

A woman with long, wavy brown hair is shown in profile, looking down thoughtfully. She is wearing a vibrant pink, sleeveless dress. Her hands are clasped near her chin. The background is a soft-focus field of pink flowers, likely roses, under bright, natural light.

THE HEIRESS'S
SECRET BABY

Jessica Gilmore

 Cherish

Jessica Gilmore

The Heiress's Secret Baby

Аннотация

A secret shared...Polly Rafferty, heiress and CEO of glamorous Rafferty's Stores is back! And this time, she's prepared for anything – well, except for the half-naked (and utterly gorgeous) Frenchman, Gabe Beaufile lying in her office! And, after sharing an unexpectedly earth-shattering kiss, discovering that he is her new vice-CEO...But, when Polly learns that a no-strings-summer-fling had very unexpected consequences, Gabe is the one person she can trust with her baby secret – and with a man so full of surprises, she had no idea what his reaction would be...!

Resolutely Polly held the glass up over the man's face and tipped it. A perfect stream of cold water fell like rain onto the peacefully slumbering face below.

Polly didn't quite know what to expect: anger, shock, contrition, or even no reaction at all. He was so very deeply asleep after all. But what she *didn't* expect was for one eye to open lazily, for a smile to play around the disturbingly well-cut mouth, or for a hand to shoot out and grab her wrist.

Caught by surprise, she stumbled forward, falling against the chaise as that hand sneaked around her waist, pulling her down, pulling her close.

"Bonjour, chérie."

His voice was low, gravelly with sleep, and deeply, unmistakably French.

"If you wanted me to wake up you only had to ask."

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Saying *au revoir*, of course."

He had shifted position and was leaning against the back of the chaise, his eyes skimming every inch of her until she wanted to wrap her arms around her torso, shielding herself from his insolent gaze.

"Au revoir?"

"Of course." He raised an eyebrow. "As you are dressed to leave I thought you were saying goodbye. But if it was more of a good morning ..." the smile widened "... even better."

"I am not saying *au revoir*, or good morning, or anything but

What on earth are you doing in my office and where are your clothes?"

The Heiress's
Secret Baby
Jessica Gilmore



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An ex au-pair, bookseller, marketing manager and sea-front trader, **JESSICA GILMORE** now works for an environmental charity in York. Married with one daughter, one fluffy dog and two dog-loathing cats, she spends her time avoiding housework and can usually be found with her nose in a book. Jessica writes emotional romance with a hint of humour, a splash of sunshine and a great deal of delicious food—and equally delicious heroes.

For Jo M

It seems pretty fitting that a book with a Parisian setting is dedicated to you just as we plan our girls' trip to Paris! I'm not sure how you have managed to be so positive and supportive and brilliant during the past five years; I am completely in awe of your

strength. Thank you so much for being such a fantastic friend to me and an inspiration (and ever-patient hairstylist) to Abs.

Here's to Paris and most of all to medical advances and to a happy, healthy future xxx

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

My Secret Bucket List

Swim in the sea, naked

NB: in azure warm seas, not in the North Sea

Sleep out under the stars

Have sex on the beach

NB: the real deal, not the cocktail

Drink an authentic margarita

Fall in love in Paris

POLLY READ THE list through for the last time, feeling the carefree *joie de vivre* fall away and the old, familiar cloaks of respectability and responsibility settling back onto her shoulders. They were a little heavy, but maybe that was to be expected after three months away.

Three months, five wishes. And she'd achieved four out of the five, which wasn't bad going. The heaviness lifted for a second as the highlights of the last three months flashed through her mind and then it descended again.

What had she been thinking? She might as well have written the list in a silver pen and decorated it with pink love hearts and butterflies, pinning it on her wall next to a lipstick-kiss-covered poster of a pre-pubescent boy band.

Polly pulled the page out of her diary and, without allowing herself a second's pause to reconsider, tore it into pieces. It was time to reposition her three-month sabbatical into something more appropriate for the new CEO of a company with a multimillion-pound turnover.

She chewed on the end of her pen for a moment and then

started a new list.

My Bucket List

Travel to the Galapagos Islands

See the Northern Lights

Walk the Inca Trail

Write a book

See tigers in the wild

There, two achieved, three to aspire to and all perfectly respectable. Not a grain of sand in any place it definitely shouldn't be...

The large luxurious town car drew to a smooth halt and jolted her back into the present day, away from dangerous memories. 'We're here, Miss Rafferty. Are you sure you don't want me to take you home first?'

Polly looked up from her diary and drew in a breath at the sight of the massive golden stone building stretching all the way down the block. She *was* home. Back at the famous department store founded by her great-grandfather. She hadn't expected to ever see it again, let alone to walk in as mistress of all that she surveyed.

She stared at the huge picture windows flanking the iconic marble steps, her heart swelling with a potent mixture of love and pride. Each window told a tale and sold a dream. Rafferty's could give you anything, make you anyone—if you had the money to pay for it.

'This will be fine, Petyr, thank you. But please arrange for my

bags to be taken back to Hopeford and for the concierge service to collect and launder them.’

She didn’t want to set foot in Rafferty’s carrying her rucksack stuffed as it was with sarongs, bikinis and walking boots, no matter how prestigious the brand names on them. Polly had spent a productive night at a hotel in Miami turning herself back into Miss Polly Rafferty from Miss Carefree Backpacker—all it had taken was a little shopping, a manicure and a wash and blow-dry.

She was back and she was ready.

Petyr opened the car door for her and Polly slid out onto the pavement, breathing in deeply as she did so. Car fumes, perfume, hot concrete, fried food—London in the height of summer. How she’d missed it. She pulled down her skirt hem and wriggled her toes experimentally. The heels felt a little constrictive after three months of bare feet, flip-flops and walking boots but her feet would adjust back. She would adjust back. After all, this was her real dream; her time out had been nothing but a diversion along the way.

Polly lifted her new workbag onto her shoulder and headed straight for the main entrance. She was going in.

* * *

‘Hello, Rachel.’

Oh, it had felt good walking through the hallowed halls, greeting the staff she knew by name and seeing the new ones jump as they realised just who was casting a quick, appraising eye over them. Good to see gossiping staff spring apart and how

everyone suddenly seemed to find work to do.

Good that nobody dared to catch her eye. There must have been talk after her abrupt disappearance but it didn't seem to have affected her standing. She allowed herself a small sigh of relief.

But it was also good to go in through the Staff Only door, to be buzzed in by old Alf and see the welcome on his face. Alf had worked for Rafferty's since before Polly's father was born and had always had a bar of chocolate and a kind word for the small girl desperately trailing after her grandfather, wanting, *needing*, to be included.

And it was good to be here, back in the light-filled foyer where her assistant had her desk. Not that Rachel seemed to share her enthusiasm judging by her open-mouthed expression and panicked eyes, and the way her fingers shook as she gathered together a sheaf of papers.

'Miss Rafferty? We weren't expecting you back just yet.'

'I did let you know my flight details,' Polly said coolly. It wasn't like Rachel to be so disorganised. And at the very least a friendly 'welcome back' would have been polite.

Rachel threw an anxious glance towards the door to Polly's office. 'Well yes.' She got up out of her chair and walked around her desk to stand in front of the door, blocking Polly's path. 'But I thought you would go home first. I didn't expect to see you today.'

'I hope my early appearance isn't too much of an inconvenience.' What was the girl hiding? Perhaps Raff had

decorated her office in high gloss and black leather during his brief sojourn as CEO. ‘As you can see I decided to come straight here.’ Polly gave her assistant a cool glance, waiting for her to move aside.

‘You’ve come straight from the airport?’ Rachel wouldn’t—or couldn’t—meet her eye but stood her ground. ‘You must be tired and thirsty. Why don’t you go to the staff canteen and I’ll arrange for them to bring you coffee and something to eat?’

‘Coffee does sound lovely,’ Polly agreed. ‘But I’d rather have it *in* my office if you don’t mind. Please call and arrange it. Thank you, Rachel.’

Rachel stood there for a long second, indecision clear on her face before she moved slowly to one side. ‘Yes, Miss Rafferty.’

