The Wedding Shop on Wexley St.

Rachel Dove



Maria is ready to say 'Yes, to the dress!'

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The Wedding Shop on Wexley Street: A laugh out loud romance to curl up with in 2018

Аннотация

Maria is ready to say ‘Yes, to the dress’!As owner of Happy Ever After, Maria Mallory is Westfield's resident wedding planner, spending her days making dreams come true for future brides.Maria even has her own perfect day planned out too, she just needs to find the right man. So when she falls in love with local celeb Darcy Burgess she can't believe her luck – it was finally her turn for her Happy Ever After. Or so she thought.Jilted at the altar, Maria can't believe that her fairytale ending hasn't come true. She's ready to give up on love once and for all. But little does she know that once you stop looking for it, love has a way of surprising you…A laugh-out-loud romance, perfect for fans of Holly Martin and Tilly Tennant.Readers love Rachel Dove:‘such an entertaining and wonderful story!”‘A fun, heartfelt and well paced story that kept me entertained all the way through.”‘a happy, bubbly and entertaining read”I adored this book, it was such a lovely story and it had me reminiscing at times about my own wedding day!”‘Laughter and joy interspersed with disappointment

and grief weave together to make a heart warming, engaging story about friendship and love.'

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About the Author

RACHEL DOVE is a writer and teacher, living in West Yorkshire with her husband, their two sons, and some furry pets.

In July 2015, she won the *Prima* magazine and Mills & Boon Flirty Fiction Competition with her entry *The Chic Boutique on Baker Street*, out now in ebook and paperback. *The Flower Shop on Foxley Street* followed this in 2017 and both books hit the Amazon top 200. *Chic Boutique* got to #2 in the rural life humour chart and is regularly in the top 100 of that chart.

Rachel was the winner of the Writers Bureau Writer of the Year Award 2016 and has had work published in the UK and overseas in various magazines.

The Long Walk Back came out in January 2018 and she is currently writing the next book in the Westfield series. She loves to write romantic fiction, both rom-com and harder-hitting women's fiction.

In addition to writing, teaching and studying for an MA in Creative Writing, Rachel also likes to hang out with her family, read lots of books, and cross-stitch geeky homages and rude sayings.

Also by Rachel Dove

The Chic Boutique on Baker Street
The Flower Shop on Foxley Street
The Long Walk Back

The Wedding Shop on Wexley Street
RACHEL DOVE



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To my mother, Sandra, who will never read past this page, but cheers me on in everything I do. 2f & 1w forever.

Love Goggle

Chapter 1
August

The heat from the summer sun kissed the tanned and freckled skin of the wedding guests as they walked up the long path to the beautiful Grade II-listed church, the best Harrogate had to offer in terms of the ultimate IT wedding venue. One where God had a front-row seat anyway. Behind an oddly discreet line of police tape, a scoop of journalists jostled against each other, all dressed in their best uncrumpled clothes. All eager to snap the incoming guests, the first glimpse of the happy couple.

Quite the guestlist was walking up this pebbled drive too. The hottest reality TV stars, fresh from the villas and beaches, the latest hot things to rock football shorts on the field, today all suited and booted with the local glitterati, were all here to see the modern love story. Meghan and Harry had nothing on Harrogate's very own playboy and tea baron, Darcy Burgess, who was today set to marry the girl of his dreams or, as the press had come to know her, the elusive girl next door. Uncharacteristically, Darcy had kept his lady out of the spotlight, so today, in the sumptuously beautiful and historic surroundings of St Wilfred's, all eyes would definitely be on the bride.

Past the line of paps, inside the church, the pews were festooned with flowers, laced into intricate ribbons and designs

at the end of the aisles. A large, imposing centrepiece full of calla lillies, white roses and the best that taste and money could buy stood on a pedestal near the altar, and the whole church was fragrant with the scent of expensive perfumes and the ambience of flowers. Everything shone and gleamed, from the brass lectern to the cheeky sparkle in the excited guests' eyes.

Today would be talked about for months, a real gem on the Northern social calendar. Taken up by the South, the Burgess wedding was certainly a networking event like no other. No one could wait to finally see the girl who had tamed the great player, Darcy. The girl next door. The young lass from the little village shop. A day of new beginnings, in more unexpected ways than one.

New beginnings came in all shapes and sizes. The day Maria Mallory was due to be married would be the first day of her new life too, but for reasons very different to those the average bride would ever think of. In fact, had she known what was coming, she might have stayed in bed that day, quivering under the duvet and throwing holy water on her wedding gown to expel the demons.

Ask any beaming child in the playground what they wanted to be when they grew up and you would get an enthusiastic answer. Thomas wanted to be an army man, Benjamin a vet just like his dad. Cassie wanted to be a ballet dancer, Alex to help sick people.

Kids wanted to be everything, from astronauts to bakers. But Maria had always been different. She didn't dream of a job. She dreamt of a status, a milestone. Maria Mallory had always wanted

to one day be a bride. She'd spent hours at home poring over her parents' wedding albums, legs dangling off the couch as she studied the happy, radiant faces of her mother and late father on their special day. While other kids played video games and rode bikes, Maria made scrapbooks filled with magazine cutouts, scraps of fabric from her mother's workbox, recipe ideas for the wedding breakfast. Elizabeth Mallory worked from home as a seamstress, and her daughter would check her diary fastidiously, looking for bridal appointments. Women would come to their house all the time, requesting custom gowns, having their dresses altered, looking through her mum's designs for the perfect bridesmaid dress to match their perfect white gown. Maria loved every minute, and couldn't wait to get married. When she hit her teens, her determination to be a bride hadn't changed. She helped her mother after school, and eventually took over when her mother got sick, running the business and helping at home while doing her own business degree. Even with the bumps in the road, Maria had never once lost sight of her goal: to get married. To have the life her mother and father once had. In sickness and health, true love, till death do us part. To have the wedding of her dreams.

And what a wedding it was shaping up to be! Every man, woman and dog had been chatting about the nuptials for months, and the moony-eyed public were all rooting for the unlucky lovers to finally say I do, and prove that love really did conquer all. What girl wouldn't want that? Even the tomboys among the

fairer sex still had an odd glistening tear at the thought.

But today, as she stood waiting in the wings of the church, missing her parents, sheltered from the view of the baying press outside, with Cassie moaning about her pale peach silk dress beside her, she was… well… disappointed. It seemed everything in her life had been leading to this point, so why didn't it feel that way? Why did it feel like an anticlimax? She told herself it was just down to wishing her parents were there with her. More so than anxiety. She was still having flashbacks to the dream she had had the night before, when she was wheeled out into the church, dressed like a whipped-cream meringue, with make-up Gene Simmons would deem 'troweled on'. She had woken in a deep panic, covered in sweat and in the tight grip of fear. She needn't have worried, though. With her designer gown, make-up artist and professional hairdresser to the stars, all hired by the Burgess family, she looked more than catwalk-ready.

Maria felt like she had reached into the pretty chocolate box and pulled out a disgusting orange cream. She tried to shake off the feeling she was having. It was just nerves, that was all. She had been waiting for this day for ever, since she was old enough to wrap a sheet around her head and marry her teddy bears. Today was the day, and nothing was going to spoil it, least of all her own silly niggles. She felt a prod and looked around, annoyed.

'What?'

Cassie was staring at her, fixing her with a look she had never seen on her best friend's face before, and Maria felt the emotions

of foreboding all over again, in stereo.

'Cassie? What… what is it?'

Cassie swallowed hard and, looking around, Maria noticed they were alone. The other bridesmaids, on the side of the groom, were suddenly noticeably absent, and the vicar was standing there, looking very uncomfortable indeed. Maria's heart dropped from her chest, nestling in her sparkly ivory court shoes.

'Cass, what!' She gripped her bouquet tighter in her hand, causing a calla lily to break from its stem. It fell to the floor between them, and Maria's eyes narrowed as she focused on the lone bloom.

'He's not coming, Mar, I'm so sorry.' Cassie's voice was uncharacteristically soft, at odds with her usual ball-busting, divorce-solicitor persona. Maria nodded, and her head kept nodding away.

'Mar, can you hear me?' Cassie stepped forward, taking the bouquet from her and dropping it onto a table nearby. Maria kept nodding, sinking into the chair that appeared like magic from behind her. Turning around, she saw the vicar, his hand on her shoulder, a kindly expression on his face. She could hear the murmurs of the congregation outside, no doubt sensing this wedding wasn't going off without a hitch. In fact, there would be no getting hitched today. Maria's cheeks flamed and tears started to run down her face. She jumped when Cassie slammed her fist down hard on the table, making her bouquet flip on the wooden surface.

'That utter bastard! I swear, I am going to staple his nards to the wall!'

Maria wiped at her tears, frowning when her make-up left a smudge on the pristine, white, long-sleeved glove she was wearing.

'Stay here, okay. I'll see what I can find out.' Cass manhandled the vicar out of the door, muttering things about God and angels and pitchforks to him under her breath. 'Stay put, okay? Don't come out till I know what's what.'

Maria nodded to the already-closed door, feeling like her head was separate from her body. It felt like it was floating somewhere, free, above her head like a balloon. Shock. It must be. Either that or she was about to pass out. A beep shook her from her thoughts. Cass's purse was on the table. *Her mobile phone!* Maria leaned forward and snatched it up, fumbling through the contents to grab the phone and bring up the call display. Before she could talk herself out of it, she dialled Darcy's number and held her breath. *It must be a mistake, Chinese whispers. He was probably stuck in traffic. Last-minute nagging from his mother, perhaps.*

He picked it up on the third ring.

'Hello?' he asked lazily. He sounded a little drunk even. 'Hello, who is this? Hello?'

