leo.

‘Thanks, Poppy, that’s awesome,’ he says, ‘and can you please thank your colleagues for us?’ We glance about the busy conference room and I’m impressed by how quickly they’ve come together to help us.

‘Of course,’ Poppy replies, ‘and I know Paloma will want to do some coaching ahead of the TV interview. She’s waiting on confirmation that you’re booked for Saturday morning, but knowing her and how many connections she has, that will come through shortly.’

‘Poppy...’ I say, turning back to her. I need to apologise for my behaviour yesterday but I’m not sure what to say.

‘You don’t need to say anything,’ she says, somehow understanding immediately. ‘It’s totally expected that you were thrown by everything I told you – and that was on top of reconnecting with this one,’ she says, nodding in Leo’s direction. I look up at him, studying his face.

I can’t *stop* looking at him. Is it going to be weird if I simply stare at him for minutes at a time? Because it’s very possible that will happen. A lot. While I’m staring at him, something comes to mind.

‘Can I ask a question?’ I ask them both.

‘Go for it,’ Poppy replies.

‘How did you two... you know, *coordinate*? With the Eurostar tickets?’

Poppy’s face breaks into a broad smile. ‘That I can’t take credit for I’m afraid.’

‘Umm...’ Leo rubs his hand along his jawline. ‘I *may* have a confession.’

‘Go on then,’ I say with a laugh. ‘What’s one more revelation in the midst of all this?’

‘You’re going to think I’m... well, some sort of creep.’

‘I will not. Don’t be silly.’

‘Okay... I’m pretty sure you will, but here goes...’

Poppy seems as interested in his explanation as I am and regards him with an amused smile.

‘So, the night of the H&M party—’

‘You mean the night another woman announced your engagement?’

‘Uh... ouch?’ he responds, my quip having hit its mark.

‘Sorry,’ I say, contrite. ‘I know that wasn’t your doing, but it may be difficult to *ever* think of that night as simply “the night of the H&M party”.’ I make the air quotes.

‘That’s reasonable,’ he replies, his expression softening. ‘We can come up with a code name or something.’

‘Or – and hear me out – after this conversation, we never speak of it again.’

This makes him laugh and he folds me into arms. ‘Oh, I’ve missed you,’ he whispers with affection, but I suspect he’s actually teasing me.

‘The train tickets, Leo,’ I prod, my voice muffled by his chest. He releases me.

‘Okay, here goes – for real this time. At the H— Oops, my bad – moving along. Anyhoo, Poppy mentioned you were travelling back to London on the Eurostar the next morning. I asked which class you’d be in – you know, uh... out of interest – and she said that *Nouveau* had sprung for first. From there, it was pretty easy.’

‘What was pretty easy?’ I ask, not getting it.

‘I went online that night and booked the fourth seat in every four-seat berth where three other passengers were already sitting.’

I shake my head, attempting to untangle what he just said. It takes a second, but I finally get it. ‘So, how many seats did you have to book?’

‘Only five.’

‘Five!’

‘I wanted to spend time with you. And I was due back in London, so...’

‘And how many sets of three people did you approach before finding us?’

‘Four.’

‘Hahaha!’ I’m not laughing *at* him, but at the hilarity of Leo wandering through train carriages, checking his tickets and finding strangers in those seats, then having to move on to the next berth. All in search of me.

*Oh.* He did that. For *me*. The laughter dies in my throat, and more tears well up.

‘Nicely done,’ says Poppy. I’ve been so transfixed by Leo’s story, I’d forgotten she was there.

‘Is that the sort of thing you would do – you know, to make a match?’ Leo asks her as I blink back the tears and compose myself.

‘Oh, you have no idea,’ she replies with an enigmatic smile. ‘If you’ll excuse me, I need to make a call.’

‘I like her,’ Leo says when she’s gone.

‘Mmm, I didn’t mind her at first, but then after she told me who she really was, I hated her a little...’

‘And now?’

‘How can I hate the woman who brought us back together?’ I ask, watching Poppy across the room.

‘Right, Elle, Leo...’ says Paloma.

I step back half a step, as I find her a *lot*. It’s like she carries this bubble of intensity with her, as if her personality is a physical being.

‘Good news,’ she says cheerily, ‘we’ve just had confirmation that *Hello Britain* will interview you on Saturday morning.’ My stomach clenches at Paloma’s so-called ‘good news’. ‘I know that’s a few days away, but we should begin preparations immediately.’

‘And by “preparations” you mean...?’ asks Leo.

‘Talking points, mostly,’ she replies. ‘And we’ll do several run throughs, obvs.’

‘Run throughs?’ I ask, hating how my voice squeaks. I sound like a scared little girl. Scratch that – when it comes to appearing on television, I *am* a scared little girl.

‘Mock interviews. I’ll play Lydia Torrent and you’ll play yourselves,’ she says with that self-assured smile of hers. ‘When can we get started? Does tomorrow work for you?’ She consults her phone. ‘I can block out the entire afternoon.’

‘Sounds great,’ replies Leo.

‘Yes, perfect,’ I squeak.

Perfectly *dreadful*. Not only have I just agreed to be on national television, but I’ve also signed up for hours and hours of Paloma.

She wanders off, barking orders at the nice woman from reception, Anita.

And now the atmosphere has returned to the room – or at least our little corner of it – I feel like I can breathe again.

‘She’s kinda intense,’ Leo whispers, breaking the tension and making me giggle. ‘And I’ve lived in New York for the past three years – I’ve met a *lot* of intense people. Paloma’s moved into the number two slot right behind this customer I had who would bring her entire entourage into the store, including her *psychic* – I’m not kidding – who chose which shoes she should buy based on the alignment of the planets – still not kidding – *and* her pet ferret, named Charlton Heston.’

I’m properly laughing now and when our eyes meet, his are creased at the corners and lit from within. With love.

‘You’re quite funny,’ I tease.

‘Sweetheart, I am *hilarious*.’ This kicks us off again and when I circle my arms around his waist and press my cheek to his chest, we’re both still shaking with laughter.

*You can do this, Elle. With Leo at your side, you can do anything.*

\* \* \*

*Poppy*

‘Hello, darling,’ says my husband when he answers the phone. I’d expected voicemail, as Tristan is often tied up in meetings during the day – I’d even prepared a witty message to leave – but this is way better.

‘Hi! So, I have news.’

‘About your case? All sorted?’

‘Mostly, just... I have to work on Saturday.’

‘Ahh, the day of the big intervention.’

‘Yep. My client is appearing on *Hello Britain* and I need to be there to support her.’

‘Ah, I see.’

‘I suppose we could do the Shaz thing next weekend. Or not at all. I’m still not sure how I feel about it.’

‘Darling, you know how Jass can be when her mind is set.’

‘Mmm, true. Hey, can you pretend that *you* had something come up on Saturday? A work thing?’

‘You mean *lie* to one of my closest friends?’

‘Yep.’

He chuckles. ‘Er, no.’

‘*Please.*’ He chuckles again and I exhale a loud sigh. ‘Okay, I’ll call Jass.’

‘I must dash, but good luck!’