Polly nodded curtly at her still-hovering assistant. Things had obviously got slack under Raff’s reign. She hoped it wouldn’t take too long to get things back on track—or to get herself back on track; no more lie-ins, long walks on beaches where the sand was so fine it felt like silk underfoot, no more swimming in balmy seas or drinking rum cocktails under the light of so many stars it was like being in an alternate universe.

No. She was back to work, routine and normality, which was great. A girl couldn’t relax for ever, right?

Slowly Polly turned the chrome handle and opened her office door, relishing the cool polished feel of the metal under her hand. Like much of the interior throughout the store the door handle was one of the original art deco fittings chosen by her great-

grandfather back in the nineteen twenties. His legacy lived on in every fitting and fixture. She loved the weight of history that fell onto her shoulders as soon as she walked into the building. Her name, her blood, her legacy.

She stood on the threshold for a second and breathed in. It was finally hers. Everything she had worked for, everything she had dreamed of—this was her office, her store, her way.

And yet it had all felt so unachievable just three months ago. Despite four years as vice CEO and the last of those years as acting CEO while her grandfather stood back from the company he loved as fiercely as Polly herself did, she had walked away. After her grandfather had told her he was finally stepping down and installing Polly's twin brother Raff in his place she had dropped her swipe card on the desk, collected her bag and walked out.

The next day she had been on a plane to South America. She had left her home, her cat and her company—and replaced them with a frivolous bucket list.

Three months later that memory still had the power to wind her.

But here she was, back at the helm and nothing and no one was going to stand in her way.

The relief at seeing her office unchanged swept over her; the sunshine streaming in through the stained-glass floor-to-ceiling windows highlighting the wood panelling, tiled floors and her beautiful walnut desk—the very same one commissioned by

her great-grandfather for this room in nineteen twenty-five—the bookshelves and photos, her chaise longue, her...

Hang on. Her eyes skittered back; that hadn't been there before.

Or rather *he* hadn't.

Nope, Polly was pretty sure she would have remembered if she'd left a half-naked sleeping beauty on her antique chaise longue when she'd stormed out.

Frankly, the mood she'd been in, she probably would have taken him with her.

She moved a little closer, uncomfortably aware of her heels tapping on the tiled floor, and contemplated the newest addition to her office.

He was lying on his front, his arm pillowing his head, just the curve of a sharply defined cheekbone and a shock of dark hair falling over his forehead visible. His jeans were snug, low, riding deep on his back exposing every vertebrae on his naked torso.

It was a tanned torso, a deep olive, and although slim, almost to the point of leanness, every muscle was clearly defined. On his lower back a tree blossomed, a silhouette whose branches reached up to his middle vertebrae. Polly fought an urge to reach out and trace one of the narrow lines with her fingers. She didn't normally like tattoos but this one was oddly beautiful, almost mesmerising in its intricacy.

What was she doing? She shouldn't be standing here admiring the interloper. He needed to wake up and get out. No matter how

peaceful he looked.

Polly coughed, a short, polite noise. It was as effectual as an umbrella in a hurricane. She coughed again, louder, more irritated.

He didn't even stir.

'Excuse me.' Her voice was soft, polite. Polly shook her head in disgust; this was her office. Why was *she* the one pussyfooting around? 'Excuse me!'

This time there was some effect, just a little; a faint murmur and a shift in his position as he rolled onto his side. She couldn't help flickering a quick glance along the lean length. Yep, the front matched the back, a smattering of fine dark hair tangled on his upper chest, another silky patch emphasising the muscles on his abdomen before tapering into a line that ran down inside the low-slung jeans.

Polly swallowed, her mouth suddenly in need of some kind of moisture. No, she scolded herself, tearing her eyes away, heat flushing through her. Just because he was in her office she didn't have the right to stand here and objectify him. She gave the room a quick once-over relieved that no one was there to witness her behaviour; she was the CEO for goodness' sake, she had to set an example.

This had gone on long enough. This was a place of business, not a doss house for disreputable if attractive young men to slumber in, or a hidey-hole for her PA's latest boyfriend. Whoever he was she was going to have to shake him awake. Right

now.

If only he were wearing a shirt. Or anything. Touching that bronzed skin felt intrusive, intimate.

‘For goodness’ sake, are you woman or wombat?’ she muttered, balling her fingers into a fist.

‘Hello.’ She reached over and took a tentative hold of one firm shoulder, his skin warm and smooth against her hand. ‘Wake up.’ She gave a little shake but it was like shaking a statue.

All she wanted was to sit at her desk and start working. Alone. Was that too much to ask? Anger and adrenaline flooded through her system; it had been a long journey, she was jet-lagged and irritated and in need of a sit-down and a coffee. She’d had enough. Officially.

Polly turned and walked crisply towards her small en-suite cloakroom and bathroom, this time uncaring of the loud tap of her heels. The door swung open to reveal a wide, airy space with room for coats and shoes plus a walk-in wardrobe where Polly stored a selection of outfits for the frequent occasions where she went straight from work to a social function. She gave the room a quick glance, relieved to see no trace of Raff’s presence. It was as if he had been wiped out of the store’s memory.

That was fine by her. He had made it quite clear he wanted nothing to do with Rafferty’s—and although they were twins they had never been good at sharing.

Another door led into the well-equipped bathroom. Polly allowed herself one longing glance at the walk-in shower before

grabbing a glass from the shelf and filling it with water, making sure the cold tap ran for a few seconds first for maximum chill. Then, quickly so that she didn't lose her nerve, she swivelled on her heel and marched back over to the chaise longue, standing over the interloper.

He had moved again, lying supine, half on his back, half on his side revealing more of his features. Long, thick lashes lay peacefully on cheekbones so finely sculpted it looked as if a master stonemason had been at work, eyebrows arching arrogantly above.

His wide mouth was slightly parted. Sensual, a little voice whispered to Polly. A mouth made for sin.

She ignored the voice. And she ignored the slight jibe of her conscience; she needed him awake and leaving; if he wouldn't respond to gentler methods then what choice did she have?

Resolutely Polly held the glass up over the man's face and tipped it. For one long moment she held it still so that the water was perfectly balanced right at the rim, clear drops so very close to spilling over the thin edge.

And then she allowed her hand to move the glass over the tipping point, a perfect stream of cold water falling like rain onto the peacefully slumbering face below.

Polly didn't quite know what to expect; anger, shock, contrition or even no reaction at all. He was so very deeply asleep after all. But what she didn't expect was for one red-rimmed eye to lazily open, for a smile to play around the disturbingly well-

cut mouth or for a hand to shoot out and grab her wrist.

Caught by surprise, she stumbled forward, falling against the chaise as the hand snuck around her waist, pulling her down, pulling her close.

'Bonjour, chérie.' His voice was low, gravelly with sleep and deeply, unmistakably French. 'If you wanted me to wake up you only had to ask.'

It was the shock, that was all. Otherwise she would have moved, called for help, disentangled herself from the strong arm anchoring her firmly against the bare chest. And she would never, *ever* have allowed his other hand to slip around her neck in an oddly sweet caress while he angled his mouth towards hers—would have moved away long before the hard mouth claimed hers in a distinctly unsleepy way.

It was definitely the shock keeping her paralysed under his touch—and she was definitely *not* leaning into the kiss, opening herself up to the pressure of his mouth on hers, the touch of his hand moving up her back, slipping round her ribcage, brushing against the swell of her breast.

Hang on, his hand was where?

Polly pulled away, jumping up off the chaise, resisting the urge to scrub the kiss off her tingling mouth.

Or to lean back down and let him claim her again.

'What do you think you're doing?'

'Saying *au revoir* of course.' He had shifted position and was leaning against the back of the chaise, his eyes skimming every

inch of her until she wanted to wrap her arms around her torso, shielding herself from his insolent gaze.

‘*Au revoir?*’ Was she going mad? Where were the panicked apologies and the scuttling out of her office?

‘Of course.’ He raised an eyebrow. ‘As you are dressed to leave I thought you were saying goodbye. But if it was more of a good morning...’ the smile widened ‘...even better.’