'Darcy?' It came out as a cracked whisper. 'Where are you? Are you okay?'

A tear ran down her cheek and she went to dab at it, trying

not to ruin her expensive face paint.

'Maria.' It came out of his mouth, just like that. Flat, monotone. No excitement, no rushed explanations, no desperate plea for her to wait for him. He said it like he was disappointed it was her, regretted taking the call from a number he didn't recognise. Cass and he had never been that close. 'It's you.'

'Of course it's me! I'm at the church. Are you here yet? The vicar said you're not coming? What's wrong?'

At first, she didn't hear anything, and she thought the call had dropped till she heard the ching of the glass. A sound she recognised. The glass coffee table in their apartment made that noise when she filled his favourite whisky tumbler and set it down next to her glass of wine as they settled down for the evening.

'I'm not coming, Maria. I'm sorry.'

At first Maria couldn't decide whether to cry, wail or laugh. The words sounded so absurd, so silly. She half-expected him to start laughing, that laugh she loved to hear. The one that came from his belly as he celebrated another successful prank.

'Don't be daft, of course you're coming. We're getting married!'

The glass clinked again, hard.

'I can't do it, Maria. I'm sorry. I… Mother… we…'

Maria felt her heart break. 'Darcy, I…'

'I'm sorry. I have to go.'

The line clicked, and he was gone. She went to press the button, to call him back, to shout, to cry, to ask him why he'd said

those things. Why her Darcy, the man who should be nervously passing wind at the altar, chewing the fat with his best man to stay calm, was at home, drinking instead. Leaving the woman he loved sat in a dress, in an imposing church setting. Trapped. Stranded in her very own fairy tale. Maria pushed the phone back into Cass's purse, throwing it onto the table as she heard her friend's loud voice coming closer outside.

'Mate, that best man is a total jackass, I tell you. I almost decked the arrogant swine!'

'Cass,' she whispered.

'He won't tell me where Darcy is, or give me his number, and apparently his family didn't even show!'

'Cass,' she tried. Harder this time. Fighting to push the words out of her mouth, amidst the mess of her scrambled thoughts.

Her friend turned and knelt before her again. Maria looked into her eyes and swallowed hard, trying to dislodge the huge lump in her throat. The more she swallowed, the thicker it felt.

'Cass,' she tried again, her voice betraying her. 'Get me out of here, okay?'

Cass nodded. Marching over to the window, she wrenched it open, looking outside. Seemingly satisfied that they had an escape route, she beckoned for her friend.

'I scoped this out too, just in case. Come on, my car's outside.' Maria nodded and five minutes later she was in the passenger seat of her friend's Mercedes, hunched low, being whisked away from her own wedding. For the first time in her life, she was glad

her parents weren't there to see how her life was going. Cassie placed a warm hand over hers.

'Stay with me, okay? I'll arrange for your stuff to be collected from Arsy's.'

Maria nodded, too numb to even complain about her friend's nickname for her would-be groom. Darcy Burgess of the Burgess Tea empire, a well-respected Harrogate institution. Currently about to corner the Yorkshire market in herbal teas, they sold everything from ginger snaps to ornamental teapots to go with their amazing tea blends. Beatrice Burgess, the head of the family, was an all-encompassing woman, driven and one hundred per cent committed to making sure her children, Laura and Darcy, didn't do anything to embarrass her beloved empire. She made the Godfather look like small potatoes, and her wrath wasn't something to seek out.

Darcy, who had just jilted her at the altar, in front of their friends. Darcy, who, up until yesterday, she had lived with in his plush apartment in Harrogate. She started to sob quietly. Cassie swore under her breath and turned on the radio, jabbing at the buttons as though they were part of Darcy himself.

'Poncey git. Who wants to marry a Darcy anyway?'

Maria looked across at her in exasperation. 'Millions of women, Cass. Millions. Mr Darcy, Mark Darcy? Come on, I know you have that poster of Colin Firth on your fridge.'

Cass's lips pursed, and she grinned at her mate. 'Okay, okay – but seriously, Mar, you'll be okay. Everything will work out.'

'I called him.'

Cass looked at her, but said nothing, flicking her attention back to zooming through the streets.

'And?'

'He said sorry.'

Cass's lips clamped together, as though trying to ward off something unpleasant from being rammed between them, or trying to escape.

'Oh, he'll be sorry all right.'

Maria nodded, looking down at the engagement ring on her finger. She didn't think for one minute he would be, but what else could she say?

'I'm hungry,' was all she could think of. 'I didn't eat a thing this morning, I didn't want a podge in my dress.'

Her friend smiled. 'I know just the thing to cheer you up.'

Ten minutes later, a very startled food server was taking an order from a weepy bride and a very angry woman in a flouncy peach dress. They took a booth in the back, ignoring the stares of the lunchtime crew and the mothers feeding their children a junk-food treat. Cassie put the tray down in front of them, and Maria sank her teeth into a cheeseburger, a napkin shoved into the front bodice of her couture gown, one Darcy's mother had insisted she wear, rather than one of her own designs. A glob of ketchup dripped from the side of the napkin onto the ivory material, and Maria wiped at it half-heartedly, leaving a small red dot on the fabric. *Oh well*, she thought to herself. *Not like*

I'll be saving it for my daughter, eh? She swallowed the last of her burger and looked across at Cassie, who was shovelling fries into her mouth while barking orders into her phone. She reached for hers out of habit, before realising that her bag, containing her keys and phone, was still in the hotel. *In the space of a morning, I have lost my fiancé, my home and my sanity*, she thought to herself glumly. The reality of her situation dawned again, and she felt the threat of her cheeseburger coming back up. Cassie barked out a final command and stashed the phone back inside her tiny peach purse. Her face paled as she looked at the current state of her childhood bestie.

'Maria, you doing okay?'

Maria looked across at her. 'Cass, what the hell am I going to do?'

Cass gripped her hand in both of hers, squeezing it tight. 'Mar, you are going to pick yourself up, get a new place, go back to work, and never speak to Arsy again.'

Maria smiled weakly at her, looking away quickly from the builder who was looking her up and down while devouring a family-sized box of chicken nuggets.

'That easy, eh? Just like that?'

'Yep.' Cass's eyes flashed with determination. 'You can do it. And tonight,' she continued, smiling devilishly, 'we are going to get you very, very drunk.'

Maria rolled her eyes. 'I can't go out tonight. I don't even have anything to wear.' She looked down at her wedding dress, to point

out the elephant in the room. Cassie smiled weakly.

'No night out. PJs, boxset, and copious amounts of Chinese food and alcohol.'

Maria nodded. Not quite the night she had planned, but it sounded good right about now.

'Deal,' she said, slurping her vanilla shake. 'But no Colin Firth.'

Chapter 2
One Week Later

'What the hell! You have got to be kidding me!' Maria slammed the local newspaper, the *Westfield Times*, onto her desk and stomped over to the kettle. She stabbed at the button, throwing ingredients into a mug. She reached into the biscuit barrel, shovelling a triple chocolate cookie into her mouth, mumbling as she chewed, before turning to the wall.

'I mean, I am the ONLY wedding planner in Westfield! The only one! How could Agatha Mayweather go elsewhere, when all she does is prattle on about community, and giving back, and fighting big corporations!' She thrust her arms out wildly as she spun around, cookie crumbs flying from her mouth. 'I mean, seriously! I am going to ring that woman up and give her a piece of my mind!'

'Who are you talking to, dear?' a voice at the door asked. Maria whirled around, seeing her part-time assistant, Lynn, standing there, a large flask in hand. Maria flushed and pointed to the wall, where a picture of her mother was framed and hung up.

'Sorry, Lynn, I was talking to Mum. The Baxters got married again, did you know that? From Love Blooms, the florist? They had a big event on Agatha's estate, and I wasn't even approached

to help!'

Lynn smiled kindly, closing the door against the slight breeze of the weather. It was quite autumnal already. She put the flask down on her desk and strode over to the wooden coat rack, taking off her cream faux fur coat.

'I know, dear, they seem so happy now, and about time too. I did worry about them, when they passed the shop to Lily. Idle thumbs and all that.' She waggled her own very busy thumbs in the air.

Maria glared at her. 'And!?'

Lynn sat at her desk, pouring a slurp of tea from the flask into one of the many bone china mugs she kept at work. She sighed and looked at Maria as she stirred, trying to find the words.

'Darling, Agatha didn't want to bother you about planning a wedding when your… er… when you were supposed to be on honeymoon. Your diary was full, so she didn't ask.'

Maria's shoulders slumped as realisation set in. 'She didn't want a wedding planner who got jilted at the altar, did she?' It came out as more of a defeated statement than a question, and Lynn's heart went out to her. She had watched Maria grow from a tiny baby to the beautiful woman standing before her, and whenever she thought of that wretched Darcy fellow, she found herself planning grisly things against his man parts with a crochet needle.

She waved her hand, cutting off Maria's rant. 'No love, not at all. No one thinks that.'

'Oh no?' Maria shouted, dashing over to the appointments diary. 'So how come I have no bookings then, for the rest of the month? Eh?'

Lynn sighed slowly. 'Maria, I know you're upset, but think about it. The diary is empty because you were supposed to be on holiday, that's all.' She took a sip of tea and eyed her furtively, obviously expecting horns to sprout from her head at any moment. Maria sagged over the diary, deflated. 'Oh,' she said softly. 'Of course, yes… sorry, Lynn.'

Lynn raised her hand to wave off her employer's apology. 'Don't give it a thought. Why don't you take the time off anyway – go away somewhere or something? Nice change of scene, eh?'