I make the next call *hoping* for voicemail.

‘You’ve just caught me,’ says Jass, not even offering a hello. ‘What’s up?’

‘So, you know the plan for Saturday?’

‘Yes. Boxes and bubble wrap purchased and van booked. I figure once we’ve moved her clothes and personal items over to Lauren’s, she can organise the big move on her own – like a proper grown-up.’

‘Yeah, um...’

‘Was there something else? I’ve got three minutes – less if I pop to the loo before my next meeting.’

‘Yeah, I can’t do Saturday – something’s come up and I need to work.’

She’s silent but I wait it out.

‘Well, we’re free tonight. You two?’ she asks.

‘You want to do it *tonight*?’ I’m not sure I’m mentally prepared to show up at my bestie’s unannounced and insist she move to another flat. Plus, it’s already been a massive day. I was looking forward to a bubble bath and one of Tristan’s yummy dinners.

‘We’ve got things on tomorrow night and Friday, so...’ Jacinda says.

‘What about next weekend?’ I ask hopefully.



‘*Poppy*,’ she says, conveying all the reasons that next weekend won’t do in just two syllables – namely that the sooner we do this, the sooner Shaz will settle into Lauren’s, meaning she’ll be completely moved when Lauren returns from Finland.

‘Tonight works,’ I say, not even knowing if Shaz is going to be home. Minor detail.

‘Excellent. I’ll make the re-arrangements and we’ll meet you outside at six-thirty. Bollocks, no time for the loo. Will just have to hold it. Bye.’

She ends the call, leaving me feeling slightly guilty. I hate having to sit through a meeting when I need to wee.

\* \* \*

‘Right, so how are we handling this?’ Jacinda asks, right as I’m about to press the buzzer to Shaz and Alfie’s flat.

‘What are you talking about? This was your idea!’

‘Yes, but she’s *your* best friend.’ She blinks at me with those enormous brown eyes.

‘Look, I don’t mean to criticise or anything – and thank you for organising all the packing accoutrement and the van – but, again, this was your idea. I thought you’d have a speech planned or something.’

‘What’s the hold up?’ asks Ravi, peeking out from behind Tristan, who’s laden with a stack of folded packing boxes.

‘Your wife has only now mentioned that we need to strategise.’

‘Wait a minute, I was on logistics – *and* we had to move this up by three days at late notice.’

‘Yes, but—’ My phone rings – *Shaz’s* ringtone. ‘Oh, shit, that’s Shaz,’ I say, fishing it out of my back pocket. ‘What do I say?’ I ask the others.

‘How about “hello”?’ quips Ravi dryly.

‘Hey, Shaz,’ I say, hoping I’ve achieved a breezy tone. ‘What’s up, pussy cat?’ Okay, that wasn’t breezy – that was

weird and oddly referenced 1960s pop culture.

‘Poppy, why the fuck are you and Tristan and Ravi and Jacinda standing outside my flat?’

‘Oh, uh...’ I look up and Shaz is at the window, staring down at us with a less-than-impressed look on her face. ‘Hi.’ I wave, and so do Jacinda and Ravi – him with a tape dispenser in his hand. Unsurprisingly, Shaz does not wave back.

‘And what is Tristan carrying?’

‘Will you just let us up?’

There’s a frustrated sigh, then the click of the building’s front door unlocking. I stuff my phone in my pocket and lead the way up to Shaz’s flat. She’s waiting with the door open and arms crossed, the look on her face having transformed from annoyed to totally pissed off in the short time it took us to walk up the stairs.

‘Come on in, you lot,’ she says, staring each of us down as we pass by. Then she closes the door and now we’re shut inside with a very angry woman.

Shaz is only slightly less ticked off after we explain our thinking.

‘Well, you know what they say: the road to hell is paved with good intentions,’ she says as she prowls around the lounge room.

‘You don’t believe in hell,’ I say from my spot on the sofa. As soon as she let us in, she told us to sit. We sat. All four of us bunched up together on the one sofa.

‘I do now that I’m living it. Did you really think this was a good idea?’ she asks, glaring at us in turn.

Tristan raises his hand. ‘I was somewhat dubious.’

‘Then you were somewhat onto something. I’m not making a decision *this* important because my friends brought around a stack of packing boxes.’

‘And rented a van,’ Ravi adds unhelpfully.

Shaz crosses to the window and peers out.

‘Oh my fucking god.’ She turns back to us. ‘If I didn’t love you lot, I’d have your guts for garters. You especially,’ she adds, thrusting a finger at me.

‘Okay, we get it,’ I say, standing to brave her wrath on my own. ‘We overstepped, we were presumptuous, we were out of line. We’re terrible friends.’

‘Well, that’s going a bit far,’ she concedes. ‘You’re not terrible friends. Yes to the first bit, though.’

‘Look,’ says Jacinda, coming to stand beside me. Out of the corner of my eye, Tristan and Ravi exchange shrugs, rightly staying out of this.

‘This is mostly my doing,’ Jass continues, ‘so if you’re going to blame anyone, send your fury in my direction.’

I’d say it was generous of Jacinda to take the fall for the rest of us, but this idiotic idea *was* hers. I was just the idiot that went along with it. I suppose that makes our husbands idiots once removed.

Shaz leans against the dining table and crosses her arms, a weary breath escaping. I’ve known her long enough to recognise the signs: she’s calming down *and* she’s forgiven us. Or she’s close to it – the forgiving part.

‘You want to know the funny thing?’ she asks us, brows raised and mouth flattening into a line.

It’s rhetorical but Ravi pipes up anyway. ‘Tell us.’

‘Alfie and I gave notice on Monday.’

‘What? On the flat?’ I ask.

‘No, at NASA. We’ve both resigned from the space programme.’

I rush to my bestie and throw my arms around her neck. ‘I am so happy for you!’

‘And you let us stew like that, giving us a right dressing down,’ says Jass with a wry laugh.

‘Well, my news doesn’t change how I feel about you showing up like this. What were you planning on doing if I said no? Kidnapping me?’

‘You did say no, and kidnapping was never on the table,’ Jacinda says, telling porkies.

‘Good to know, because you’d make terrible kidnappers. You were about as subtle as a neon sign in a dark alley – despite Poppy’s outfit. What were you going for, anyway?’ she asks me. ‘Trinity from *The Matrix*?’

‘I said the cast of *Ocean’s Eight*,’ Jacinda chimes in.

‘Hmm.’ They (rudely) appraise my all-black outfit with twin tilted heads and narrowed eyes.

‘Right,’ I say, redirecting the conversation away from what I’m wearing. ‘We should chuff off and let you get back to *not* packing up your flat.’

‘Ha-ha. Thanks for the boxes, by the way. And the bubble wrap. Oh, and these,’ she says, picking up the tape dispensers and holding them up like guns. ‘Can I assume from tonight’s errant behaviour that you’ll be on hand when I *do* move?’ she asks us.

‘Shaz, I love you, you know I do,’ Jass replies, ‘but no one our age wants to help their mates move – that’s for twenty-somethings. Besides, you’re a grown woman with a good job – hire a bloody removalist.’