‘I am not saying *au revoir* or good morning or anything but *what on earth are you doing in my office and where are your clothes?*’

She hadn’t meant to tag on the last line but with the imprint of his hand still burning her back and the taste of him taunting her mouth she really needed to be looking at something other than what seemed like acres of taut, tanned bare flesh.

Surely now, now he would show some contrition, some shame. But no, he was what? Laughing? He was mad or drunk or both and she was going to call Security right now.

‘Of course, your office! Polly, *bonjour*. I am charmed to meet you.’

What? He knew her name? She took an instinctive step backwards as he slid off the chaise, as graceful as a panther, and took a step towards her, hand held out.

‘Who are you and what are you doing here?’ She stepped back a little further, one hand groping for the phone ready to call for help.

‘I am so very sorry.’ He was smiling as if the whole situation

were nothing but a huge joke. 'I fell asleep here, last night, and was confused when you woke me.' His eyes laughed at her, shamelessly. 'It's not the first time I've been awakened by a glass of water. I am Gabriel Beaufile, your new vice CEO. My friends call me Gabe. I hope you will too.'

No, that was no better, she was still looking at him as if he were an escaped convict. Not surprisingly, Gabe thought ruefully. What had he been thinking?

He hadn't. He'd been dreaming, stuck in that hazy world between sleep and wakefulness when he'd felt a warm hand on his shoulder followed by the chill shock of the water and, confused, had thought it some kind of game. After three weeks of eighteen-hour days, making sure he was fully and firmly ensconced at Rafferty's before the formidable Polly Rafferty returned, he wasn't as switched on as he should be.

Well, his wake-up call had been brutal. It was bad enough from Polly's point of view that he had been catapulted in without her say-so or knowledge—and a wake-up kiss probably wasn't the wisest way to make a good impression. He needed to make up the lost ground, and fast.

He smiled at her, pouring as much winning charm into the smile as he could.

There was no answering smile, not even in her darkly shadowed eyes. The bruised circles were the only hint of tiredness even though she must have come straight here from the airport. Her dark gold hair was twisted up into a neat knot and

her suit looked freshly laundered. Yet for all the business-style armour there was something oddly vulnerable in the blue eyes, the determined set of her almost too-slender frame.

‘Gabriel Beaufile?’ There was a hint of recognition in her voice. ‘You were working for Desmoulins?’

‘*Oui*, as Digital Director.’ He debated mentioning the tripling of profits in the proud old Parisian store’s web business but decided against it. Yet. That little but pertinent detail might come in handy and he didn’t want to play his hand too soon.

‘I don’t recall hiring a new vice CEO.’ There was nothing fragile in her voice. It was cold enough to freeze the water still dripping over his torso. ‘Even if I had, that doesn’t explain why you were sleeping in my office and appear to have mislaid your top.’

Nor why you kissed me. She might not have said the words but they were implied, hung accusingly in the air.

No, better to forget about the kiss, delightful as it had been. Strange to think that the huge-eyed, fragile-looking woman opposite had responded so openly, so ardently, that she would taste of sweetness and spice.

Damn it, he was supposed to be forgetting about the kiss.

‘Polly, *je suis désolé*.’ This situation was not irredeemable no matter how it seemed right now. It wasn’t often that Gabe thought himself lucky to have three older sisters but right now they were a blessing; he was used to disapproving glares and turning the stickiest of situations right around.

‘I have been using this office until you returned—we didn’t know if you would want to take over your grandfather’s office or stay in here. But once again I was working too late and missed the last train back to Hopeford. It was easier to crash out on the couch rather than find a hotel so late. If I had known you were coming in this morning...’

He threw his hands out in a placatory gesture.

It didn’t work. If anything she looked even more suspicious. ‘Hopeford? Why would you be staying there?’

A sinking feeling hit Gabe. On a scale of one to ten this whole situation was hitting one hundred on the awkward chart. If she wasn’t happy about having a vice CEO she hadn’t handpicked then she was going to love having a strange houseguest!

‘Cat-feeding. Raff was worried Mr Simpkins would get lonely.’ He smiled as winningly as he could but there was no response from her.

Okay, charm wasn’t working, businesslike might. ‘I do have an apartment arranged,’ he explained. ‘But unfortunately, just before I was going to move in, the neighbour’s basement extension caused a massive subsidence in the whole street. I can quite easily go to a hotel if it’s a problem but as your house was empty and I was homeless...’ He shrugged. It had made perfect sense at the time.

Apparently not to Polly. ‘You’re staying in my *house*? Where is Raff? Why isn’t he there?’

‘He was in Jordan, now I think he’s in Australia but he should

be back soon.’ It had been hard to keep up with the other Rafferty twin’s travels.

‘Australia? What on earth is he doing there?’ She sank down into the large chair behind her desk with an audible sigh of relief, probably worn out by the weight of all the questions she had fired at him. Gabe’s head was spinning from them all.

‘I thought Raff would wait until I got back before taking off again,’ Polly murmured, her voice so low that Gabe hardly caught her words.

If Gabriel had to narrow all his criticisms of his own family down to just one thing it would be the complete lack of respect for personal space—physically *and* mentally. Every thought, every feeling, every pain, every movement was up for general discussion, dissection and in the worst-case scenario culminating in a family conference.

His middle sister, Celine, would even video call in from New Zealand, unwilling to let a small matter like time zones and distance prevent her from getting her two centimes’ worth in.

The possibility of anybody in the Beauflis household not knowing the exact whereabouts of any member of their family at any given time was completely inconceivable. Sometimes Gabe suspected they had all been microchipped at birth. How could Polly Rafferty have no idea where her own twin brother was or what he was doing?

She looked up at him, the navy-blue eyes dark. ‘I think I might be more jet-lagged than I realised,’ she said slowly. ‘Let me get

this straight. You are working, here, at Rafferty's, as the vice CEO and living at Hopeford. In my house.'

'Temporarily,' Gabe clarified. 'Your house, that is.'

She closed her eyes.

A knock at the door jolted her back to wakefulness, the eyes snapping open.

'Yes?'

The door opened, followed a moment later by Rachel, who was carrying a large tray. She flickered a sympathetic glance over at Gabe and he couldn't resist winking back.

'Your coffee, Miss Rafferty.' Rachel set the tray onto the desk and smiled at Gabe. 'I brought your usual smoothie, Mr Beaufils,' she said in a much lighter tone. 'The chef has your muesli ready. I said you might prefer to eat it in the staff canteen this morning. Oh, and dry-cleaning has sent your clean shirt up. I'll just take it through for you.'

'Merci, Rachel.'

Polly had begun to pour her coffee but stopped mid flow, her eyes narrowed and fixed on her assistant.

'You were aware that Mr Beaufils was here? In my office?'

'Well, he often works late...' Rachel said.

'And you didn't think to warn me?'

'I...'

'Tell Building Services I need to see them this morning. Mr Beaufils obviously needs his own sleeping and breakfasting area. Oh, and his own assistant. Get on to HR. We'll discuss the rest

later.’

‘Yes, Miss Rafferty.’ Rachel bobbed out with a sigh of relief, returning a second later with a crisply wrapped shirt, which she handed to Gabe before exiting the office and closing the door.

‘Nice girl, very competent.’ Gabe sauntered over to the tray and picked up his usual smoothie. It had taken a few days for the chef to get the mixture just right but it was pretty close to perfection now. He took it over to the chaise and sipped but could feel Polly’s eyes on him and looked over at her with a faintly enquiring smile.

‘Are you quite comfortable?’ she asked. ‘Are you sure you don’t want to ask for your muesli in here? Take a shower before getting dressed? How about a massage?’

He bit back a smile at the sarcastic tone in her voice. ‘A shower would be lovely, thank you.’ He downed the shake, feeling the cool liquid hit the back of his throat, the vitamins working their way into his system. ‘Don’t worry about showing me the way. I know my way around.’

‘Hold on.’ But she was too late, Gabriel Beaufiles had disappeared into the cloakroom.

Polly jumped to her feet but came to a stop. She was hardly going to follow him into the shower, was she?