Maria shook her head. 'I should be in St Lucia now. Somehow a week in some caravan in Skegness on my tod just doesn't sound appealing.' Lynn opened her mouth to speak again, but the phone on her desk started to ring. She smiled kindly at Maria and dealt with the customer. Maria went to the just-boiled kettle, pouring herself a huge mug of steaming hot coffee. As she added more sugar, she had to admit, if only in her own head, that she shouldn't be at work. She felt like the angry wedding performer in that Adam Sandler movie. A movie she loved, and now couldn't watch for fear of murdering someone, or herself, with a noose made from the finest lace she possessed. She should be glad she didn't own a hardware store, the way she was feeling, but Lynn was right: work *was* going to be tricky, to say the least.

She listened to Lynn discussing venues and prices with the

person on the phone as she took her coffee into the back, to her office. Once there, she closed the door and sagged to the floor behind it, the steaming beverage clutched in her fingers. She took a gulp and, setting it on the coffee table, crawled across the floor and curled up on the couch in the corner. She covered herself over with a blanket, and promptly fell asleep.

Lynn came in an hour later, tucked her in, and pulled the phone socket from the wall so she wouldn't be disturbed. Maria looked exhausted, even in sleep, and Lynn frowned as she looked down at her. *The poor girl*, she thought as she brushed a strand of blonde hair away from her face. Closing the office door behind her, she went to the diary and looked over the next three months. Christmas was coming, and with it the party season, bringing a very welcome set of clients that had nothing to do with weddings. Lynn would book the diary up with these, and try to avoid doing any events. The business was doing well – if a little stalled since the wedding as regards the bigger, more lucrative jobs – so a couple of months off the wedding circuit wouldn't do them any harm, and Lynn was determined to protect her employer as much as possible. She bit her lip as she fired up the computer, checking for any incoming enquiry emails that might derail her plan, but it appeared to be blissfully quiet on the nuptials front so far. It was a stroke of luck that Maria had put her own wedding at the end of the main season. Had this happened in spring, it would have been even worse. She just hoped Maria would be feeling better by the time the season was in full swing again. Being a jilted bride,

wedding planner and owner of wedding boutique Happy Ever After wouldn't bring Miss Mallory peace any time soon. *Men*, she thought to herself, seething at her feeling of helplessness. *They really did have a lot to answer for sometimes.*

Chapter 3

Maria put her key in the lock of Cassie's cottage, sighing as the heavy, red-painted, wooden door only gave an inch. Pushing and tugging at it, she finally made headway and ended up flat on her face in the hallway, having landed on a pile of post. Tutting loudly, she picked up the huge array of magazines and letters, stacking them as best she could on the hall table. For an organised person like Maria, living with Cassie in her Westfield cottage was quite the change from Darcy's large, sleek, minimalist Harrogate abode. Cassie had bought the place from her parents after university. They had a few rental cottages dotted around the area, and Sanctuary Cottage had always been a favourite of Cassie's. She used to sneak in there with Maria after school to study, away from her bickering mother and father, and Maria loved to spend time with her friend there. Cassie was always so much happier within its walls, so much more relaxed, and Maria loved to see this side of her. After they graduated, Cassie had gone and landed a huge job in a swanky Harrogate firm, and had begged her parents to let her buy the place; they'd ended up giving in just to get some peace.

'Cassie?' she shouted, already guessing her friend was still at work, given that her car wasn't parked on the drive. Locking the front door, she headed for the shower, ignoring the blinking of the answer machine. No one would be ringing her anyway.

Other than Cass and Lynn, the only other person in her life was… had been… Darcy. So now she was back to being alone, and it was worse, much worse, now. Because she was all too aware of how it had felt to be in a couple, and how close she had been to having that for ever. After her parents died, she'd got used to being alone – but being plonked back into the status wasn't as easy. It felt like the January slump, dull and rather cruel. Just as you got used to the excitement, the build-up, the change in routine… suddenly, there you were – slap bang back in routine-ville, having to work again, the excitement over, leaving depressed, grey people contemplating major life changes and Googling holiday packages to use as escape pods. An escape pod sounded like a fantastic idea at the moment.

Rinsing off the suds from her hair, she heard a door bang downstairs.

'Cass?' she shouted, squinting at a stray sud that had dripped down into her eye. 'That you?'

She listened but heard nothing. *Cass was never home early; the woman was a machine.* She listened again, but the shower was all she could hear.

The bathroom door burst open and Maria screamed. The other person screamed back just as loudly, and Maria grappled for purchase on the shower curtain while swinging one arm behind her for something to use as a weapon. Her fingers found a shampoo bottle, and she was just about to douse the intruder with Pantene when she heard her name being called. Wiping at her eye

frantically, she looked again at the door and saw Cassie standing there, face still frozen mid scream. She put the shampoo bottle down on the side of the bath, willing her frantically beating heart to slow down.

'Cassie! You frightened me to death! Where's the fire?' she laughed, embarrassed at her reaction. Cassie didn't answer at first, looking panicked. Maria turned off the water and grabbed a fluffy bath towel, wrapping herself up. Getting out of the shower, she shivered as her feet hit the cold tiled floor. Cassie was still looking at her funny, and hadn't moved an inch.

'Cass,' Maria said, concerned now. 'What's the matter? Bad day at work?'

Cassie grabbed her arm, pulling her slowly into the guest room. Maria followed, wondering what had happened to make her friend so uncharacteristically anxious. She sat down at the foot of the bed, her pal sitting next to her, putting an arm around her, oblivious to the wet hair that trailed down it.

'I take it you didn't listen to the answerphone message then,' she said softly. Maria shook her head, concern now clouding her own features.

'No, why? Cass, you're seriously worrying me now. Please – just tell me what's wrong!'

Cassie took a breath. 'My secretary was reading one of those celeb mags at work this afternoon, and she came across a piece on Darcy.'

Maria felt suddenly woozy, her breath taken in a sharp gasp.

'Okay,' she said, her voice barely audible. 'Go on.'

Cassie reached into her pocket and pulled out a ripped piece of paper on which Darcy's face could be seen smiling out from above the crease. Maria grabbed it from her, unfolding it. The headline read HARROGATE BACHELOR LICKS HIS WOUNDS IN THE SUN. Underneath were three pictures: one of Darcy in a pair of shorts, looking out to the horizon from a tropical beach, tanned and pensive. Another was of him driving down a beach road in a flash open-top car. His hair was being blown by the wind, making him look sultry, and his lips were contorted in a sad pout. I mean, the man looked depressed, albeit in sunny weather and behind the wheel of a posh car.

The third picture was of him lying on a sunlounger, caught in mid laugh, cocktail in hand. Scanning the pictures, she stopped dead. It wasn't the hand holding the cocktail she was focused on, but the other one. The one held by a slender set of fingers, a woman's, her thumb bearing a fleur-de-lys ring. The person was obscured by a wall of loungers, so only the hand showed, but it was unmistakable. Darcy had gone on honeymoon, *their honeymoon*, and was holding hands with another woman. The article was brief, just a few lines about how Darcy Burgess, heir to the Harrogate tea empire, was 'consoling' himself with an 'unknown female companion' after his aborted wedding to Westfield girl Maria Mallory.

Cassie took the piece of paper back from her. Maria allowed it to slip through her fingers. It felt like it was on fire anyway,

her fingertips tingling from the contact.

'How can it say that? It makes it sound as though I left him at the altar. He broke my heart, and he went on holiday! We were supposed to be married now!'

Cassie said nothing, thrusting the article back into her pocket. She strode over to the wardrobe, throwing the doors open, and started thumbing through the hangers. Maria looked across at her.

'What are you doing?'

Cassie grabbed a red dress and thrust it at Maria. 'Put this on.'

Maria looked at the dress, which had been a daring purchase, never worn. The tag scraped at her arm as she laid it on the bed. 'I can't wear that, I should never have bought it!' *Trust Cassie to have rescued that from her old place, Darcy's home. She should have left it there.* She pushed the thought from her head. She shouldn't be ungrateful; after all, she had got all her belongings back without even having to put a toe near Darcy. Which was good, since the toe was attached to her foot, and if she had seen him, she would have used that foot to give him a good kicking. If Cassie hadn't got there first and ripped him limb from limb like she'd threatened to, that was.

Cassie glared at her, oblivious to the violent thoughts swirling round in her friend's head. 'Why buy it then? Come on, get your hair dried. We are going out… NO ARGUMENTS,' she boomed as Maria opened her mouth to protest. Maria felt her foot itch but ignored it. Not tonight, angry toe.

Two hours later, Maria found herself in Harrogate, squeezed into the red dress, shoes pinching her feet, wondering why the hell she wasn't sitting on Cassie's couch eating ice cream, sloshing wine down and crying. She said the same to Cassie as they walked on tottering heels to the nearest trendy bar, Ice, in the wine-bar-and-posh-eatery part of Harrogate's city centre, which, coincidentally, butted up against the legal quarter of Harrogate, and no doubt the two sides kept each other in business quite well too. Walking into Ice with Cassie, it was hard to ignore the stares her friend attracted. Cassie Welburn was, she had to face it, sex on a twenty-nine-year-old stick. She was always tanned thanks to her meticulous salon treatments, plucked and shaped to perfection, and tonight, as usual, she was dressed to kill. Even Maria's daring red slinky number looked tame in light of Cassie's black and silver dress, slashed to the thigh, combined with sparkly silver heels that made her even taller than her just-under-six-foot frame. Maria blushed and nudged Cassie's elbow with her own.

'People are staring, Cass.' Cassie shrugged, propelling them both forward into the bar with a determined swagger.

'Let them stare, girl. Don't worry, I've got your back.' Maria belatedly realised that tonight, thanks to that ridiculous article, the stares might indeed be for her and not her glamorous friend. She cringed inwardly and planted a smile on her face. She took her friend by the arm and, pushing her boobs out and her chin up, headed to the bar. 'Let's get smashed,' she declared.