‘So, what do you call all this then?’ she asks, flinging her arms out.

‘A gesture,’ Jacinda replies. ‘So you didn’t cock things up with Lauren.’

Shaz rolls her eyes and shakes her head at the same time, but I doubt there’s a universe in which Jacinda Sharma admits she was wrong.

‘All right, time to go,’ Jacinda says, corralling our husbands out the door.

I hug Shaz again. ‘I really am thrilled for you. You know how much I love an HEA.’ I step back and regard my bestie, trying hard not to get all mushy. ‘They’re even better when it’s someone I love.’

*So much for not getting mushy*, I think as I blink back tears.

‘Thanks, Pop, and yes, I am vaguely aware of your addiction to happily ever afters.’

‘It’s not an add—’

‘I’m joking, you dork,’ she interjects with a chuckle and, just like that, I’m forgiven.

‘Oh, and don’t tell the others,’ I add quickly, ‘but I’m happy to help with the move.’

‘You don’t have to – although, you do love wrapping things in bubble wrap – a *lot*.’

‘I *so* do. Is that weird? Oh! Is *that* an addiction?’

‘You want my professional opinion?’ she asks with a lopsided smile.

‘Er, no. Bye.’ I smack a kiss on her cheek and catch up to the others.

\* \* \*

*Elle*

I can’t believe I’m sitting in a television studio with three cameras pointing at me. So far, I’ve done little more than smile like a maniac and nod along as Leo has responded to Lydia Torrent’s questions.

And it doesn’t matter how many times Paloma drilled us in preparation for this interview, how confident and prepared I felt yesterday, my heart is hammering and there’s a lump the size of Texas in my throat. Apt, I suppose, but I don’t feel capable of uttering a single syllable. Just as long as I don’t vomit on live television.

If it hadn’t been for Poppy, I wouldn’t have made it to the set. She assured me that it was normal for nerves to induce vomiting – yes, even three times in quick succession. Then she guided me through a relaxation meditation while the hair stylist curled my hair.

‘And Elle,’ says Lydia, fixing her gaze on me. Oh god – *please* let this sofa swallow me whole. ‘How soon after meeting up with Leo the second time around did you realise the old feelings were still there?’

Perhaps unwittingly, or more likely because she’s a pro and can tell how terrified I am, Lydia Torrent has just lobbed me the perfect question. Because picturing Leo in that godawful double-denim outfit is exactly the salve I need and I chuckle, my nervousness dissipating as if by magic.

‘Actually, Lydia, that first meeting didn’t go so well.’ Beside me, Leo smiles and shakes his head – he knows exactly where I’m going with this. ‘First, he was extremely late – I am positive the waiter thought I’d been stood up – and *then* he arrived wearing the most ridiculous outfit—’

‘In my defence,’ Leo interjects, ‘it was wardrobe for a photoshoot.’

‘You mean this outfit?’ asks Lydia.

On the large screen behind her, up pops a photo of Leo in the double denim.

‘Yes! Exactly,’ I say, feeling as if Lydia and I are in cahoots. ‘Hardly swoon-worthy.’

‘I just wanna say, it was the exact opposite for me,’ says Leo. ‘I knew the moment I saw her sitting there, all mad because I was late but looking *so* pretty, that I had never stopped loving her.’

‘Aww,’ says Lydia, ‘that’s lovely.’ Leo glances at me with a sweet smile, then lifts my hand, pressing his lips to the back of it.

When I glance at Lydia Torrent, I can’t help thinking, *Now, that’s swooning*. I swear she’s about to slide off her chair.

‘Hopefully, you didn’t take too long to come around, though?’ asks Lydia’s co-host, whose name completely escapes me.

‘Er, no – not really,’ I tell him. Looking back at Leo, I add, ‘He’s still the same man I fell in love with all those years ago – bright, funny, talented, *kind*...’

‘So, you’ve reunited, but why the decade apart – especially as it seems like the love was there all along?’ Lydia asks.

Leo and I were prepped on variations of this question – it was one of the talking points Paloma negotiated when she secured the interview. That said, it’s a difficult one to answer and I’m grateful that it’s Leo who’s expected to respond.

‘I had a family obligation that arose right around the time we finished college – sorry, university. I had to leave London

suddenly and go back to Texas, and it's taken me until this year to find my way back – to the city *and*, as it turns out, to Elle.'

Exactly as he rehearsed it multiple times; though not any easier to hear.

Because it's a reminder of all that lost time. Ten years we could have been together – travelling, working, sharing adventures and inspiration, designing, supporting each other through the tough times. Being a couple, *partners*.

Being in love.

'And your recent engagement to supermodel Franzia – can you explain how that fits into *your* love story?'

It's another answer we rehearsed, only we went back and forth on whether to out Franzia or help her save face. In the end, Leo's loyalty to Serena, the woman he'd always thought of as an aunt, won out.

'Well, that was completely misguided – me getting swept up in Lorenzo the persona and forgetting who *I* was, that I'm just Leo,' he responds. 'And of course, the timing turned out to be terrible, as it coincided with unexpectedly seeing Elle again. But, you know, being with her' – he looks my way – 'it's made me accept that I can be myself *and* be the steward of Lorenzo the *label* without compromising my core values.'

'And what about Franzia's take on all this?' asks Lydia. 'When she appeared on our show a few days ago, she was quite upset about your relationship with Elle.'

'I know, and I can only guess at what she's been going through. It's understandable she felt blindsided – and that's on me. I should have told her as soon as Elle and I reconnected – *before* it hit the media.'

Lydia nods in understanding and her co-host, whose name I *still* can't recall, pipes in with, 'So, just before we go to an ad break, any design collaborations on the horizon?'

'How 'bout you take this one?' Leo says to me.



‘Yes, actually. We’re working on a collection as we speak, inspired by air travel in the fifties and sixties.’

‘Brilliant.’ I get the sense we could have told him we baked a batch of brownies together this morning and elicited the same reaction. It’s also clear we’re about to wrap up but there’s something I’d like to say.

‘Thank you, Elle Bl—’

‘Sorry, hi, um...’

Nameless co-host stares at me in horror – and rightly so, as it’s not the done thing to ‘go off script’ (so to speak) on morning talk shows.

‘Did you have something to add?’ asks Lydia, throwing me another lifeline.

‘Er, yes, actually.’ In my peripheral vision, I see a balding man wearing a headset, madly circling his hand in the air. I’m guessing that’s the ‘wrap it up’ signal, and that’s exactly what I aim to do.

Ignoring him *and* the nameless co-host, who is turning pink before my eyes, I take a steadying breath and look right into the centre camera.

‘I wanted to say that Leo and I are very sorry how this has played out – us finding each other again – especially the impact it’s had on our loved ones, our teams, our customers, and supporters... But we promise, it wasn’t for nothing and despite what you might read or hear, there are no villains in this love story – especially not Leo, who has been brave enough to come here today and tell his story – *our* story.’

I feel the squeeze of his hand and I could go on and on about how much I love this man but, again, live television – *and* we’ve already overstayed our welcome.