Not that he would mind—he’d probably just ask her to pass him the towel! After all he had no compunction about parading around her office half naked. No wonder Rachel was smitten. Smoothies and muesli indeed.

The phone on her desk blared. It was probably the kitchen wondering if Gabe wanted a lightly poached egg with his breakfast. Polly glared at it before pressing the speakerphone button.

‘Polly Rafferty.’

‘You’re home, then.’ Familiar grizzled, curt tones.

‘Hello, Grandfather. I hope you’re feeling better.’ He at least hadn’t expected her to go back to Hopeford before returning to work. But then Charles Rafferty had never actually taken a holiday—*his* bucket list probably read ‘spend more time in the office’.

Her grandfather merely grunted. ‘Hope you’re ready to get down to some serious work after your little holiday.’ Polly bit back the obvious retorts; it hadn’t been a holiday, she had left the company after barely taking a long weekend off in the last five years.

But what was the point? Words wouldn’t change him.

‘Have you met Beaufilets yet?’

Polly couldn’t stop her eyes flicking towards the cloakroom door. ‘I’ve seen him,’ she said drily. ‘Confident young man.’

‘He’s Vincent’s boy, Gabriel. You know Chateau Beaufilets of course, we’ve been their exclusive UK stockist for decades. He’s the only son.’

‘That doesn’t explain why he’s here.’ Her voice was sharper than she had intended.

She didn’t want her grandfather to know how much Gabe’s

presence had shaken her.

‘Oh, he’s not here because of the vineyard although that’s a good connection of course. Man did some great things at Desmoulin’s, which is why I snapped him up. Thought he’d be good balance for you.’

‘Good balance for me?’ Polly wasn’t sure whether she wanted to laugh or cry. Balance or replacement? If he couldn’t have Raff did her grandfather want this young man instead? Just how much did she have to do before he finally accepted her? ‘I really think I should have been consulted.’

‘No.’ Her grandfather’s answer was as sharp as it was unequivocal. ‘Vice CEO is a board decision. We need someone with different strengths from you, not someone you can ride roughshod over.’

Talk about the pot and the kettle. Polly glared at the phone.

‘He knows the European markets and is very, very strong digitally, so I want him in charge of all e-commerce. Oh, and Polly? It’s going to take a few weeks before his apartment is sound again. It won’t bother you to have him at yours until then? You barely spend any time there as it is.’

Despite her best intentions Polly found her attention wandering back to the moment she had first seen Gabe sprawled on her chaise. The line of his back, the strong leanness of him, the delicacy of that intricate tattoo spiralling up his spine.

Thank goodness her grandfather wasn’t here to see the flush on her cheeks.

Her first instinct was to demand they find Gabriel Beaufiles alternative accommodation a long, long way from her house and home. And yet...it might be useful to keep him close. What was that they said about friends and enemies?

‘I can’t imagine there’s much to excite him in Hopeford,’ she said sweetly. ‘But of course he can stay.’

The more she could find out about Gabriel Beaufiles, the easier it would be to outmanoeuvre him. She was in charge of Rafferty’s at last and no smoothie-drinking, bare-chested, charming Frenchman was going to change that.

CHAPTER TWO

GABE FINISHED TOWEL-DRYING his hair and grabbed the clean shirt Rachel had brought him. Pulling it on, he began to button it up slowly, once again running the morning’s unexpected events through his mind. What had he been thinking?

He hadn’t been thinking, that was the problem, he’d been reacting. A sure sign he’d allowed himself to mix business and pleasure that bit too often. Not enough sleep and too many office flirtations.

What a first impression! Although he wasn’t sure what had thrown her more—the kiss or the news of his appointment.

He couldn’t blame her for being less than pleased with either but he was here and he was staying put. Unlike Polly Rafferty he didn’t have the advantage of bearing the founder’s name, but he was just twenty-eight, already the vice CEO of Rafferty’s and his goal of running his own company by thirty was looking eminently

doable.

Things were nicely on track to get the results he needed, to learn everything he could and in two years look for the opportunity he needed to achieve his goal. Because life was short. Nobody knew that better than Gabe.

He pushed the thought away as he strode out of the bathroom and along the passage that led to the office. It was time to eat some humble pie.

‘Nice shower?’

Gabe came to a halt and stared at Polly Rafferty. Was that a smile on her face?

‘Rachel tells me you’ve been working all hours,’ she continued. ‘I just want to thank you. Obviously it was less than ideal that I wasn’t back before Raff left but it’s such a relief that you were here to help out.’

‘I was more than happy to step in.’ Gabe leant against the door frame and watched her through narrow eyes.

Polly seemed oblivious to his gaze. She was leaning back in his chair—correction, her chair—completely at her ease. She had taken off her jacket and it hung on the hat stand in the corner, her bag tossed carelessly on the floor beneath it. Her laptop was plugged into the keyboard and monitor, his own laptop folded and put aside. Several sheets of paper were stacked on the gleaming mahogany desk, a red pen lying on top of one, the crossed-out lines and scribbled notes implying great industry. It was as if she had never been away.

As if he had never been there.

Polly looked up, pen in hand. 'You haven't had breakfast so I suggest you take an hour or so while I get to grips with a few things here, then we can discuss how it's going to work moving forward. Starting with a permanent office and an assistant for you.' She couldn't be more gracious.

In fact she was the perfect hostess. Gabe suppressed a smile; he couldn't help approving of her tactics. Polly was throwing down the gauntlet. Oh, politely and with some degree of charm but, still, she was making it clear that absence or no absence this was her company and he was the incomer.

'You don't want your grandfather's office?' he asked. 'I assumed that you would want to move in there.'

A flicker of sadness ran over her face disturbing the blandly pleasant mask. 'This room belonged to my great-grandfather. The furniture and décor is just as it was, just as he chose. I'm staying here.'

But she wasn't going to offer him the bigger room either; he'd stake his reputation on it.

'I don't need an hour.' He pushed off the door frame. 'I am quite happy to start in fifteen minutes.'

'That's very sweet of you, Gabe.' The smile was back. 'But please, take an hour. I'll see you then.'

The dismissal was clear. Round one to Polly Rafferty.

That was okay. Gabe didn't care about individual rounds. He cared about the final prize. He inclined his head as he moved

towards the door. ‘Of course, take as long as you need to settle back in. Oh and, Polly? Welcome back.’

Polly held onto the smile as long as it took for the door to close behind the tall Frenchman then slumped forward with a sigh. It had taken her just a few minutes to reclaim the office but it still didn’t feel like hers. It smelt different, of soap and a fresh citrusy cologne, of leather and whatever was in that disgusting green drink Gabe had tossed down so easily. She’d sniffed the glass when he was in the shower and recoiled in horror—until then she didn’t think anything could be as vile as the look of the smoothie, but she’d been wrong.

Her coffee smelt off too. It must be the jet lag and all the travelling she’d done in the last week—nothing smelt right at the moment. Her stomach had twisted with nausea at the mere thought of caffeine or alcohol and even the eggs she had tried to eat at the airport.

Polly pushed the thought away. Whining that she was tired and that she felt ill wouldn’t get her anywhere. She needed to hit the ground running and not stop.

Walking over to the massive art deco windows that dominated the office, she peered through their tinted panes at the street below. Coloured in red and green it looked like a film maker’s whimsical view of the vibrant West End. Polly had always loved the strange slant the glass gave on the world. It helped her think clearly, think differently—helped her see problems in a new way.

And right now she needed all her wits about her.

‘Gabriel Beaufils,’ she said aloud, her mind conjuring up unbidden the tall man lounging at his ease, jeans riding low, bare chested, the water still dripping from his wet hair. What did that tell her?

That he was shameless. That he was beautiful.

Polly shook her head impatiently, replacing the image in her mind with the man that had just left. Leaning insouciantly against the door, wet hair slicked back. Still in jeans but now they were more sedately paired with a crisp white linen shirt. No tie. Laughter in his eyes.

That was better. Now what could she deduce from that? He didn’t care what people thought about him, what she thought about him. That he was confident and utterly secure in his charm. That he was underestimating her.

She could work with that.