Four bars later, the two friends were knocking out shapes on a dancefloor. They were now in a place called Fresh! which had a large dancefloor in the back, complete with strobe lighting and a large DJ booth that overlooked the whole area. It was all neon lights, tacky road signs, and club kitsch, but it went well with the Eighties pop they were currently playing. Maria was laughing at Cassie, who was singing her head off to a Wham! hit while several suitors flanked her, unseen, ready to make their move, like big cats on a gazelle. If only they'd known Cass was the biggest cat of them all. No man could take her down; just ask her clients. Cassie illustrated the point by wiggling gracefully away from a man who dared to wrap his arms around her, shooting him a look that could curdle milk. As the song merged into another, Maria licked at her lips. The remnants of the last shot were sticky on her mouth and she needed something to rehydrate. Motioning to Cass over the loud music that she was heading to get something to drink, Maria took a rare empty stool at the surprisingly quiet bar. It seemed everyone was writhing and thrashing on the dancefloor, all the stools occupied but hers and another next to it. The bartender, a bored-looking youth in a uniform consisting of a black T-shirt and the tightest jeans known to mankind, gave her an enquiring nod as she sat.

'Bottle of water, please, thanks,' she said, getting only an eye roll in return. 'Jesus, who died?' she said under her breath.

'No one yet,' came the answer from her left. She looked across, surprised anyone had heard over the music, and met the brown

eyes of a man who made the barman look positively cheerful. He looked wretched; bloodshot eyes under hooded lids, a near-vacant expression, all topped by a head of very unruly brown hair. He had a look of Droopy the cartoon dog. Cute, though – what Maria would call a fixer-upper. Good bones, just needed a bit of renovation. The cut of his rather creased but obviously expensive clothes did him no favours either. He looked like he needed to be steam-cleaned from head to foot.

She shook her head, snapping herself out of work mode. When it came to suits on men, she was always dressing them, rather than undressing. She thought of Darcy's honeymoon suit, the time she'd taken designing it from scratch, making it with her own two hands, just to hang in some wardrobe, untouched and unloved. A bit like her. Unless he had taken it with him, to hang in some foreign wardrobe with another woman's clothes. A traitor suit. One that waggled its sleeves at any bit of clothing going. A slut suit, with no ounce of honour among its fine threading.

'Bad day?' she asked, paying the bartender and taking a refreshing swig from the ice-cold bottle of water. He turned to her again, a half-smile playing on his lips.

'A bad month, to be honest,' he said glumly, throwing back a shot with a flick of his head. Maria nodded in understanding.

'I get that – me too.' He looked across at her, and Maria felt his eyes run over her, scrutinising her from head to foot. She blushed, remembering she looked like a damn Bond girl.

'Ignore the get-up. My mate Cass "dressed me" and dragged

me out to cheer me up.'

The man nodded, turning towards the dancefloor, where it seemed everyone but them was. Maria pointed to Cassie, who was currently rubbing body parts suggestively with a man who looked like Channing Tatum's slightly better-looking stunt double. Cassie caught them watching and waved emphatically, tossing her hair into Nearly-Tatum's face, not that he seemed to mind. Maria laughed despite herself. Her friend was mad, but she loved her to bits, despite their normally different views on romance. The man peered back over his shoulder at her, flashing an amused grin. 'So, she's supposedly here to cheer you up, yet you're sitting at the bar alone, drinking water, while she does that?' He pointed again to Cassie, who was now pretty much in danger of being mauled by the males surrounding her. Mauled or peed on territorially. Neither was an appealing prospect. Nearly-Tatum looked all set to beat his chest and run up the speaker tower with her under his arm, taking a few rivals down along the way. Maria sighed and turned back to the bar, hailing the lazy barman, who looked like he was reading a comic book in the corner.

'Two of whatever he's having, please,' she said, motioning to the empty shot glasses.

'Make that two each,' the man added, thrusting a twenty onto the bar. Maria couldn't be bothered to argue, so she grabbed a twenty from her purse and put it on top of his. He smiled.

'In the mood to get drunk?' he asked. 'I'm Mark by the way.'

She looked across at the unkempt but handsome man. Cassie was with her, she was pretty safe where she was, and the thought of getting blasted and having a laugh with a man who wasn't going to jilt her at the altar and take another woman on honeymoon sounded like a pretty welcome way to spend the evening.

'Maria,' she said in reply, as the shots were lined up. 'And you bet your ass I am.'

Chapter 4

Maria was pretty sure her head had been sawn off in the night, jammed with nuts and bolts, and then stapled back on. Even opening her eyes caused her physical pain, but she had a horrible feeling of dread that forced her to push back the pain and peel apart her crusty eyelids. Managing to pull open one eye, she half-sighed in relief as she realised she was lying on her front in Cassie's spare room, her room while she was here. Her relief was short-lived when she saw a piece of paper on her pillow, some unfamiliar writing scrawled across it. Fighting against the wave of nausea that occurred when she moved her arm from her side, she reached for the paper, her fingers barely grasping it. Hungover was not the word. She felt as though she had been dug up. She could still taste the many, many shots she had drunk last night, along with an undertone of chips she didn't remember eating. The paper said:

I had to get to work but thank you for last night. I really needed the company.

Mark Smith

A mobile number was underneath the name, along with a solitary kiss. Maria put the paper over her face, blocking out the sunlight from the window by her bed. A flashback of skin on skin popped into her head, and she grimaced. What the hell had she been thinking? Sleeping with a stranger went against everything

she believed. And she did remember sleeping with him, however hazy her memory was. And protection? Oh Lord, she couldn't remember. She rolled out of bed as urgently as she could (which wasn't very urgently at all), crawling to the bathroom as the contents of her stomach warned her they were about to make an appearance. She had just reached the rim, her fingers curling around the cold porcelain, when she spotted something floating on top of the water. A condom. *Thank heaven, the angels, and the makers of rubbers*, she exclaimed in her head. The nausea subsided slightly with the panic, and she rolled onto her back, gripping the base of the toilet like an otter trying to break a clam.

'Cass… i… e… eee,' she called feebly. No reply. She banged her palm down on the tiled floor with a slap-slap sound, as loudly as she could bear with her headache. 'Cass…' *slap* 'iieee…' *slap*. 'Cassie!' she tried again, and heard a shuffling noise in the corridor. Maria was just about to shout again when the door opened and Maria found herself staring at the naked man parts of Nearly-Tatum, and the chips made a surprise reverse appearance after all.

Maria hugged the blanket around her for dear life as she looked at the Saturday morning autumn weather from the cottage window. She was dressed in fresh PJs, post-shower, and was still barely holding it together. Nearly-Tatum, a very friendly Australian otherwise known as Tucker, had made her a coffee and was now making scrambled eggs, in his pants, in the cottage kitchen. Cassie was lying in the armchair next to her, staring

pointedly at her.

'Cass, stop!' Maria shuddered as the sound of her own voice rattled the pickled brain in her head. 'I can't talk about it. I can't even drink this coffee.' She put the steaming mug onto the coffee table, alongside a stack of law books and two yoghurt pots, spoons still stuck in. She gagged at the sight. 'Seriously, Cass, I'll clean this place for you, or hire you someone?'

Cassie, legs dangling over the IKEA chair arm, waved her away with her rather feeble fingers. 'I will sort it, chill.'

The radio was on in the kitchen, and Tucker-Tatum was humming along to Bon Jovi as he clanged pans about. Cassie snuck a look at her, grinning devilishly. Even hungover, and with her Little Mermaid PJs on, she was still quite a sight with her perfect, sculpted brows and long, raven-black hair. Maria looked back at her, flicking her eyes to the kitchen. 'So, what's happening today? And what did you get up to last night?'

Cassie raised an eyebrow and shook her head. 'Oh no, missus, you don't get to find out about my night, till you spill about yours!'

Maria groaned. 'Oh, Cass, it was a mistake, obviously. I shouldn't have gone anywhere near a bloke last night. I can't remember most of it, and I seriously think my liver is dying today. Those shots were little cups of poison, I'm sure of it.'

Cassie nodded, wincing herself. The smell of bacon and eggs started permeating the air, and they both licked their lips at the same time. A man, in the kitchen, cooking hangover food. It seemed that Cassie had won the morning after, at least. Not that

Tatum-Tucker would be seen again after today. He was already on borrowed time, he just didn't know it yet. It was a miracle he'd even got to stay the whole night. Maria was grateful for the fact that her friend didn't do relationships, given the man had watched her vomit half-naked, held her hair back and picked her up off the bathroom floor. All done with tanned washboard abs and a pair of Captain America pants he had thankfully dashed to put on. Embarrassment was not the word, but he seemed to take it in his stride, calling for Cassie to help while he cleaned up the bathroom and got to making coffee. Now he was feeding them, and she had even seen him heading to the bins, black bag in hand. Cassie was oblivious to it all, having just helped Maria get changed before they plonked down into their respective blanket forts in the living room. It felt weirdly domestic, the longer they sat there, so Cassie turned on the television. Or rather, she jabbed at the remote on the arm of the chair with a shaky, polished finger. It sprang into life, and she dived on it, hitting the volume button with gusto as the sound of the morning news filled the air. 'Arrghh!' they both moaned collectively at the noise.

'Everything all right?' The Australian twang came from the kitchen.

'Yes!' they both shouted, wincing again. 'Yess…' they whispered, shooting each other a sympathetic look as they retreated deeper into their blankets like turtles into their shells.

'And in other local news, Darcy Burgess – is the honeymoon truly over?'