‘And again, thank you, Elle Bliss and Lorenzo, young lovers and fashion designers, reunited,’ the co-host says to the camera, his jaw clenched. ‘After the break, how effective is your double glazing?’

Three seconds later, a voice booms from the darkness behind the cameras. ‘And we’re clear!’

The studio erupts into activity, and Lydia Torrent reaches over and pats my knee. When I meet her eye, she nods at me in approval. Then we’re ushered off the set by a crewmember dressed entirely in black while the next guest gets settled on the sofa.

‘Bean! Oh my god, you were brilliant.’ Cassie rushes over and enfolds me in a hug, rocking me from side to side.

‘I thought you said you were too nervous to watch,’ I say when she releases me.

‘Turned out I was too nervous *not* to watch,’ she says, still beaming with pride. ‘You were both so, *so* good.’ She grabs Leo, hugging him tightly, and he laughs. I wonder, if like me, he’s flooded with relief that it’s over.

‘Nicely done, you two,’ says Paloma as she and Poppy join us. ‘I even liked that last bit – when you went off piste,’ she says to me. ‘You know, you’re more media savvy than you think.’

‘I’m not, I promise. I hope that’s the last television interview I ever have to do.’

She regards me with an appraising smile. ‘I doubt it will be.’

Before I can delve into how I feel about that, we’re approached by the cranky bald man in the headset.

‘Clear the studio, please. Off to the greenroom,’ he barks, shooing us as if we’re chickens who broke out of the coop. Paloma herds us out of the studio, clearly knowing her way around. She must come here a lot.

‘Bean, wait,’ says Cassie as we enter a long hallway. I hang back. ‘I am so proud of you.’

‘Thank you, that means a lot.’ It does. Cassie is not just my sister and business partner; she’s my closest friend and has always been my biggest champion.

‘Mum and Dad too,’ she says, holding up her phone. ‘They just texted to say they were watching. They want to hear all about it when we go for lunch tomorrow.’

‘I’m just glad it’s over – *and* we have the spa this afternoon,’ I say, shimmying my shoulders. Now the interview is done, I can get properly excited about a full afternoon of spa treatments for me, Cassie, and the whole Bliss Designs team. I’ve even invited Leo.

‘You know, we could have postponed. It’s been a mare of a week for you.’

‘No way. I’ve needed this to look forward to. Besides, the team deserves it – especially as, come Monday, we’ll be working them like mad. We have less than six months to get ready for New York Fashion Week.’

Her expression shifts. ‘Elle, I really am sorry about the matchmaking agency—’

‘No, we’re not doing that. Your methods may have been unusual and, yes, it was a shock at first, but Cass, it worked! Leo and I are back together.’

Tears gloss her eyes and she encircles me in another hug. I return it, my arms wrapped tightly around her waist. ‘You are the best sister ever,’ I say.

‘I know,’ she replies, sending us into a fit of giggles.

‘Hey, you two.’ *Leo.*

Cass and I let each other go, wiping happy tears from our faces.

‘I’ll see you in there,’ she says, indicating the greenroom.

‘You okay?’ he asks, coming closer to gently run his thumbs under my eyes.

I nod. ‘Sometimes there’s so much feeling inside, it leaks out. I used to say that when I was a little girl. I’d be overcome – sad about missing out on a party or overjoyed when our parents let us stay up late – and I’d cry. I thought there was this reservoir of tears inside me and that sometimes it spilled over.’

He watches me closely, saying nothing, his lips curled up at the corners.

‘What? You’re looking at me strangely.’

‘Nothing. Just... you told me that once – about the reservoir and your tears leaking out. It’s nice to remember little things like that.’

‘I suppose we’ll have a lot of those moments – remembering things we said or did all those years ago.’

‘Yeah,’ he says, his expression wistful, but then his smile falls away and a furrow forms between his brows.

‘Hey, listen, what you said in the interview... You didn’t need to share in the responsibility like that. None of this was your fault.’

‘But we’re in this together, remember? You and me. Isn’t that what you told me in the loo? That we can get through anything as long as we support each other?’

‘I did say that.’

‘You did and you were very convincing. It was an excellent speech,’ I tease.

My teasing has the desired effect, and he smiles softly, his eyes creasing at the corners.

‘You are so beautiful,’ he says quietly, ‘and not just on the outside, but your heart... I don’t deserve you.’

‘Yes, you do.’

‘I don’t – not yet – but I’m going to, I promise.’

We share a sweet smile.

‘I love you, Leo Jones.’

‘I love you right back, Ellie Bliss.’

He dips his head and kisses me, his lips soft and warm and against mine, and it’s lovely and wonderful and worth kissing all those frogs for – oops, wrong fairy tale. At that, I start sniggering.

Leo breaks the kiss and looks at me, amused. ‘You know, it can do a lot of damage to a guy’s ego if you laugh while he’s kissing you. That’s twice now.’

‘It’s not you! Or the kiss! It’s... Oh, never mind.’ I grab him by the shirt front – one of his fitted black T-shirts – and pull him back into the kiss.

And this time, it isn’t funny. It’s perfect.

# EPILOGUE

NEW YORK FASHION WEEK

‘Elle, can you please check this?’ Zara calls out. I trot over to where she and Leo’s assistant designer, Asher, are running through final checks on our collection.

‘Show me.’

‘This belt...’ she says, sliding it around the model’s waist. ‘Buckle centred or off-centre? I know we settled on centred but...’

She’s right – it’s not quite working.

Leo and Asher join us and I feel for the poor model – minutes to go and the four of us are fixated on her mid-section. A pro, she stands completely still, her posture flawless.

‘What do you think?’ I ask Leo.

He adjusts the position of the buckle and steps back. ‘Like this. Now it offsets the asymmetrical lapel.’

‘Yes, perfect.’

‘Great catch, Zara, thanks,’ Leo says. ‘Not sure why we didn’t see that before.’

‘Two minutes,’ says the back-of-house caller. ‘Models, places please.’

The twenty-four models shuffle over to a long piece of fluorescent-pink gaffer tape that’s stuck to the floor, forming a line.

Juju, who's wearing our final look, shoots me a grin. We were lucky to book them – since Paris, they have juggernauted right into the supermodel sphere.

And speaking of supermodels, at the head of the line is supermodel-in-the-making, Penny-Jean. She's tipped to replace Franzia, who recently fell from grace when her horrid behaviour made headlines across the world. Penny-Jean is a twenty-year-old Iowa farm-girl with pin-straight, natural blonde hair to her waist, a round freckled face and the largest blue eyes I've ever seen. She looks absolutely stunning in head-to-toe coral – a fitted scooped-neck, nipped-waisted top and full skirt combination in raw silk, with a pillbox hat in turquoise felt and vegan leather heels to match.

We're bringing back the hat! Or at least we're hoping to. Fingers, toes, eyes, and all other crossable body parts crossed.

I'm also wearing the same shoes as she is. Leo, total genius that he is, has accomplished the impossible: a high heel that is not just sexy but *so* unbelievably comfortable, I prefer them to my trainers. I have them in every colour imaginable. They were popular before we joined forces and now they're flying off the shelves almost faster than the factory can make them! Other designers keep pestering him for his trade secret. But we'll never tell.