What else? Polly pulled herself away from the view and returned to her desk, running her fingers possessively over the polished wood. *Okay, let’s do this.* She pulled up a search engine and typed in his name. ‘Who are you, Monsieur Beaufils?’ she murmured as she hit enter.

The page instantly filled with several engines. He had left quite the digital trail.

Polly sat back and began to read. Some of it she knew. He was from an affluent background, his family the proud makers of a venerable brand of wine. However, Gabe had left home in his late teens, gone to college in the States and stayed on to do

his MBA while working at one of the biggest retail chains there.

‘Good,’ she muttered, returning to the results page and scanning the next paragraph, an article written about him just a few months ago. ‘What else?’

Two years ago he had returned home to France, to Paris, to take charge of digital sales at Desmoulins. The young up-and-coming whizz-kid introducing innovation into one of Paris’s most venerable *grande dames* had made quite a stir. Was that what he was planning to do here?

So much for his business history. Personal life? She moved through several lines of results. Nothing. Either he was very discreet or he didn’t have a private life.

Polly’s mouth tingled as if his lips were still hovering above hers. Despite herself she flicked her tongue over them as if she could still taste him. Discreet it was. That was a very practised kiss.

She took the cursor back to the top of the page and hit the images button. Instantly the page filled with photos of Gabe, smiling, serious, in a suit...in head-to-toe Lycra.

Hang on? He was wearing *what*?

She hovered over the image of Gabe walking out of a lake, wetsuit half undone, and Polly resisted the urge to zoom in on his chest. She checked the caption. He was a triathlete.

Gabriel Beaufils. Confident, charming, discreet and competitive.

She could handle that.

A smile curved her mouth. This was going to be almost too easy.

* * *

‘I hope I didn’t keep you waiting. I got caught up in something.’

As a matter of fact he was precisely on time—Polly would bet money that Gabe Beaufile had been standing outside the office watching a stopwatch to make sure he walked back in exactly one hour after she had dismissed him.

She would have done the same thing herself. Interesting.

Not that she was going to let him know that. She kept her eyes locked on her computer screen, giving every impression that she too was busy. ‘I hope you had a nice breakfast.’

‘Yes, thank you, most important meal of the day.’ There was a dark hint of laughter in his voice.

‘So they say.’ She looked up and smiled. ‘I’m usually too busy to remember to eat it.’

She had meant the glance and the smile to be brief, dismissive, but there was an intensity in his answering look that ensnared her. How could eyes be so dark, so knowing? Heat burned her cheeks, a shiver of awareness deep inside.

Reluctantly she pulled her gaze away, staring mindlessly at her computer screen, reading the same nonsensical sentence over and over again.

‘You should take care of yourself, Polly.’ His voice was low, caressing. ‘Neglecting your body is not wise.’

‘I don’t neglect my body.’ She wanted to pull the defensive

words back as soon as she had uttered them.

‘I exercise and eat well,’ she clarified not entirely truthfully but she didn’t want to admit to her snacking habits to him. Not when he was evidently so healthy. And fit. It took every ounce of willpower she had not to look up again, to sweep her eyes over him from head to toe, lingering on the muscles she knew were lurking under that crisp white shirt. ‘I just don’t make a big deal of it.’

She pushed her chair back and stood. ‘I am going to do a walkabout,’ she said. ‘Would you care to accompany me?’

He stayed still for a moment, that curiously intent look still in his eyes, and then nodded courteously as he pulled the door open and held it for her.

Polly sensed his every movement as he followed her back out into the light, glass-walled foyer, awareness prickling her spine.

Rachel looked up as they walked by, curiosity clear on her face. Polly had no doubt that she was emailing all of her friends with a highly scurrilous account of her boss’s encounter with a half-naked Frenchman. Let her; Polly would fill her PA’s forthcoming days so completely that she wouldn’t even be able to dream about gossiping.

It wasn’t far from her office to one of the discreet doors that led out onto the shop floor. This was what Rafferty’s was all about. No matter how essential the office functions were they existed for one purpose—to keep the iconic store in business. Polly ensured that every finance assistant, every

marketing executive spent at least one week a year on the shop floor. Just as her great-grandfather had done. She herself spent most of December on the shop floor serving, restocking and assisting. The buzz and adrenaline rush were addictive.

‘I’ve spoken to Building Services,’ she said as she slid her pass through the door lock, turning with one hand on the handle to face Gabe. ‘I am going to turn Grandfather’s old office into the boardroom. It’s bigger than any of the meeting rooms, far too big for one person—and I think he’ll be pleased with the gesture. He is still President of the Board.’

Polly knew everyone expected her to move into the vast corner suite but couldn’t face the thought of occupying her grandfather’s chair, feeling him second-guessing her all the time, disapproving of every change she made.

‘And me?’ It was said with a self-deprecating and very Gallic shrug but Polly wasn’t fooled. There was a sharpness in his eyes.

‘The old boardroom.’ It was a neat solution. Polly got to keep her office, her grandfather would hopefully feel honoured and Gabe would get a brand-new office in keeping with his position. But not a Rafferty office, not one with history steeped in its walls.

‘Building Services are confident they can create a room for your assistant with no major infrastructure changes and there’s already a perfectly good cloakroom. You can start picking wallpaper and furniture this week and it should be ready end of next week.’

‘And where do I work in the meantime?’ His voice was

still mild but Polly was aware of a stillness about him, a quiet confidence in his gaze. She didn't want to push too far, not yet. Reluctantly she discarded her plan that he sit in her foyer, with Rachel, or that she find him a spare desk in one of the bigger, open-plan offices where the rest of the backroom staff worked.

'We can fit a second desk in my room,' she said. 'Just until you're settled. But, Gabe? No more sleeping in the office, no more using my assistant to sort out your laundry and...' she swallowed but kept her gaze and voice firm '...you remain fully dressed and act appropriately at all times. Understood?'

Gabe's mouth quirked. 'Of course,' he murmured.

'Good.' She pushed the door open.

This was it, this was where the magic happened.

Polly blinked as she stepped out. They had entered the home furnishings department on the top floor and the lights were switched to full, purposely dazzling to best showcase the silks, cushions, throws, ceramics, silverware and all the other luxury items Rafferty's told their customers were essential for a comfortable home. Beneath them were floors and galleries devoted to technology, books, toys, food and, of course, fashion.

Polly's heart swelled and she clenched her fists. She was home.

And yet everything had changed. She had changed.

She had hoped that being back would ground her again but it was odd walking through the galleries with Gabe. If her staff greeted her with their usual respect, they greeted him with something warmer.

And how on earth did he know every name after what? Three or four weeks?

‘*Bonjour*, Emily.’ Polly narrowed her eyes at him as they entered the world-famous haberdashery room. Had his accent thickened as he greeted the attractive redhead who had turned the department into the must-go destination for a new generation of craft lovers?

‘How is your cat? Did the operation go well?’ He had moved nearer to Emily, smiling down at her intimately.

Polly’s head snapped round. No way. He knew the names of every staff member and all about the health of their pets too?

‘Yes, thank you, Mr Beaufils, she’s desperate to go outside but she’s doing really well.’ Emily was smiling back, her voice a little breathy.

‘They can be such a responsibility, *non*? I’ve...’

Had he just dropped an aitch? *Really*? Polly had known him for what, an hour? And she already knew perfectly well that Gabe spoke perfect, almost accentless English. Unless, it seemed, he was talking to petite redheads. She coughed and could have sworn she saw a glimmer of laughter in the depths of his almost-black eyes as he continued.

‘I’ve been looking after Mademoiselle Rafferty’s cat for the last few weeks. He is a rascal, that one. Such a huge responsibility.’

‘They are,’ Emily said earnestly, her huge eyes fixed on his. ‘But worth it.’

Oui, the way they purr. So trusting.'

That was it. Polly felt ill just listening. 'So greedy,' she said briskly. 'And so prone to eviscerating small mammals under the bed. If you're ready, Gabe, shall we continue? Nice work,' she said to Emily, unable to keep a sarcastic tone from her voice. 'Keep it up.' And without a backwards glance she swept from the department.

* * *

It had been an interesting morning. Gabe was well aware that he had been well and truly sized up, tested and judged. What the verdict was he had no idea.