The newscaster couldn't have caused a larger impact if he had parachuted in through the roof. They both jumped off the sofa, commando-crawling across the cream (and slightly stained) carpet towards the dusty TV unit.

'Turn it up, turn it up!' Maria screamed at Cassie, who was pressing the buttons like her life depended on it.

'Just weeks ago, a certain August wedding was heralded as the crown in Harrogate's events calendar, with Darcy Burgess, eligible bachelor and heir to the Burgess Tea Company, set to wed local Westfield entrepreneur and wedding planner Maria Mallory. However, on the day, the wedding didn't go to plan, and pictures emerged from the overseas press of Darcy, looking alone in St Lucia. What happened to the pair? Was Darcy jilted at the altar? The Burgess family have yet…'

'Breakfast, girls!' Tucker said, an apron emblazoned with the chipper slogan 'This came with the kitchen' the only thing covering his half-nakedness.

'Sshh!' They both batted him away. Shrugging, he put their plates down on the coffee table, returning to sit on the couch with one of his own.

'Where did you get that apron?' Cassie asked him, looking at Maria. Maria shook her head, transfixed by the screen.

'It was in the drawer, in a wrapper. You know,' he said, shovelling a piece of bacon into his mouth, 'that kitchen is pretty grim, almost like no one uses it.'

'Sshh!' Maria waved frantically.

'Sshh!' Cassie added, giving him a glare from her mascara-ringed eyes. He snorted, biting off a piece of bacon aggressively at her. She grinned at him before remembering to scowl.

Maria was glued to the screen. 'It says they have yet to release a statement. It's ridiculous, why would they do that?' The look she gave Cassie broke her heart. She wrapped her swaddled arm around her friend.

'Protection, hun – they have a reputation.'

Maria sniffed, wiping away a tear. 'So do I, and a business. I have a living to make, and Westfield is such a small, close-knit place. People talk, and after last night…'

A vision of the events of the evening before swam into focus and Maria burst into tears. Tucker stood and quietly left for the kitchen, sensing the need for privacy. Cassie hugged her tighter.

'We can spin this, you know,' Cassie said, her legal acumen springing into action. 'Why don't we talk to the local paper, see if they'll run your story? At the end of the day, Mar, he went on honeymoon with another woman after jilting you at the altar. He deserves to be run through the press, not you.'

Maria sobbed loudly. 'I can't do that. It's too petty, not to mention embarrassing. How did this happen? Them being so quiet about everything makes me look awful. How can he do this to me, Cass? And Mark last night… I mean, oh God!'

Cassie wrapped her arms around her best friend once more, crushing her under their combined blankets.

'Hey, listen, last night was… well… it was company. You

needed comfort, and everyone spins out when they have a break-up. We all do silly things and hurt people. Mark left you his number as well, so it's not all bad. He could be Prince Charming! Darcy arseface could be the frog. This could be a funny story you and Mark tell your grandkids by the fire.'

Maria laughed, prompting a snot bubble to blow out of her left nostril. Cassie visibly shrank away from her, always disgusted by anything gross or remotely like looking after a child. She grabbed the tissue box and threw it to Maria. Maria caught it gratefully and blew her nose.

'That, my friend, is gross. Now, come on, let's eat breakfast before it gets cold. You have to work today, remember?'

Maria groaned. Saturday was the day she worked alone in the shop, luckily. She could get away with drinking vats of coffee in her sweatpants with Lynn not around, and there were no brides booked in, so she could concentrate on doing the alterations at the back of the shop. She made the odd dress or two for the sale racks when she had time, and they sold well to the locals and the tourists, so maybe she could run up a couple of designs to fill the shopfront a little. The display would need changing too, she thought, as she started to eat her cooling breakfast. It would soon be the party season, and the bridal display could be taken down. Thinking of her own gown, wrapped up with the other dresses in the upstairs flat of her shop, her stomach roiled once more. She would return it, she decided, and get rid of it. They'd paid for it anyway. They would just have to get rid of the burger relish

stain. Darcy could jolly well spring for a dry cleaner. She needed to try to take back some semblance of control.

It was at that moment that Tucker walked back in sporting his apron and a dish-washing brush. Both having forgotten he was even there, Cassie joined Maria in a loud scream, which sent Tucker diving down the back of the sofa, suds flying, and the girls running to the medicine cabinet for more paracetamol.

'Dude!' Cassie said, ramming a white pill into her desert-dry mouth. 'You need to wear a bell!'

Tucker laughed as he walked into Cassie's room, a tattoo of a kangaroo punching a koala on a surfboard on his sculpted back the last thing they saw before the door closed.

Chapter 5

Opening the door to Happy Ever After, Maria heaved a sigh of frustration. Her old Ford car was freezing, the heating having not worked even when it belonged to her mother years ago, but the shop was supposed to be warm, and it was so cold. She always silently thanked Lynn in her head for doing one of the many tiny but wonderful things she did around the business, like setting the heating in autumn and winter. The radiators were cold to the touch this morning, though, no hum of the heating. Wexley Street was a small row of shops linked to pretty cottages at either side, just in the heart of town, near Baker Street and jutting off Foxley Street. Westfield had been home for ever to Maria and her mother and father, and she couldn't imagine living anywhere else. Normally, at this time of year, with the wedding season slowing and the first autumn leaves dropping, Maria would be in her element. Designing fancy-dress costumes for kids that she sold online, catering for the local dances and parties that the festive season brought with it. It was magical.

This time, however, it felt so flat. She was alone. Nothing had changed, it seemed. Nothing at all. The shop was the same, with its slightly wonky walls, peeling paint and old-fashioned features. In its previous life it had been a bookshop, and her father had brought her as a girl to wander among the shelves, delving for literary treasures about pirates and princesses, while he studied

one thing or another. It reminded her of the wand shop from *Harry Potter*, complete with dusty shelves and strange owner. Mr Hoffman had died not long after her mum and, with no family to speak of, the business closed. Maria had been dealing with the grief of becoming an orphan, living in an empty house full of memories, and a desire for something new, linked with the familiar. She had sunk all her money from the house into the shop, saving what furniture she could fit in and selling the rest. She had lived upstairs among the stock till Darcy had asked her to move in with him. Now she was back to being here, her safe haven, and she wouldn't let anything or anyone take it from her.

Flicking the trusty kettle on, she shook off her fleecy coat and bobble hat, placing them on the old coat rack. Father's hat still hung there, just as it had at home, perched on top, and she smiled at it fondly. It was on the far wall, near the double-windowed doors of the back room, next to the photo of her mother.

'Morning, Mum,' she said absently. 'You don't have to say a word,' she muttered, opening the back doors to let light into the rooms. It seemed so much darker today. She looked into the back room at her inbox of projects and alterations. Not much there, she mused. Lynn had struck again. She knew her assistant had taken care of everything for her, not wanting her to be stressed with work, but in truth, with the huge blanks in the diary, Maria could have used the distraction. She shook her head to chase away the blues and headed to the counter. Filling her favourite mug with some sweetener, she reached for the kettle and flicked it on again.

She mustn't have done it properly the last time, as it was cold. Nothing happened.

Flicking the button impatiently, she waited for the red light to flick on. Nothing. Moving to the light switch, she flicked it on. Still nothing. She sighed and, going into the back room, flicked light switches on and off, tried the sewing machine, the over locker. Nothing, and the phone was off too. Damn it. Heading through to the back, she opened the door to the back pantry and pulled down the cover to the fuse box. Something had tripped, obviously. The electrics had been pretty much untouched since she bought the shop, and probably for years before that. She was amazed they'd passed the survey, looking at them now. She switched one of the switches, which was flipped down, back up, but it tripped again.

She growled and flicked the switch again. The same thing happened. 'What?'

She tried again but got nothing. 'Damn it, I don't need this today. What the hell is going on?'

The shop was due to open soon. She couldn't very well open up with no power! She went to her handbag to get her phone but remembered she had left it at home switched off. Perfect, and the desktop wouldn't work without power. She looked under the wooden countertop, hunting around among catalogues and sample books till her fingers touched what she was looking for.

She used to laugh at her mother and her old-school ways, hoarding things that didn't have a place in the modern world.

Now she did it too, and thank God she had. Thumbing through the Westfield phone book, she felt close to her, and her heart squeezed in pain at the fresh wave of loss she felt. Thank goodness for Cassie and Lynn. The thought of being alone was never far from her thoughts these days. She thought of Darcy, what he would think of her if he knew she had spent the night with a stranger. Would he even care? She had studied the pictures from the press so many times now, she felt as if she could draw them from memory.

She was glad her mother wasn't here, in a way. The thought of her sitting in the church watching her only child get jilted was too much to bear. She wondered what kind of person could do that to another person. The Darcy she knew would never have done something so callous. Except he had. He'd done it and never looked back. The photos proved it. She could understand him wanting to get away. God knew she had wanted to escape herself. She could just about forgive him for going on their honeymoon, if she really willed herself to. The honeymoon she had booked, planned and helped pay for, given that he and his family had paid for the wedding. The honeymoon had been her contribution, her small way of exerting her independence. But it was fine. He needed to get away, escape the flak for what he'd done.

Fair enough. She could swallow that, in time. It was the arm in the photo that bothered her. What did it mean? Had he used her ticket to take someone else? Had he met someone there? Was it all for the press? They didn't seem to know who she was, and as

it was just an arm, they didn't have much to go on. If it had been staged for the press, wouldn't Darcy have made sure they could actually see her? At least with a face, a body, there would be more context. Maybe she was wearing a resort uniform? Perhaps she was just a member of staff, passing him a cocktail to cheer him up. Maybe she was minging. She could be a moose for all Maria knew. Anyone could have attractive-looking arms. Look at Madonna. Her arms were epic, but looking at them disembodied in a photo, you couldn't tell whether it was the Queen of Pop or Iggy Pop. The crazy thought cheered her no end. The owner of the arm could indeed be no one, just a passing holidaymaker. The thought that Darcy could be that cruel didn't bear thinking about. She'd loved the man he was. It felt like he had died too, in a way. The thought of him being out there, kissing another person with his lips, cradling someone in the arms that used to encircle her, was damn near killing her.