As my eyes scan the looks, I swell with pride. It has been an intense six months getting this collection ready: design teams working in tandem, long hours, and lots of what Leo calls 'hustle'.

Leo exhales a loud breath as he takes his place beside me and entwines his fingers in mine. 'Ready?' I ask him, my shoulders shimmying with excitement.

If you'd told me a year ago I'd be standing here at New York Fashion week, about to show *with* Leo, I'd have laughed long and hard.

'Sweetheart, I have never been more anxious about anything in my entire life. Except maybe this,' he says, raising my left hand where a solitaire diamond on a simple gold band catches the light.

I laugh softly. ‘You never told me that. Why were you anxious about proposing? You knew I’d say yes.’

He shakes his head. ‘But that’s the thing. I couldn’t fathom why such a sweet, beautiful, talented woman like you would ever say yes to someone like me. Every day, I pinch myself that you did.’

I turn towards him and capture his chin in my hand. ‘You listen to me, Leo “Lorenzo” Jones Campbell, you may have too many names, but you are not just anyone. You are the love of my life and I wouldn’t want to do any of this without you – and I mean *all* of it – the designing, the travel, the life we’re building together – *everything*. You got that?’

He nods and I draw his face closer to land a kiss. ‘Now, shush, because it’s about to start.’

He chuckles good-naturedly and slings an arm around my shoulder right as the house lights dim and the chattering audience hushes.

This is it.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, from Bliss Designs and Lorenzo, presenting “The Mile High Club”,’ says the announcer. When she’s cued, Penny-Jean walks out into the bright lights of the catwalk, her chin high and looking like perfection.



# MORE FROM SANDY BARKER

We hope you enjoyed reading *Shout Out to My Ex*. If you did, **please leave a review**. If you'd like to gift a copy, this book is available to purchase in paperback, hardback, large print and audio.

Read on for a sneak peek at the next book in the Ever After Agency series!

## Chapter One

Greta

Today is the day!

I've been working at the magazine nearly fifteen years and today marks the biggest day of my career to date: the launch of my very own online vertical. Well, not *mine* per se – technically, it's part of *Nouveau's* new online platform – but it is very much my baby. I conceived it, designed it, staffed it, and edited it within an inch of its soon-to-be-out-in-the-world-for-all-to-see life.

Of course, it wasn't *all* me. Despite *Nouveau Life* being my vision, it wouldn't have come to fruition without the hard work of my carefully chosen team, or without the support of my boss/mentor/idol, Anjali.

I often say to myself – and only when I'm certain I'm alone – that I want to be like Anjali when I grow up. It's an odd thought for a thirty-seven-year-old, I know, but although she's less than ten years older than me, her professional accomplishments are the stuff of (my) dreams. She became editor-in-chief of *Nouveau India* when she was twenty-five; by twenty-eight, she'd moved to *Nouveau Britain*, our flagship edition; and within two years, she was appointed head of editorial.

That's when she hired me as a (lowly) staff writer straight from university. I was eager but green and she took me under her wing, teaching me practically everything I know about the magazine business – mostly how to be cutting edge and a leader in the industry, rather than simply staying ahead of the curve. She is also the sort of woman who can command a room without saying a word or (more importantly) without making anyone feel small.

Only my best friend, Tiggy – a name she's been stuck with since she was born, because her older sister couldn't say 'Elizabeth' – knows how much I worship Anjali.

My phone chimes with an incoming message – it's Mum.

Viel Glück Liebling. Wir lieben dich!

Mum is German and even though she's lived in the UK for forty years – *and* I was born here – she always messages me in German. I *understand* German, but beyond the basics, I'm rubbish at replying. I'm positive it's an enormous disappointment to her I'm not properly bilingual.

Danke! :)

After replying, I tuck my phone into my handbag and turn to face the full-length mirror on the back of my bedroom door. When you work at a fashion magazine and do *not* look like Kaia Gerber (or her mum, for that matter), there are countless approaches to developing your signature work look.

While some of my colleagues are always on trend, my look is classic and chic, which works perfectly with my petite and curvy frame. As Coco Chanel said, ‘Dress shabbily and they remember the dress; dress impeccably and they remember the woman.’ And I want to be remembered – especially for being clever and brilliant at my job.

Today, I’ve chosen an empire-line shift dress in dove grey with a matching tailored jacket and my three-inch Lorenzo heels in silver (which are far more comfortable than they look). My strawberry blonde hair is pulled into a loose up-do that looks effortless but took me an age, and my makeup is natural-looking save for my glossy peach lips.

If I do say so myself, I look *fantastic*.

‘Time to take the magazine world by storm,’ I tell myself with a lifted chin. Talking to yourself may be thought of as quirky or odd or even a sign of madness, but I consider it one of my superpowers.

\* \* \*

When I arrive at *Nouveau*, my assistant editor, Bex, greets me with a squeal as I step off the lift.

‘Good morning, Bex.’

She bounces on the balls of her feet. ‘I’m *so* excited. Isn’t it just *beyond*? Your look is totes on fleek, by the way,’ she adds before I have a chance to reply. ‘Very classy.’

‘Thanks, Bex. Not long to go now!’ I indicate for her to walk with me towards my office and she falls into step, chattering the entire way. I barely register half of what she says – most of it about engagement on socials – because the closer we get to my office, the more surreal this begins to feel.

As we walk the halls, my colleagues send me smiles and nods, with a couple of winks thrown in. Roger from accounting lifts a thumb into the air from across the office. *Are all accountants called Roger? Or is it that all Rogers go into accounting?* I think, my mind landing on an absurd thought.

I cross the threshold into my office, Bex on my heels, and I’m overcome by a roaring in my ears, something I’ve never experienced before. ‘Er, Bex, would you mind closing the door?’

‘Sure thing,’ she chirrups. I walk around my desk, plop into my chair, and turn on my laptop. Bex remains standing by the door, an inquisitive look on her face.

‘Are you all right?’ she asks.

‘I’m not sure,’ I reply. The roaring has intensified and now my heart is racing. Is this a panic attack? I pick up a notepad from my desk and start fanning myself.

‘It’s going to be brill, I promise,’ she says in a comforting tone.

‘Oh, yes, no doubt.’

I glance her way and she’s still watching me, her brows knitted together. ‘Do you need anything from me? Or the others – they’re already here. Actually, I’ve been here since seven.’

‘Seven?’ I ask with a jolt.

She shrugs. ‘Excitement, I suppose.’

‘Of course – a big day for you as well, and much deserved.’ She beams. ‘And thank you for asking, but no, there’s nothing I need.’

Ahh, that must be the reason I'm feeling like this. I'm at a loose end. The launch of *Nouveau Life*, which has consumed me for months now, has been meticulously planned right down to the tiniest detail. And with every logistical facet having been automated, the site will go live at 10 a.m. and dozens of posts will feed out to *Nouveau's* social media accounts – all without anyone lifting a finger.