Nor, truth be told, was he that interested. He had his own weighing up to do.

Tough, but not as tough as she thought. Surprisingly stylish for someone who lived and breathed work; the sharp little suit she was wearing would pass muster in the most exclusive streets in Paris—unusual for an Englishwoman. He liked how she wasn't afraid of her height, accentuating it with heels, the blonde hair swept up into a knot adding an extra couple of centimetres.

And she wasn't going to give him an inch. The solution to the offices was masterful. It was going to be fun working with her.

He loved a good game.

Gabe strode through the foyer, smiling at Rachel as she looked up with a blush. Maybe he should have gone a little easier on the flirting. He wouldn't make that mistake with his own assistant—he would request a guy or, even better, a motherly woman who

would keep all unwanted callers away and feed him home-made cake. He made a note to keep an eye on the ‘interests’ section of any applicants’ CVs.

He opened the door to Polly’s office without knocking; after all they were sharing it.

‘This is going to be fun,’ he said as Polly looked up from her computer screen, trying unsuccessfully to hide her irritation at the interruption. ‘Roomies, housemates. We should take a road trip too, complete the set.’

Bed mates would really make it a full hand but he wasn’t going to suggest that. Totally inappropriate. But, despite himself, his eyes wandered over her face, skimming over the smattering of freckles high on her cheeks, the wide mouth, the pointed little chin. She kissed like she spoke—with passion and purpose—but there was none of the coolness and poise. No, there was heat simmering away behind that cool façade.

Heat he was better off pretending he knew nothing about.

‘I’ll let you have a lift in the company car. Will that do?’ She looked unamused. ‘Did you decide on office furniture? There’s a temporary desk for you there.’ She nodded over towards the wall where a second desk had already been set up, a monitor and phone installed on its gleaming surface.

‘I’ll be here a week or two at the most according to Building Services and then you’re free of me.’

‘Hardly,’ she muttered so low he could barely make out her words then spoke out in her usual crisp tones. ‘Are you available

to talk now?'

'*Certainement*, if you need me to be.' He didn't mean to let his voice drop or to drawl the words out quite so suggestively but the colour rising swiftly in her cheeks showed their effect all too clearly. 'It would be good to start again, properly,' he clarified.

'Good.' Polly waited until he had taken his seat at his new desk. It wasn't quite as good a position as hers, which faced the incredible windows. When Gabe had sat there absorbed in his work he would look absently up every so often, only to be struck anew by the light, the simple artistry of the stylised floral design.

Now his view was the bookshelves that lined the opposite wall—and Polly, her desk directly in his eyeline. She swivelled her chair towards him, a notepad and pen poised in her hand, her legs crossed.

The only way this was going to work was if he behaved himself in thought and deed. But he was a mere man after all and better souls than him would find it hard to stop their gaze skimming over the long willowy figure and the neatly crossed legs. Incredibly long, ridiculously shapely legs. Of course they were.

'You've got a pretty impressive CV,' she said finally. 'Why Rafferty's?'

'That means a lot coming from you,' he said honestly. 'Oh, come on,' as her brows rose in surprise. 'Polly Rafferty, you set the standard, you must know that. I came here to work with you.'

'With me?'

‘Don’t misunderstand me, there’s a lot you can learn from me as well. In some ways Rafferty’s is stuck in the Dark Ages, especially digitally. But, you have done some great things here over the last few years. I have no problem admitting there are still things I need to learn if I am going to be a CEO by the time I’m thirty...’

‘Here?’

He raised an eyebrow. ‘Would you let me?’

‘You’d have to kill me first.’ She shook her head, her colour high.

‘That’s what I thought. No, maybe a start-up, or even my own business. I’ll see nearer the time.’

‘You’re ambitious. It took me until I was thirty-one to make it.’ Her eyes met his coolly, the blue of her eyes dark.

‘I know.’ He grinned. ‘A little competition keeps me focused.’ He shrugged. ‘Rafferty’s is possibly the most famous store in Europe if not the world. It’s the missing piece in my experience—and I have a lot to offer you as well. It’s a win-win situation.’

She leant back. ‘Prove it. What would you change?’

He grinned. ‘Are you ready for it? You only just got back.’

The corners of her mouth turned up, the smallest of smiles. ‘Don’t pull your punches. I can take it.’

‘Okay then.’ He jumped out of the chair and began to pace up and down the room. It was always easier to think on his feet; those months of being confined to bed had left him with a horror of inaction.

‘Your social media lacks identity and your online advertising is practically non-existent—it’s untargeted and unplanned, effectively just a redesign of your print advertising. I suggest you employ a digital marketing consultant to train your existing staff. Emily is very capable. She just needs guidance and some confidence.’

He looked across for a reaction but she was busy scribbling notes. Gabe rolled his eyes. ‘This is part of the problem. You’re what? Writing longhand?’

‘I think better with paper and pen. I’ll type them up later.’ Her voice was defensive.

‘*Non*, the whole company needs to think digitally. The sales force need tablets so they can check sizes and styles at the touch of a button, mix and match styles.’

‘We have a personal touch here. We don’t need to rely on tablets...’

‘You need both,’ he said flatly. ‘But what you really need is a new website.’

There was a long moment of incredulous silence. ‘But it’s only three years old. Do you *know* how much we spent on it?’

Polly was no longer leaning back. She was ramrod-straight, her eyes sparkling, more in anger than excitement, Gabe thought. ‘Too much and it’s obsolete. Come on, Polly.’ His words tumbled over each other, his accent thickened in his effort to convince her.

‘Do you want a website that’s fine and gets the job done or do you want one that’s a window into the very soul of

Rafferty's? You have no other stores anywhere—this is it. Your Internet business *is* your worldwide business and that's where the expansion lies.'

'What do you have in mind?'

This was what made him tick, made his blood pump, the adrenaline flow—planning, innovating, creating. It was better than finishing a marathon, hell, sometimes it was better than sex. 'A site that is visually stunning, one that creates the feel and the look of the store as much as possible. Each department would be organised by gallery, exactly as you are laid out here so that customers get to experience the look, the feel of Rafferty's—but virtually. Online assistants would be available twenty-four hours to chat and advise and, most importantly, the chance to personalise the experience. Why should people buy from Rafferty's online when there are hundreds, thousands of alternatives?'

She didn't answer, probably couldn't.

'If we make it better than all the rest then Rafferty's is the store that customers will choose. They can upload their measurements, their photos and have virtual fittings—that way, they can order with certainty, knowing that the clothes will fit and suit them. Cut down on returns and make the whole shopping experience fun and interactive.'

'How much?'

'It won't be cheap,' he admitted. 'Not to build, maintain or staff. But it will be spectacular.'

She didn't speak for a minute or so, staring straight ahead at the window before nodding decisively. 'There's a board meeting next week. Can you have a researched and costed paper ready for then?'

Researched *and* costed? 'Oui.' If he had to work all day and night. 'So, what about you?'

'What about me?'

'There must be something you want to do, something to stamp your identity firmly on the store.'

'I have been running the company for the last year,' she reminded him, her voice a little frosty.

'But now it's official...' If she wasn't itching to make some changes he had severely underestimated her.

She didn't answer for a moment, her eyes fixed unseeingly on the windows. 'We have never expanded,' she said after a while. 'We always wanted to keep Rafferty's as a destination store, somewhere people could aspire to visit. And it works, we're on so many tourist tick lists; they buy teddies or tea in branded jars, eat in the tea room and take their Rafferty's bag home. And with the Internet there isn't any real need for bricks-and-mortar shops elsewhere.'

'But?'

'But we've become a little staid,' Polly said. She rolled her shoulders as she spoke, stretching out her neck. Gabe tried not to stare, not to notice how graceful her movements were, as she turned her attention to her hair, unpinning it and letting the dark

blonde tendrils fall free.

Polly sighed, running her fingers through her hair before beginning to twist it back into a looser, lower knot. It felt almost voyeuristic standing there watching her fingers busy themselves in the tangle of tresses.