She felt the physical pain of her loss, and took a moment to will her body to breathe again. Grief and a hangover. Never great. She lowered herself to the floor, pulling the phone book onto her lap. Thumbing through, she looked for an electrician who wouldn't charge the earth for a Saturday-morning callout. They didn't have one in Westfield, tending to fix what they could themselves, but this was out of her league. She could call one of the villagers, but given that everyone seemed to be giving her a wide berth, she didn't relish playing the jilted bride *and* damsel in distress. That would be one step too far in terms of

feeling pathetic. She needed to prove to everyone, and herself for that matter, that she could still stand on her own two feet. She'd done it before, and she would again. She had to. And it was then that she saw it. The little box advert, staring out at her from the paper. Chance Electrics. Chance. It spoke to her. That's what she needed. Hope. A chance to solve this problem, get her business back up and running and the home lights burning so she could at least keep the wolves from the door while she recovered.

This is it, Maria. She could hear her mother's voice in her head, spurring her on. *You can do this, my girl. You don't need anything else. Use what you already hold.* She nodded at her mother's photo and picked herself up off the floor. Thank goodness there were still phone boxes in the village, she thought to herself as she headed to the nearest one. Pressing in the number, she smiled to herself. No weekend callout fee either. It really was a sign.

Cassie was hiding in her bathroom, pretending to get ready. She had applied her liquid eyeliner three times already. Any more and she was going to end up looking like Marilyn Manson. She could still hear Tucker in the kitchen, humming along to the radio and banging things around. Why was he still here? Robbers made less noise. She half-hoped he was robbing her, because then at least he would go and she could avoid the awkward conversation she knew was coming. This was precisely the reason why she never brought people home. Sanctuary Cottage was just that to her, a sanctuary from her parents at first, and then her job, and now she had a rogue Australian running around, rummaging in

her cupboards. She couldn't even ring Maria because her phone was on charge in the living room. She needed to fake a work emergency or something, but what would she say? A carrier pigeon had flown in through the bathroom window? Hogwarts owl? She couldn't hide in here all day, that was certain. She needed to woman up, go out there and face him. Say 'thanks for the hot sex, don't forget to wipe me from your memory on your way out of the door'. What kind of weirdo hung around in the morning anyway, let alone made breakfast? It was definitely bad man code, she was sure of it.

A polite knock came at the door, making her jump.

'Cassie, you okay in there?' His Aussie twang reverberated through the wood.

'Er, yeah, I'm fine. Do you need something?' She tiptoed to the door, listening for sounds of movement.

'Well, I thought we could maybe get lunch, if you like? I don't have to work till later. Do you fancy it?'

'Lunch?' Cassie said, incredulous. 'Why?'

An amused chuckle came back. 'It's what people do, eat at certain times of day. Sometimes they even do it together, have a conversation or two.'

Cassie cringed. She couldn't think of anything more toe curling, aside from turning up to court dressed as a pirate.

What have you come dressed as today, Cass? Professional suicide? Arrgghhhh, me hearties!

'Er, no, sorry, I can't. I have a lot of work coming up, I have to

work. All weekend. And next week. The whole month, actually.'

He said nothing, so she put her ear to the door. She couldn't hear anything.

'Okay, so lunch next week then. You eat lunch at work, right? I'll call you…'

Oh God. What was his deal? Did he feel bad? He obviously didn't do this very often.

'Er, yeah?'

'Right, it's a date then. I'm going to go now, let you get on with work and stop listening behind doors.'

Cassie sprang back from the entrance, cursing under her breath.

'Nice mouth,' he laughed. 'See you next week! I left you something in the fridge.'

She stared at the door, head cocked to one side till she heard the front door open and close. She came out of the bathroom, heading to her bedroom to look out of the window. Looking out from behind the blinds, she saw him heading down her path. He looked like he was walking down a catwalk. Weird or not, Cassie did have to recognise that the man was an absolute hottie. Shame she wasn't the type to do second dates. Or even first ones. Hell, having breakfast with him had been a first, even with Maria as a buffer. She was just admiring his butt wistfully when he stopped at the gate, turned and looked straight at her.

'Shit!' she said, jumping back behind the curtain. Sneaking a peek, she saw him blow her a kiss before walking off towards

Westfield centre. Uber hadn't quite hit the village yet. The villagers were still getting over high-speed internet arriving. Summoning a taxi with the click of a button was more than some of them could take, for now. Hopefully he wouldn't go shooting his mouth off in the village about where he had spent the night. With Maria already in the spotlight, the last thing she needed was for people to think she was hanging around with random men. But as Cassie herself always said, the best way to get over a man was to get under another. It would have done Maria some good, something to take her mind off Arsy Darcy. As long as it wasn't a regular thing. Maria wasn't like that anyway. All she had ever wanted to be was happy and married.

Cassie watched Tucker walk away till he was out of sight, and then headed downstairs. It was like stepping into the twilight zone. It didn't even feel like her house. She looked into the lounge. Same in there. He had cleaned up. Really cleaned. She could smell polish, cleaning sprays. Walking into the kitchen she was hit by a horrible smell. She gagged and headed to the window, throwing it open. What the hell had he done? She looked around and saw the bottle on the side. Bleach. The man was insane. She'd pulled Mr Mop. Every surface had been cleared, wiped clean. She could see her work surfaces for once. It felt like she *had* been robbed. Flicking her foot on the pedal bin, she only saw an empty bin liner. He had even taken the rubbish out. She looked in horror towards the now very shiny fridge freezer. He had even scrubbed the fronts of the damn appliances. Who knew

what horrors awaited behind those doors. What would it be? A severed head? A ransom note?

She walked across the gleaming kitchen floor, pinching her nose against the smell of cleanliness around her, and curled her fingers around the metal fridge handle. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door.

Her fridge was mostly empty, aside from a bottle of wine in the cooler. It was always empty, which begged the question of where he had got breakfast from. In her alcohol-pickled stupor this morning, she hadn't even realised that she didn't own a tin of beans, let alone the makings of a full English. Had he been shopping? Oh, dear Lord.

On the bottom shelf was a package wrapped in tinfoil. When she opened it, she saw a ham salad sandwich, cut in half and placed neatly on a plate. On the top was a note, written on a small piece of paper.

Thanks for last night, and since I know you'll probably say no to lunch, I made some for you.

Jesse Tucker

He had left his number, written there underneath his name. A stupid name at that. Who had a last name as a first name, anyway? Another reason never to call him. And she wouldn't be eating his food either. Not a chance in hell. She shut the fridge door again and headed upstairs. She needed to get to the gym, try and get rid of this hangover. Hopefully the stink of her gym bag when she got back would mask the gross smells here. She

just hoped Maria wouldn't expect her to keep things like this. It was never going to happen. Who would want to live like this? Life was for living, not cleaning. Cassie headed out, grabbing her phone on the way past. A minute later, she came back and grabbed the sandwich, tucking it into her bag. If she got hungry later, she might as well eat the damn thing. No one would ever know.

Chapter 6

The thing about ice cream that not enough people knew was that it had amazing restorative properties for the body. It soothed the soul, helped some sugar work its way around the sluggish body system when hungover, and cheered up the most melancholy of hearts. Since she no longer needed to fit into a wedding dress, or a honeymoon bikini, she felt that eating the emergency tub of Rocky Road from the icebox was allowed. It was the weekend after all, and it would melt anyway – since the whole shop was still down. It had been two hours, and even though the 'open' sign was flipped, no one had come into the shop. At this rate, next year she wouldn't even have a shop to hide in. She sat on the floor, back against the countertop, legs pulled up to her sides as she balanced the tub on her knees. She could see her mother's picture on the wall, and she looked at it as she did every day. In the years since she had passed, Maria had always missed her. When she'd signed for the shop, the first person she had wanted to call was her mum. When Darcy had proposed, Lynn and she had shed a tear or two about the fact she wouldn't be there.

This time was different. Maria was broken, and she knew it. In her dehydrated, exhausted state, she felt the loss of her mother as though it were yesterday. She shovelled another spoonful of ice cream into her mouth and looked at her mother's smiling face.

'I miss you so much, Mum. I have so much to tell you, and I don't even know what to do anymore.' A sob escaped her lips, and she sucked in a shaky breath. 'Darcy… Darcy left me, and I got drunk… and there was a man… and the business…' She dissolved into sobs, shoving the spoon into the half-empty tub of melting ice cream. 'I miss you so much. I really want to pull it together, but I don't think I can this time.' She heard a noise at the side of her, but ignored it.

'I just need someone to be there for me, Mum, for once. Why does everyone leave?'

'Huh-hum.' There was that noise again. Maria looked to her left and, through tear-stained eyes, saw that the shop door was ajar, and in front of it was a very puzzled-looking man. Quite a good-looking one at that.

'Oh, shit!' She jumped up, throwing the carton to one side and standing up so quickly she got a post-alcohol head rush. 'Oh, ow!' She grabbed her head with both hands, trying to quell the lightning bolt that was striking between her ears. He went to step forward, placing his bag on the floor and closing the shop door. He flicked it to closed, and then just kind of stood there, watching her. Maria was suddenly very aware of the fact that she had been caught mainlining ice cream, looking like a bag lady and talking to a wall. She wiped her eyes ineffectually. Looking down at the floor, she saw that the discarded ice cream tub was now lying on its side, dribbling its contents onto the hardwood floor. It felt like a metaphor for her life, discarded and dribbling

away.