And, as I won't need to start on the weekly blog posts or next month's edition until this afternoon, for the next hour, there is literally nothing for me to do (and I mean that in the *literal* sense, not ironically).

I can't remember the last time I had a full hour without a meeting or a phone call or an email to answer – *or* without an article to write or edit. I'm now positive that's the reason I'm out of sorts. I'm not *busy*. I glance at the time at the bottom of my laptop screen – ugh, still more than an hour to go.

I'd intended to spend the morning clocking the number of hits on the website, reading comments from readers, and graciously accepting congratulatory messages from my colleagues. Anjali has booked a celebratory lunch for the *Nouveau Life* team at Cicchetti, which I am very much looking forward to, but in my current state, I'm not sure I can sit here all morning simply *observing*. Especially if Bex is going to keep staring at me like that.

I slam my laptop shut and stand. 'Are you going somewhere?' she asks.

'Er, yes... coffee!' I declare as though I've suddenly remembered it exists. 'I think I'll pop down to the new coffee shop on the corner that everyone's been raving about.'

'Did you want company?' she asks. 'Or I can run out and get you something.'

'Actually, if you could stay here and man the desk, so to speak, that would be fab.'

She gives me an odd smile, confusion marring her features, and I scuttle past her, laptop under my arm and my handbag slung over my shoulder. The ride in the lift feels like it takes an aeon, as does the walk through the lobby, but stepping outside *Nouveau*, I inhale deeply. Somehow, the smell of exhaust fumes is soothing, as is the thrum of traffic along the Strand.

I'm about to head towards the coffee shop when a silver Mercedes pulls up right in front of me. The back door opens and a long leg wearing a very high red heel stretches out, followed by the rest of Anjali. Terrible timing to execute an escape.

'Greta!' she says warmly. 'Happy launch day!'

'Thank you.'

She closes the car door and tucks her wavy black bob behind her left ear. 'Where are you off to?' She eyes my laptop and now I feel foolish for bringing it along.

'I was just popping out for a coffee,' I reply, as if my behaviour is perfectly normal.

'Are you all right?'

Clearly not if everyone keeps asking me that – well, so far it's only been Bex and Anjali, but still. 'Er, yes, I think so.'

'Nerves?' she asks with a tilt of her head.

'Possibly.'

'Understandable, but are you sure a double shot of espresso is the answer?' she teases. 'Just kidding,' she says with a laugh. 'I'm gagging for a coffee – I'll join you.' She looks in both directions. 'Any preference?'

'I was thinking about that new place on the corner.'

‘Perfect.’ She heads off and I rush to catch up to her. We may both be wearing heels – she’s also in Lorenzos – but she has a good nine inches on me height-wise and her strides are much longer than mine.

‘Hopefully it’s not *all* nerves,’ she says when I’m beside her again. ‘I want you to enjoy this day; you’ve certainly earned it. Although, I remember a few firsts from my career – or rather, I don’t because they were a blur and before I knew it, it was a week later and everything was humming along.’

We’ve worked together all these years and this is the most Anjali has revealed about her meteoric rise in the magazine business. We reach the coffee shop – amusingly called ‘The Daily Grind’ – and she swings open the door, holding it for me.

The décor is inviting, if a little austere. It has a Scandinavian vibe – lots of blond wood, including the wall panelling, the counter, and the tables and chairs – and there are more plants than in a garden centre. The air in here must be *extremely* breathable.

We line up and order, then wait to the side for the baristas to work their magic on the giant espresso machine. I watch their precise rhythmic movements as Anjali chats to me, but as with Bex earlier, I’m not taking in any of what she’s saying. The roaring is back.

I smile and nod at her, hoping I’m doing a reasonable facsimile of listening, which I clearly am. ‘So, what do you think?’ she asks, catching me unawares. ‘Should we sack him?’

‘What? Sack who?’ Panicked, I conduct a mental roster of the several hims who report to Anjali. I can’t for the life of me think who she might be talking about – they’re all brilliant at their jobs.

‘The tiler.’

‘The ti— *Oh*, sorry.’ She angles her head – she’s either confused or amused. ‘To be honest, I haven’t heard a word.’ I tap on my temple. ‘I have this sort-of intense noise inside my head.’ *Wonderful*. I didn’t mean to be *that* honest with her.

Though at least it’s not as embarrassing as what I told her that night we were working late a couple of weeks back. I still cringe every time I think about it.

‘My fault,’ she says. ‘I was trying to distract you by moaning about the utter *mare* of our renovations. And the noisy head – perfectly normal.’

*Oh, thank god.*

‘Angela, Greta,’ calls the barista. Anjali and I exchange an amused look – the solidarity of those with a ‘novel name’ – then push through the small crowd to the counter to collect our coffees, a latte for me, extra foam, and a long black for her.

She leads the way to the window, where we slide into seats vacated by two men mere seconds ago. She brushes some pastry crumbs onto the floor and pins me with a look. The Anjali look.

I’ve been the recipient of this look *many* times. It can mean anything from ‘I have some juicy work gossip for you and you mustn’t tell a soul’ to ‘I know you’ve worked sixteen days straight and I’m about to insist you take a mini-break to Tenerife’.

‘Now, Greta—’

‘Ladies! I see you’ve discovered my new favourite haunt.’

Oh god, that voice. It's been known to send shivers down my spine and set my nethers (as my mum calls them) alight. Like now, which is especially awkward while being in public – *with my boss*.

'Hello, Luca,' says Anjali, warmly accepting a cheek kiss from our colleague. She adores Luca – everyone does. And not just because he's the most handsome and charming man at *Nouveau* (or possibly anywhere). He's also a brilliant fashion editor – *so* talented. He can make or break a designer just like that (imagine me snapping my fingers).

'Greta!' he exclaims, leaning down to land *two* kisses, one on each cheek. Luca may be London-born, but when he wants to be particularly charming, he favours the customs of his Roman mother. I resist the sudden urge to squirm in my seat, graciously accepting the kisses (like a perfectly normal person would do).

'Congratulations! So excited for *Nouveau Life* – bound to be a smash hit.'

'Er, thank you. Very exciting, yes.' I barely get the words out, as my throat has constricted and my cheeks feel like they're on fire.

Fortunately, Luca appears not to notice that I'm seconds from spontaneously combusting. 'See you back there in a bit,' he says with a roguish grin. God, Anjali may need to mop me off the floor in a minute.

I watch as Luca snakes his way through the other patrons, consciously steadying my breath. Anjali clears her throat and I cast my eyes towards her. 'Sorry, you were saying?' I ask brightly. *Please don't mention my red cheeks – or anything else about Luca.*

'I—'

'Excuse me, Greta?' When I look up again, a man is standing beside me – forty-ish, light brown hair, kind smile, blue eyes. He reminds me instantly of James McAvoy.

'Er, yes?'

'I'm Ewan.'

Why is he telling me this? 'Hello, Ewan.' He continues smiling at me and I continue wondering why. 'Er, have we met before?' He shakes his head. 'So how do you know my name?' I ask, returning his bemused smile. He did say 'Greta' but close enough – I've answered to worse.

He holds up a coffee cup. 'I have your coffee.'