‘We were one of the first stores in London to stock bikinis. Can you imagine—amidst the post-war austerity, the rationing and a London still two decades and a generation from swinging...my great-grandfather brought several bikinis over from Paris. There were letters of outrage to *The Times*.

‘We were the first to unveil the latest trends, to sell miniskirts. We were *always* cutting edge and now we’re part of a tour that includes Buckingham Palace and Madame Tussauds.’ The contempt was clear in her voice. ‘We’re doing well financially, really well, but we’re no longer cutting edge. We’re safe, steady, middle-aged.’ Polly wrinkled her nose as she spoke.

It was true; Rafferty’s was a byword for elegance, taste and design but not for innovation, not any more. Even Gabe’s own digital vision could only sell the existing ranges. But it was fabulously profitable with a brand recognition that was through the roof; wasn’t that enough? ‘Can a store this size actually be cutting edge any more? Surely that’s the Internet’s role...’

‘I disagree.’ She shook her head vehemently. ‘We have the space, the knowledge, the passion and the history. The problem is, it takes a lot for us to take on a new designer or a new range, to hand over valuable floor space to somebody little known and

unproven—and if they have already established themselves then we're just following, not innovating.'

'So, what do you plan to do about it?' This was more like it. Her eyes were focused again, sharp.

'Pop-ups.'

'Pardon?'

'Pop-ups. Bright, fun and relatively low cost. We can create a pop-up area in store for new designers whether it's clothes, jewellery, shoes—we'll champion new talent right here at Rafferty's. Sponsor a graduate show during London fashion week in the main gallery.'

That made a lot of sense.

'But I don't just want to draw people here. I want to go out and find them—it could be a great opportunity to take Rafferty's out of the city as well. Where do we have the biggest footfall?'

It was a good thing he'd pulled those eighteen-hour days; he could answer with utter confidence. 'The food hall.'

'Exactly! The British are finally understanding food—no, don't pull a superior gourmet French face at me. They are and you know it. There are hundreds of food festivals throughout the country and I want us to start having a presence at the very best of them. And not just food festivals. I want us at Glyndebourne, Henley, the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Anywhere there's a buzz I want Rafferty's. Exclusive invitation-only previews to create excitement, with takeaway afternoon teas and Rafferty's hampers—filled with a selection of our bestselling products as souvenirs.'

Gabe rubbed his chin. ‘Will it make a profit?’

‘Yes, but not a massive one,’ she conceded. ‘But it *will* revitalise us, introduce us to the younger market who may think we’re too staid for them. Make us more current and more exciting. And that market will be your domestic digital users.’

Gabe could feel it, the roar of adrenaline, the tightening in his gut that meant something new, something exhilarating was in the air. ‘It would create a great buzz on social media.’

She nodded, her whole face lit up. ‘It all works together, doesn’t it? I am presenting at the board meeting too. It’s less investment up front than you will need—but this is something untried and untested and the current board are a little conservative. You support me and, once I’ve checked your finances and conclusions, I’ll support your digital paper. We’ll have a lot more impact if we’re united. Deal?’ She held out her hand.

Gabe worked alone. He preferred it that way. Sure, he had good relationships with his colleagues, liked to make sure they were all onside but he didn’t want or brook interference.

Freedom at home and at work. That way he never had to worry about letting anyone down.

But this was a great opportunity—to be part of the team dragging Rafferty’s into a new age. How could he refuse? He took her hand, cool and elegant just like its owner.

‘Deal.’

CHAPTER THREE

POLLY KICKED OFF her shoes with a sigh of relief. She was home, the sun was shining and it was Friday evening. This was exactly what she needed to get over this pesky jet lag. Surely the tiredness, the constant nausea and the lack of appetite should have gone by now?

It wasn't exactly a weekend break, she still had a lot of work to do if she was to wow the board in a week's time, but she could do it at home either in the little sunshine-drenched study at the back of the cottage or in the timber-beamed, book-lined sitting room. Away from the office.

Usually her office was a sanctuary but right now it felt alien. Gabe seemed to fill every corner of it. His gym gear in her cloakroom, a variety of equally disgusting smoothies on the table and, worst of all, Gabe himself.

He was so *active*, always on the phone, pacing round, chatting to every member of staff as if they were his long-lost best friend.

Even his typing was a loud, banging, flamboyant display. She couldn't think, couldn't concentrate when he was in the room.

But, although he had been living in Hopeford, in her house, for several weeks there was no trace of Gabe in the living areas of the cottage; his few possessions were kept neatly put away in the guest bedroom. Not that she'd snooped, obviously, but she had felt a need to reacquaint herself with her home, visiting every room, reminding herself of its quirks and corners.

It was odd being back after such a long absence. The cottage was clean, aired and well stocked, the rambling garden weeded

and watered all thanks to the concierge service she employed to take care of her home. Mr Simpkins, the handsome ginger cat she'd inherited when she'd bought the house, was plump and sleek and bearing no discernible grudge after their time apart. But everything felt smaller, more claustrophobic.

For three months she had been someone else. Someone with no purpose, no expectations. It had been disconcerting and yet so freeing.

But that was over. She was home now and she had a lot to do. Friday night usually meant her laptop, a glass of wine and a takeaway. Polly put her hand to her stomach and swallowed hard; maybe she'd forego the latter two this week.

And think about a doctor's appointment if the tiredness and nausea didn't go away soon.

Hang on a second, what was that? Polly had visitors so rarely that it took another sharp decisive peal of the doorbell before she moved. Probably Gabe.

'If he can't keep hold of his keys how can I trust him with Rafferty's online strategy?' she asked Mr Simpkins. He merely yawned and turned over, stretching out in a patch of early evening sunshine.

Walking down the wide stairs towards the hallway, she took a moment to look around; at the polished, oiled beams, the old flagstoned floor, the gilt mirror by the hat stand, the fresh flowers on the antique table. It had all been chosen, placed and cared for by someone else. She lived here but was it really hers?

The doorbell rang again, impatiently. 'I'm coming,' she called, trying to keep the irritation out of her voice. It was hardly her fault that he had forgotten his keys. Unlocking the door, she pulled it open.

It wasn't Gabe.

Tall, broad, hair the same colour as hers and eyes the exact same shade of dark blue. A face she knew as well as she knew her own. A face she hadn't seen in four years. Polly clung onto the door frame, disbelief flooding through her. 'Raff?'

'I still have a key.' He held it up. 'But I didn't think you'd want me just walking in.'

'But, what are you doing here? I thought you were in Jordan. Or Australia?'

'Sorry to disappoint you. Can I come in?'

'Sorry?' Polly gaped at him as his words sank in. 'Yes, of course.'

She stepped back, her mind still grasping for a reason her twin brother was here in her sleepy home town, not trying to save the world, one war zone at a time.

Raff faced her, the love and warmth in his eyes bringing a lump to her throat. How on earth had four years gone by since she had last seen him? 'Come here.' He took her in his arms. It had been so long since he had held her, since she had allowed herself to lean on him.

'It's so good to see you,' he said into her hair. Polly tightened her grip.

It wasn't Raff's fault their grandfather had favoured him, wanted him to take over the store. Yet somehow it had been easier to hold him culpable.

'Hi, heavenly twin,' she murmured and took comfort in his low rumble of laughter. They had been named for the Heavenly Twins, Castor and Pollux, but Polly had escaped with a feminine version of her name. Her brother had been less lucky; nobody, apart from their grandparents, used it—Raff preferred a shorter version of their surname.

'Thanks for looking after everything.' She disentangled herself slowly, although the temptation to lean in and not let go was overwhelming. She led him down the wide hallway towards the kitchen. 'Looking after the house, Mr Simpkins.' She swallowed, hard and painful. 'Taking over at Rafferty's.'

'You needed my help, of course I stepped in.' He paused. 'I wish you'd called, Pol. Told me what was going on. I didn't mind but it would have been good if we had worked together, sorted it out together.'

'After four years? I couldn't,' she admitted, heading over to the fridge so that she didn't have to face him. 'You stayed away, Raff. You went away, left me behind and you didn't come back. Ever.' She swallowed painfully. 'I didn't even know whose side you were on—if you had spoken to Grandfather, knew what he was planning, if you wanted Rafferty's.' That had been her worst fear, that her twin had colluded with her grandfather.