She took another stab at wiping her face with sticky fingers.

'I'm really sorry, can I help you?'

The man didn't say anything for a beat. He just looked at her, an odd expression on his face. She looked right back, trying to figure out who this man was and why he was just staring at her.

'I'm the electrician. Are you okay?' He was looking at her as though he was expecting a gust of wind to whip through the shop and blow her away. In turn, seeing him standing there, among the beautiful silks and trains of the front display window, Maria couldn't help thinking how strong he looked. He was dressed in a simple black T-shirt and workers' trousers in a dark gunmetal grey. He had actual guns, big arm muscles she could make out under his short sleeves. It was then she noticed his pockets were filled with assorted tools. He jangled a little as he moved closer, taking one slow step after another towards her.

'I'm James Chance. I believe we spoke on the phone. Maria, is it?'

She nodded mutely, blinking back the tears that kept threatening to erupt. He took another step forward.

'Okay,' he said softly. 'Why don't you point me to the fuse box, and I'll let you freshen up while I get started. That all right?' She noticed his eyes then, blue-green, like beautiful glass marbles, topped off with thick, dark lashes against the darker cropped hair that peeked out from his baseball cap. They were looking at her with concern. It was a look she was all too used to nowadays,

and she shrank away from it. The man picked up his toolbox and slowly walked closer to her. She walked zombie-like to the back room and pointed to the fuse box.

'It's there. I'll just… er… go upstairs.' She headed to the back stairs and looked back at him.

'You okay down here?' She realised she was about to leave her business, and her till, unattended, in the presence of a complete stranger.

'I'm fine, don't worry – and listen, I am trustworthy. I have ID, if you want to see it, or I can come back another time?' The thought of him not fixing the electrics was incentive enough to swallow her fears. He didn't look like a serial killer. Although what serial killers looked like was anybody's guess. It wasn't like they had a club badge or bought matching T-shirts.

'No, no!' she squeaked. 'I really can't afford to lose any more business right now. I really need the electrics fixing. I won't be long, please stay.' It didn't escape her attention that she was begging a man not to leave. This was obviously her life now. Trying to hold a man down. Yay. Feminism was alive and kicking in Westfield.

He looked at her kindly. 'I'm not going anywhere, don't worry.' She smiled back, oddly comforted by his words. He turned away, and she headed up the stairs.

Looking in the mirror in the bathroom upstairs, Maria groaned. No wonder the bloke had been looking at her funny, what with talking to the wall. And this. Looking at her reflection

was like looking at a poster of Zelda from *Terrorhawks*. Minus the good hair. Hers was stuck up all over, from a mixture of being tousled during stranger sex to leftover hair mousse. Plus what looked and smelt suspiciously like toothpaste. She put the plug in and ran the hot water, nipping to the rail in the other room to see what clothes she had on the hangers. Making her own clothes had its perks.

Heading down the stairs fifteen minutes later, wearing a simple summer dress and tights from her accessories stock box, her hair scraped back into a tidy bun, she could hear the soft bangs of metal on metal, followed by the occasional grunting and muttering.

She stood beside him and he turned at the noise. His gaze flicked over her, his eyes looking her up and down, and she flushed with embarrassment.

'Sorry, I'm having a bit of a day.' She brushed her dress skirt down self-consciously. It was a plain navy blue, brightened up slightly by a thin red belt and sheer tights.

James looked at her and smiled. 'You look nice. Are you okay? It's not my business, but—'

'I'm fine,' Maria said, plastering on a fake smile. It was her stock response nowadays; it didn't even have any meaning anymore. Who was fine these days, really? 'Can you fix my box?'

Her eyes widened as her words hit the air. 'I mean, my fuse box, er… my electrics. Can you fix it?'

His lip twitched and he looked like he wanted to say

something, but he turned back to the box and pointed. 'This is outdated. To be honest, I'm surprised it's worked as long as it has. The fuse wire was shot, so I've fixed it for now, but you really do need to replace it all, rewire the lot.'

Maria felt like she'd been punched in the gut. 'Is there any way we can avoid that, maybe patch it up?'

James shook his head. 'I can do a temporary fix, but realistically it needs doing now.'

Maria stood there, biting the skin on her thumbnail, shaking her head from side to side rapidly. James stepped down from his small stepladder.

'Listen, you can get a second opinion, but they'll only tell you the same. It needs sorting, the sooner the better. I am quite quiet next week so I can fit you in. I can even start today, if you like – cut down on the days you'd have to close.' He looked around him at the empty shop. 'You're closed today, right? Do you have anywhere to stay?'

'I'm open today, actually, and I don't live here. I'm living with a friend.'

'Because of the power?' James asked. Maria frowned. *Why did he care?*

'Er, no – I don't live here. I lived in Harrogate till recently, but I… now I'm staying with my friend. Cass.'

He said nothing, rubbing his hand down the scruff of his facial hair.

'My friend, Cass, she has a cottage here in Westfield. So it's

handy for work.'

He kept looking at her, one brow arched.

'She's a hotshot Harrogate divorce lawyer. She's been really great, actually, putting me up.'

Nothing. He was looking at her like he was trying to work her out. *Why do I feel the need to fill the silences?*

'So…' She changed tack. 'When can you start, and do you know how much, roughly?'

She was half-expecting him to start showing his butt crack and sucking the air in between his teeth, but he just shook his head.

'I'll need to get some parts. I'll shop around to see what I can get. With the rewiring, you can redo the sockets and light fittings too. Do you have any ideas?'

I don't even have a clue what I'm doing tomorrow, let alone making decisions like this. 'I don't know, do you need to know today? I don't think I can do that today.'

'You have a little time. Do you want me to come back when I have a few quotes for you?'

Maria found herself nodding along dumbly.

'You sure you're okay? Can I call someone to come?'

'No!' she squeaked, suddenly picturing Lynn and Cassie frantically racing to the shop, having received a mumbling call from a strange, deep voice. 'No.' *Good, that was calmer, Maria. Well done.* 'I'm fine, really, I'm just having a bad day.' *Preceded by a few weeks of total devastation.*

'Yeah,' he said, his head moving from side to side as he openly

gawked at her. 'You don't look well. Are you ill?'

Maria went and had a little sit-down on her chair, wrapping her arms around herself.

'I may or may not have had enough alcohol last night to stun an alcoholic rhino.'

He went back to work then, a grin on his face. 'Ah, hangover and a bad day at work. That'll do it. You own the place?'

'Yep,' she nodded, licking her lips to try to get some moisture going in her mouth.

'Just you then?'

She groaned, hitting her head on the desk. 'Yes, just me. A tiny little woman. Don't you read the news? It's old hat now. I'm fine on my own, aside from the binge drinking and awkward sexual encounter. Just fine and dandy. If people can't handle that, it's their tough luck.'

She was staring at the wooden counter, trying to resist the urge to slam her head against it again, when she realised the whole shop was quiet. She sneaked a peek under her arm and looked at him. He was standing halfway up the ladder, looking straight at her.

'I meant in the business. Is it just you in the business?'

Oh, holy mother of hell. He must think I'm barmy.

'Oh!' She laughed awkwardly, a shrill cackle that made her sound like she was auditioning for *Wicked*. 'I thought… well, never mind what I thought. It's fine. No, it's my business but I employ Lynn part-time. She worked with my mother before she

passed. I opened this up and she came with me.'

What the hell are you doing! Stop telling him your life story, you bloody demented woman!

He nodded, closing up the fuse box and stepping down the ladder.

'Okay, it's safe now for when you go home, but I really think you need to get it sorted soon. I can come tomorrow if you like. I have a free day.'

I bet you can too, at double the cost.

'I won't charge weekend rates. I'm at a loose end at the moment myself. I have family staying with me and I'd be glad of an excuse to get out of the house to be honest.'

He pulled a face, and she sat up.

'That would be great, thanks. How much do I owe for today?'

He waved her away as he packed up his tools. 'I'll let you have some quotes tonight, and we can sort the bill then.'

She nodded, thinking of her bank account. With the honeymoon costs, and the way business was going, it would be tight. She would be living with Cass for a while at this rate, not that Cass would mind. Her liver might object, though.

He was just finishing up when the phone rang. Thank God she had the power back on at least. She scooped to pick it up and saw Lynn's number on the screen.

'Hey, Lynn, you okay?' She half-watched James pack up as she listened to Lynn chat about her morning.

'Cool, chilled morning then, eh? That's good. No, it's been

dead here, and…' She went to tell her about the electrics, but stopped herself. Lynn didn't need to be fretting about that. Hopefully things would be well underway by the time she was in next.

'I'm about to head home myself to be honest. I'm going to take one of the machines to Cass's and work from there. I haven't had a customer all day.'

'Do you think people saw the photos?' Lynn asked tentatively. Well, she obviously had.

'You mean the photos that humiliate me and show I wasted years of my life with a completely selfish arsehole? Probably, yeah. I'm guessing that this is what happened. Like people need another reason to avoid me. I mean, you don't book a wedding planner who can't keep a bloody man, do you?' She spun around with the phone in her hand and saw that James was waiting by the door. He looked as though he was waiting… nay, hoping… for the zombie apocalypse to hit so he could be eaten alive by the undead. Obviously preferable to overhearing her tragic backstory.

'Er, Lynn, a customer just came in. Yeah, I have to go. Speak to you later. Enjoy your weekend.'

'Sorry, I wasn't listening, honest. I just wanted to say goodbye properly. What time do you want to start tomorrow?'

'Whenever, just let me know and I'll be here to let you in.'