'Oh.' I look at the coffee cup I've been drinking from, which has 'Ewan' scrawled on the side. 'Oh! I'm so sorry. I must have picked up yours.'

'Yes,' he says, a lilt of laughter in his voice. 'Here.' He sets my coffee in front of me.

'I'm afraid I've already drunk from yours, but I'd be happy to buy you another one.'

He smiles again. 'No need – I'll sort it. Have a lovely day.' And before I can thank him, he leaves.

I turn to Anjali, about to ask her for a second time what she was going to say, when she flicks her wrist to look at her watch. 'Bollocks, we should probably go.'

'But what were you going to tell me?' I ask as we stand and gather our belongings.

'We'll chat about it later,' she says, smiling enigmatically.

*We'll chat about it later.* Well, thank you, Anjali, that doesn't sound ominous at all! Oh god, I hope it's nothing to do with what we talked about that night.

As we make our way back to the office, the roaring kicks into high gear.

## Chapter 2

### *Poppy*

'Saffron, will you please get your bum out of my face.'

Tristan chuckles smugly from the other side of the bed. 'Fine for you. You're her favourite, so you get the good end,' I say, gently pushing her away from me.

She purrs loudly, nuzzling the crook of Tristan's neck, and he pets her with one hand. 'She loves us both equally.'

'Hah, *hardly*. And don't encourage her,' I add, snuggling into my now-cat's-bum-free pillow.

'Good morning, darling. How did you sleep?' he asks cheekily.

'Fine until our cat decided to join us,' I say, stifling a yawn. 'I'm not loving this newfound desire to sleep with us – especially when she has her own room.' We once had a guest room with a study nook. Now we have 'Saffron's room', where she sleeps on the bed all day, only changing positions to chase the sun (when it's out).

Tristan props himself up, and lifts Saffron and puts her on the floor. 'Off you go, Saffy,' he coos. Well, she does *not* like that. There's a disdainful 'meow' and she struts out of our room like a cat on a mission – probably to post on socials about how hard her life is.

'Not sure if I'm still her favourite after that,' he says, leaning over to kiss my cheek.

'Ah-hah! So, you admit it,' I say.

He chuckles again and gets out of bed. 'Tea?' he asks.

'Have I told you today how much I love you?'

'Not today,' he says from the doorway.

'I love you!' I call out before surrendering to the yawn.

I'm usually a morning person. I'm also not one of those people who lives for the weekends. I *love* being an agent at the Ever After Agency, but after a sleepless night due to a certain feline, I could easily steal another half-hour under the duvet. Surely Saskia and Paloma, who run the agency, won't mind if I'm a *little* bit late.

'Darling, it's nearly six-thirty,' Tristan says from the kitchen. My eyes pop open – bugger, I must have drifted off.

'Thank you!'

'And tea's ready.'

'Coming.'

I pad to the kitchen and take up a spot at the breakfast bar, where a steaming mug of tea awaits. No dainty china teacup for me this morning – Tristan has busted out the big guns. The only thing we own that's bigger than my 'World's Best Friend' mug is a bucket. He's also made me breakfast: three Weetabix and milk.

'I love you more than I did ten minutes ago,' I say before taking a sip of tea.

'Much on for the start of the week?' he asks.

‘Finalising some paperwork on the reunited lovers case—’

‘The two ninety-year-olds?’

‘That’s the one. They are *so* sweet, Tris. Iris told me to expect a wedding invitation.’

‘I’ll have to dust off the tux.’

‘I *suppose* you can be my plus one,’ I tease, and the corners of his eyes crease over the rim of his mug.

‘I also have a meeting with a new client this arvo, a school friend of Saskia and Paloma’s. The agency’s way of returning a massive favour she did for us back in March.’

‘So, a VIP?’ he asks.

‘Exactly.’

‘Like I was.’ Tristan’s dark amber eyes twinkle with mirth.

‘Boy, you have tickets on yourself, Mr Fellows.’ He laughs at that, then tucks into his breakfast.

Nearly a year ago, *Tristan* was my client. I was tasked with finding him a wife in forty days to ensure he inherited a sizable sum (make that an eye-watering sum). Against my better judgement, professional creed, and everything a matchmaker is *supposed* to do, I fell in love with him. Fortunately, he fell right back, which we figured out in time. *Just* in time.

Our best friends played their roles in our love story too – my bestie, Shaz, fellow ex-pat Aussie and all-round top chick, and Tristan’s closest friends, Ravi and Jacinda. Ravi and Jass have become like family to me over this past year and along with Shaz’s girlfriend, Lauren, we’re now a tight sextet. Those friendships are a big part of why I love my life. Another one is standing across the way, reading the news on his phone.

‘Meow.’ At my feet, Saffron rubs up against the legs of the stool.

‘Uncanny timing, Saffron.’ She’s up there amongst the reasons I love my life, but I’ll never tell her that. It’ll go to her head.

‘Meow.’

‘Go ask Tristan to make you breakfast. He’s chief cook and bottle washer this morning.’

She looks up at me disdainfully before stalking off around the kitchen bench. I just love her little half-black, half-orange face but she’s lucky she’s so cute, the little minx.

‘Right,’ says Tristan sometime later, ‘I need to head in early this morning.’ He’s already had his breakfast, fed Saffron, and cleaned up the kitchen. And there’s me, sitting here with bed-hair, half-drunk tea, and very soggy bix while checking my socials.

He smacks a kiss on my lips. ‘Bye, darling. Have a wonderful day.’ He stoops to pet Saffron under the chin. ‘You too, Saffy,’ he says, his voice suddenly two octaves higher. We watch him leave and when the door closes behind him, Saffron looks at me, sniffs the air, and heads towards her bedroom.

Like I said, little minx.

\* \* \*

‘Thank you so much for coming in.’ Anjali, a tall, slender, south-Asian woman, who looks like she just stepped off a runway, indicates for me to sit in the chair opposite her, then takes a seat behind her desk. ‘So sorry you had to come all this way – I’d stupidly thought I’d be able to get out to Richmond this afternoon.’

I wave her off. ‘Not a problem. Happy to be invited back to *Nouveau*.’

‘That was a smashing article you wrote for us back in March.’

She’s referring to the piece I ‘co-wrote’ as part of a case to bring together two fashion designers. And by ‘co-wrote’ I mean that I sent a stack of scribbles to my colleague, Freya, who gave the piece some shape, then I submitted it to a *Nouveau* editor, a woman called Bex, who turned it into an article.

It was a huge ask of *Nouveau* to publish that article, and it only came about because of Anjali’s friendship with Saskia and Paloma.

‘That’s a generous characterisation of my contribution,’ I say, and we exchange smiles.

‘And a successful case, I hear. I saw that Elle Bliss and Lorenzo just got engaged.’

‘Yes! Absolutely thrilled for them – such a gorgeous couple. And that article was paramount to us making the match, so thank you again,’ I reply. I don’t bother correcting her that Lorenzo is the label, whereas the man behind the world-famous sexy-but-comfortable shoes is called Leo.