Raff sounded incredulous. 'Surely you didn't think I would

agree? That I would take Rafferty's away from you?"

'Grandfather made it very clear that nothing I had done, nothing I could do was enough to compete with your Y chromosome.' She turned, forced herself to meet the understanding in his eyes. 'It destroyed me.'

Raff winced. 'Polly, I spent three months running Rafferty's while you were gone and I hated every minute of it. How you manage I don't know. But even if I had come back and experienced an epiphany about the joys of retail I *still* wouldn't have agreed. I don't deserve it and you do. You've worked for it, you live it, love it. Even Grandfather had to admit in the end that his desire to see me in Father's place was wrong, that his fierce determination for a male heir was utterly crazy. I've agreed to join the board as a family member but that's it. You're CEO, you're in charge.'

Polly grabbed a cold beer and threw it to her twin, who caught it deftly with one hand, and pulled out a bottle of white wine for herself. She checked the label: Chateau Beaufils Chardonnay Semillon. One of Gabe's, then.

'So where have you been?' Raff was leaning against the kitchen counter. He raised the beer. 'Cheers.'

'Oh, here and there.' Polly's cheeks heated up and she busied herself with looking for a corkscrew. *Remember the new bucket list*, she told herself, ruthlessly pushing the more reprehensible details of her time away out of her mind. 'I went backpacking. In South America.' She flashed him a smile. 'Just like you always

said I should.’

He smirked. ‘When you say backpacking, you mean five-star hotels and air-conditioned tours?’

‘Sometimes,’ Polly admitted, breathing a sigh of relief as the stubborn cork finally began to give way. She eased it out carefully, wrinkling her nose as the aroma hit her. She held the bottle out to Raff. ‘Is this corked?’

He took it and inhaled. ‘I don’t think so.’

She shrugged, and poured a small amount into a glass. She didn’t sip it though; just the sight of the straw-coloured liquid caused her stomach to roll ominously. She put the glass down. ‘But I did my fair share of rucksacks and walking boots too, along the Inca trail and other places.’ She grinned across at him. ‘You wouldn’t have recognised me, braids in my hair, a sarong, all my worldly goods in one bag.’

‘I had no idea where you were.’ He didn’t sound accusatory; he didn’t need to. She had read his emails, listened to his voicemails. She knew how much worry she’d caused him.

‘I didn’t want you to. I didn’t want pity or advice or anything but time to figure out who I was, who I wanted to be if I wasn’t going to run Rafferty’s.’

‘And?’

‘I was still figuring it out when Clara emailed me telling me to come home. So, don’t think I’m not glad to see you but why are you here? Did you miss Mr Simpkins?’

‘My shirts don’t look the same without a covering of ginger

fur,' he agreed. 'Polly, there's something I need to tell you.' He turned his beer bottle round and round, his gaze fixed on it. 'I'm not going to be working in the field any more. I've accepted a job at the headquarters of Doctors Everywhere instead and I'm moving here, to Hopeford.'

Polly stared. 'But you love your job. Why on earth would you change it? And you're moving here? Hang on!' She looked at him suspiciously. 'Do you want to move back in? I'm not running a doss centre for young executive males who are quite capable of finding their own places, you know.'

'For who?' His face cleared. 'Oh, Gabe? He's still here? How are you getting on with him?'

'No.' She shook her head, unwilling to discuss her absent houseguest. 'No changing the subject. What's going on?'

Raff took a deep breath. 'You're not the only one who's been working things out recently. I have to admit I was pissed when you left with no word—I hotfooted it straight here, convinced that Clara knew where you were. I was determined to get it out of her, drag you back and get on with my life.'

'She didn't. I didn't even really know what my plans were.'

His mouth twisted into a smile. 'I know that now but things were a bit hostile for a while.' He shook his head. 'I can't believe it's only been a few months since I met her, that there was a time I didn't know her. Thing is, Pol, meeting Clara changed everything. I'm engaged. That's why I'm staying in the UK, that's why I'm moving to Hopeford. I'm marrying Clara.'

* * *

'Bonsoir?'

Polly should get off the sofa, should open her laptop, look as if she were working.

But she couldn't. Her appetite for the game, the competition had gone.

'Hi.' She looked up wearily as Gabe walked into the room. He was so tall his head nearly brushed the beams on the low ceiling.

'Nice run?' she continued. Small talk was good; it was easy. It stopped her having to think.

'Oui.' He stretched, seemingly unaware that his T-shirt was riding up and exposing an inch of flat, toned abdomen. 'A quick ten kilometres. It ruins the buzz though, getting the train after. I might try biking back to Hopeford one evening. What is it? Just fifty kilometres?'

'Just,' she echoed.

Gabe looked at her curiously. 'Are you okay?'

'Yes, no.' She gave a wry laugh. 'I don't really know. Raff's engaged.'

'Your brother? That's amazing. We should celebrate.'

'We should,' she agreed.

The dark eyes turned to her, their expression keen. 'You're not happy?'

'Of course I am,' Polly defended herself and then sighed. 'I am,' she repeated. 'It's just he's moving here, to Hopeford. He's marrying my closest friend and joining the board at Rafferty's.'

She shook her head. 'I feel like I am being a total cow,' she admitted. 'It's just, I have spent my whole life competing against him—and he wins without even taking part.'

'And now...' she looked down at her hands '...now he's moving to my town, will be on the board of my company and is marrying the one person I can confide in. It feels like there's nowhere I am just me, not Raff's twin sister.'

The silence stretched out between them.

'I have three sisters,' he said after a while. 'I'm the youngest. It can be hard to find your place.'

Polly looked over at him. 'Is that why you're here? Not working at the vineyard?'

'Partly. And because I needed to prove some things to myself.' He walked over to Mr Simpkins, who was lying on the cushion-covered window seat set into the wall on the far side of the chimney breast.

Gabe should have been an incongruous presence in the white-walled, book-lined sitting room, the soft furnishings and details were so feminine, so English country cottage. He was too young, too indisputably French, too tall, too *male* for the low-beamed, cosy room. And yet he looked utterly at home reaching over to run one hand down Mr Simpkins' spine.

He was wearing jeans, his dark hair falling over his forehead, his pallor emphasised by the deep shadows under his dark eyes and the black stubble covering his jaw. He worked so late each night, rising at dawn to fit in yet another session in the gym—

and the lack of sleep showed.

Polly watched the long, lean fingers' firm caress as her cat flattened himself in suppliant pleasure and felt a jolt in the pit of her stomach, a sudden insistent ache of desire as her nerve endings remembered the way his hand had settled in the curve of her waist, those same fingers moving up along her body, making her purr almost as loudly as Mr Simpkins.

'Is that why you went away?' he asked, all his attention seemingly on the writhing cat. 'Because of your brother?'

Polly flushed, partly in shame at having to admit her own second-class status to a relative stranger—and half in embarrassment at her reaction to the slow, sure strokes from Gabe's capable-looking hands.

'Partly,' she admitted. 'I had to get away, learn who I was without Rafferty's.'

'And did you?' He looked directly at her then, his eyes almost black and impossibly dark. 'Learn who you are?'

Polly thought back. To blisters and high altitudes. To the simple joy of a shower after a five-day trek. To long twilight walks on the beach. To lying back and watching the stars, the balmy breeze warm on her bare skin. To the lack of responsibility. To taking risks.

It had been fun but ultimately meaningless.

'No,' she said. 'I saw some amazing things, did amazing things and I had fun. But there was nothing to find out. Without Rafferty's I don't have anything...I'm no one.'

‘That’s not true.’ His voice was low, intimate.

‘It is,’ she argued. ‘But Raff? He is utterly and completely himself. I think I’ve always envied that. And now he has Clara—which is great, she’s lovely and I’m sure they’ll be very happy. But my brother and best friend getting married? It leaves me with no one.’

She heard her words echo as she said them and flushed. ‘I am the most selfish beast, ignore me, Gabe. I’m tired and fluey and having a pathetic moment. It’ll pass!’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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