He nodded and opened his mouth as though to say something further. He looked like he was struggling to think of something,

so she saved him.

'Listen, James, is it?' He smiled, his amused mouth twitching. 'I'm just having a bad day. I promise to rein in the crazy for tomorrow. If you don't want the hassle, I understand.' She plucked a Post-it note off her desk and scribbled down her mobile number.

He took it, opened the door and went to leave. 'See you tomorrow, Maria. I'll contact you later. Stay hydrated.'

She sank back down into her chair, watching him walk off to his van. *Stay hydrated.* She huffed to herself, going to pack up a machine and some work for home.

'As if a glass of water will sort me out, eh, Mum? I need more than that.'

She packed up and, making sure she'd locked up, carried her stuff to her waiting car. Getting in and cursing the crappy heating once more, she continued her conversation with her mother as she pulled away.

'Stay hydrated!' she snorted, shaking her head as she wove through the streets of Westfield. Driving past the vet's, she passed Amanda on her way up to the house, a cat in her arms. She was walking a little strangely and, as she turned, Maria could see why as her little baby bump came into view.

She waved, and Amanda waved back cheerfully. Cow.

'Well, did you see that? Benjamin Evans, going to be a dad. I never thought I'd see the day, did you, Mum?' She drove down the main street, heading towards the cottage. 'She looked well,

though, didn't she? Married bliss to the man of your dreams and a baby on the way. Own businesses. Pretty good going, isn't it? At this rate, I shan't even have the shop by Christmas.' She drove the rest of the way in silence till she reached Cassie's home. If her mother had been there, she would have told her to shut up anyway, and get on with it. So that's what she would do. After a spell of vomiting and changing her bedsheets to rid them of the smell of the stranger she had bedded the night before. If she had to caption her life at the moment, #lifegoals #blessed wouldn't be first choice. She would rock #epicfail #passthebarfbag, though.

Chapter 7

Darcy walked off the plane into the tepid Northern weather and shivered. Whether it was the shock of being back in Britain or the dread of things to come he couldn't be sure. He had taken ill on the plane, and not even the complimentary champagne had made him feel any better.

His social media accounts had been deactivated while he was away, and he had left his phone at home, not wanting to be contacted while he went away to escape from his nuptials, as it were. For the first few days it had worked too, once his assistant had informed the hotel that he would in fact be attending alone, and it was no longer a honeymoon. A change of room had saved blushes all round, and a lucky couple newly engaged had been jubilant to score a free upgrade, courtesy of the sad-looking man propping up the bar in a rather tragic-looking gaudy shirt. He had found it in his case when he arrived, a joke present from Maria, he guessed, who had packed his case for him. He had gone to throw it out, but had instead found himself donning it to go down to the evening meal. Penance, perhaps. He tried to think about how Maria was, what she was doing, but he couldn't picture it. He knew she had picked up her things, or someone had. His doorman had called his office to gain permission for them to enter, and his father had told him when he had called to let them know where he was, and his room number, in case any

business arose in his absence.

'It's done now, spit spot,' his father had proclaimed down the phone, as though Darcy had just had a boil lanced, or managed to kiss off a bad blind date.

'Hardly, Father,' Darcy tried to counter, but his father was already talking again.

'It would never have worked out and then where would we be, eh? You're bound to find a nice girl when the time comes, a worthy woman, who will want the same things as us.'

Darcy opened his mouth to argue that Maria surely did want the same things as them, for Darcy to be happy, but it was no use. What was the point in arguing now, anyway? The damage was already done. He had chickened out, hotfooting it down the back stairs before the organist had even cracked her fingers.

So now here he was, heading for the arrivals lounge and all that would follow it. He knew he was expected to head straight to the office, but he wasn't in a rush to race back into the cutthroat corporate tea business. His dad had already been spouting about some celebrity ad campaign that their biggest rival, Northern Tea, had produced. Darcy had been spared the onslaught for a few days but he knew his mother, father and younger sister would be ready and waiting to fill him in. It was as though they had just erased Maria from their lives, as easily as deleting a file. Darcy wasn't sure how easy that would come to him, but he supposed he had little choice.

As he went to stand by the carousel with the other dejected-

looking holidaymakers, he caught the eye of a woman standing on her own nearby. She was looking tanned from her trip, her hair sporting a threaded braid. She turned and smiled at him.

'Hi, I recognise you, don't I?'

Darcy nodded. 'Probably from the flight.'

She considered this. 'No, I don't think so. Maybe from England?' She was looking him up and down now, obviously trying to remember. Then he realised.

'It might be my baby pictures.'

The woman looked confused. 'Baby pictures?'

'Yes,' he said, watching the carousel start to turn slowly. 'I was in an ad campaign, for Burgess Teas?'

'Oooo!' she squealed loudly, making half the airport jump. 'You're that guy, the wedding guy!'

She looked around him, looking disappointed. 'Where is she?'

Darcy looked at her in horror as the people around them seemed to come to life, murmuring and pointing. *Oh God*, he thought to himself, seeing his case finally coming down the carousel towards him, like a life raft in a stormy open sea. He pushed his way through the crowd, nodding at people who were now smiling and waving at him, and frog-dived onto his case. He missed his footing a little and ended up moving along the carousel with his case for a beat till he managed to pull himself and it back upright. The woman was still there, giving him a conspiratorial look.

'I get it,' she stage-whispered. 'You have to be discreet, for the

cameras. Is she meeting you later?'

He pulled his case to him, slamming it into his own leg and wincing with pain. He looked down and noticed a thin line of blood seeping through his cream linen trousers. He rubbed at it, which only sent a fresh wave of pain searing through his calf and caused the blood to smear. The woman never noticed, having sped off to collect her own baggage. He pulled up the handle of his case and took his opportunity to leave, pulling his carry-on man-bag onto his shoulder. He was feeling very confused and sweaty. Why would she think he was on his honeymoon? Surely the media machine had got wind of the story? He might not be famous by some modern reality TV standards, but in the North he was photographed a lot, normally because of his former shenanigans in the South with various IT girls and supermodels. Drunken nights out in the right places. Or tumbling out of hotel rooms the morning after. And on one occasion, being papped jumping out of a mansion bedroom window when his date for the night's footballer husband arrived back early from practice with a pulled hamstring. Lucky for him, because the man was livid. Even with a limp, he had been within a cat's whisker of catching him.

He pulled his dejected self around the corner and gasped. Held back by several security guards and the barrier was a wall of journalists. He looked behind him momentarily, but there was only a couple with a small boy behind him. He didn't recognise them. Were they here for him? He turned back round and they

started snapping away. *It might be me they're here for, after all*, he thought to himself.

'Darcy, mate – where's the girl?'

'Darcy, Darcy – over here, mate – can you flash your ring finger for us?'

Bemused, he looked down at his own hand, which was still sporting the small gold ring Maria had bought him when they got engaged. She had joked that it was to chase away the skanks, but he knew it was just a thoughtful gift. Which he had forgotten to take off when he ditched her. *Shit balls of fire.* He went to shove his hand in his pocket, and was setting his head and body into battering-ram mode when a hand linked through his. A blonde woman, dressed in white linen trousers and a pink bustier, smiled at him, as though she expected him to just smile back in recognition. She covered his ring with her fingers and, bringing it up to her lips, dropped a kiss on it, winking at the cameras. Darcy was about to object when she leaned in and kissed him full on the lips. She had both hands rammed around his face, and it was all he could do to grip his bags and breathe. She tasted of cinnamon, which reminded him of the cough drops his grandmother sucked. He resisted the urge to gag as she pulled away, linking arms with him again and pulling him to the exit doors. Security held off the paparazzi, but they were still hollering and whooping, shouting questions at him as the pair were ushered through security.

'What the hell was that?' he asked her, incredulous. 'Why did you do that, in front of them?'

He recognised her then. She had done it before, on the beach. He had been walking along, minding his own business, when she had appeared, grasped his hand, said hello and then disappeared. He had seen her loitering around the place, eating dinner near to him, sitting nearby at the pool.

The woman ignored him, gripping him in one hand and her case in the other as they headed to a driver holding a placard saying 'MR WHITE'. The bracelet she wore on her wrist jangled, annoying him.

'Here, honey,' she said, pointing at Darcy. The driver nodded and took both their cases, walking off towards the exit. 'This is us, let's go. We need to avoid them.'

She pointed a pink-painted talon back towards the arrivals area, and Darcy shuddered.

'Okay, okay, but I'm not Mr White. I'm—'

'I know who you are, Mr Burgess. I'm under orders to take you straight to the office.'

Darcy's heart sank into his designer shoes.

'Oh God, did my bloody father send you?' He clenched his fists in impotent anger. 'Argh! Will he never leave me be!' he demanded, shouting up at the white ceiling of the airport. The woman just ignored him and motioned for him to keep walking. He followed behind her, feeling like a man on his way to a firing squad. Then he remembered. The name on the placard. Mr White. *Oh God.*

'The driver, that sign? Was it really for me?' She nodded,

raising a brow as if to say '*of course, dum-dum*'.

The colour drained from his face. She bloody loved *Reservoir Dogs*, and one too many *Godfather* binges had sent the old dragon over the edge.

'Bloody hell,' he exclaimed in his plummy Hugh Grant tones. 'I'm done for, aren't I?'

They had arrived at the waiting car now, and the driver opened the door. He looked inside, half-expecting the gates of Hades to be inside, not the plush leather interior he saw.

'Yep,' she said, bundling him into the back. 'Your mother sent me.'

Chapter 8

‘So, you going to call him, or what?’ Cassie asked, passing her a coffee and getting into bed next to her. ‘Eugh, I hope you changed your sheets!’ She wrinkled her nose in pretend disgust.

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