‘There’s no need to thank me,’ she says, ‘especially as I am about to ask the agency to return the favour. Well, *ish*. It’s not so much a favour from the agency as from you.’

‘Me?’

‘Yes – it’s what I’d require of you. In addition to your work as a matchmaker, I mean.’

Intriguing. ‘What did you have in mind?’ I ask, keeping my expression neutral.

‘Well, Sask tells me you used be a psychologist.’

‘Yes, I practised for just over ten years before joining the agency.’

‘And you specialised in...?’

‘Predominantly positive psychology and treatment using CBT – cognitive behavioural theory.’

‘Perfect.’

‘So, how does this relate to the case?’

‘Well, as you know, I’d be engaging you on behalf of a colleague. Greta Davies. She is brilliant, professional, hard-working, and very much has it together. But if this is going to work, I think you’ll need to go undercover – *ish*.’

Anjali clearly likes couching her words with ‘ish’ but all she’s done is confuse the matter – I still have no idea what the case is or what I’ll be doing.

And the last time I went undercover was for the case Anjali mentioned earlier, where I posed as a fashion journalist. When I told Shaz about it, she couldn’t stop laughing. I’d have taken offence if I didn’t agree with her – it *was* laughable.

‘Undercover as...?’ I ask, hoping I won’t be asked to pull any more fashion articles out of my bum.

‘An advice columnist – ish.’ Wow, that’s three ishes in three minutes. ‘Sorry, I’m doing a rubbish job of explaining this, aren’t I?’



*Yes, you really are.* ‘No, not at all,’ I say, the consummate professional.

‘Put simply, I want you to help Greta find love.’

‘Excellent. Then that’s our starting point,’ I say, glad we finally got to the crux of things. ‘And does Greta *want* to find love?’

‘Yes. I *think* so.’

‘It’s best if you’re certain. We wouldn’t want to attempt to solve a problem that may not exist.’

‘Right. Well, you see, I’ve known Greta for fifteen years and I’ve watched her live and breathe work – these days, even more so than I do. And if she ever *does* take time for herself, it’s only because I’ve forced her to. That said, if you’d have asked me a fortnight ago whether Greta wanted to fall in love, I would have said no. Other than having rather obvious infatuation for our colleague, Luca, Greta’s sole passion is her job.’

‘So, what happened to change your mind?’ I ask.

‘Something she said. She was talking herself, as she often does, only this wasn’t one of her affirmations or verbal to-do lists. She may even have meant it as a throw-away comment – only, evidently, it wasn’t.’

‘What was it?’

‘Well, Greta’s just launched her own online vertical, you see, and—’

‘Sorry, a vertical?’ I ask, interrupting.

‘It’s like an imprint of a publisher – part of the whole, but also its own thing.’

Nope, still confused. ‘Uh...’

‘Sorry, the vertical, *Nouveau Life*, is an online magazine – but still part of *Nouveau*.’

‘Ahh, got it. And Greta’s at the helm.’

‘Exactly. Anyway, we were working late one night – I’d stuck around to help her with an article from one of our freelancers about dating apps. We’d just decided on a pull quote from one of the interviewees – it was something like, “I’ve been single so long, I have no idea what being in love even feels like.” Something like that. And Greta muttered to herself, “You and me both, love.”’

‘Oh, that’s rather...’ I don’t finish the thought, but my meaning must be clear.

‘Exactly. Now, ordinarily I would have pretended I didn’t hear her, but as it was just the two of us, it was obvious that I *did* hear. And then I found myself asking her about it.’

I lean forward in anticipation. ‘And?’

‘And, apparently, she’s been thinking about it a lot lately – love. Especially now she’s in her late thirties. Has she left it too late? That sort of thing.’

‘Well, that seems to answer my question.’

‘I’m glad. You know, this is the first time she’s ever said *anything* like that to me – been that candid about her personal life. It’s stuck with me ever since. Actually, I nearly brought it up again this morning, which would have been disastrous timing. A huge distraction on her big day. I also hadn’t met with you, of course, so it would have been premature. It’s just that... I’ve become a little obsessed ever since she told me.’

‘That’s understandable. You obviously care about her a great deal.’

‘I do. Still...’ She heaves out a sigh. ‘Perhaps this whole thing is misguided. I realise it’s incredibly patronising of me, thinking I know best for someone else.’

‘Although, sometimes that’s the case,’ I say, thinking of the times I’ve had to nudge Shaz in the right direction. ‘You mentioned Greta’s crush on Luca – could that lead to something, do you think? Any idea how he feels about her?’

‘I couldn’t say, really. It’s possible he has feelings for Greta – she’s clever, accomplished, very attractive... Then again, Luca is... Well, he’s charming and witty, but he’s also a total a player,’ she says with raised brows.

‘Right.’

‘Look, I adore Greta and if there’s something I can do to make her happy – happier, I should say, because she really is a cheerful person – then I want to do it. Which, of course, is where you would come in.’

‘As an advice columnist for *Nouveau Life*.’

‘Yes.’

‘And how exactly does that fit into your plan?’

She leans her elbows on the desk, her dark brown eyes flashing with excitement. ‘I convince Greta to hire you as a contributor, creating an advice column for *Nouveau Life* with a focus on love, and *you* help Greta find love.’

That’s it? That’s the extent of her plan? Having my own column could be interesting – but how would that help me nudge Greta towards someone other than Luca? And then it comes to me – the missing piece.

‘The advice columnist idea is inspired,’ I say, blatantly buttering up the client – the *VIP* client. ‘Being a contributor to *Nouveau Life* would give me the perfect cover story for the rest of the team, but how about we tell Greta who I am and what I do?’

‘But how would that work?’ she asks with a slight frown. ‘What if she’s resistant? Then this whole thing falls apart.’

‘She can be resistant. It won’t matter because *you’re* going to assign her an article – actually, let’s make it a series of articles. I’ll set her up on dates and she’ll write about her experiences. Ten first dates... Dating as a career woman... I’ll leave the angle up to you – or even Greta – but dating will become her *assignment*. And I’ll provide the potential matches, one of which may end up being Greta’s person. What do you think?’

That spark of excitement returns to her eyes and she smiles at me widely. ‘I think you’re a bloody genius.’

‘I’ll take that. So, when should we meet with Greta? At the end of the week?’

‘That’s perfect. I wouldn’t want to spring this on her immediately, what with the launch and everything.’

I nod. ‘Oh, and it’s best if Greta completes her own client questionnaire, but if there’s anything you can tell me about her before Friday, that will help me put together a long list.’

‘Brilliant. Thank you, Poppy.’

I stand and hold out my hand. ‘Welcome to the Ever After Agency.’

‘And welcome back to *Nouveau*,’ she says, firmly shaking it.

\* \* \*

We hope you enjoyed this sneak peek at the next book in the Ever After Agency series!

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I hope you enjoyed *Shout Out to My Ex*. See you soon for Book 3 in the Ever After series...

Sandy x

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**Sandy Barker** is a bestselling author of destination romance. She's lived in the UK, the US and Australia, and has travelled extensively across six continents, with many of her travel adventures finding homes in her books.

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