

HELLER



JD NIXON

Heller

by JD Nixon

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Cover design by JD Nixon

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## **Chapter 1**

"I'm sorry, Tilly, but I'm going to have to let you go," Barnaby said, not sounding nor looking particularly sorry at all.

He'd asked me to stay behind after the show had finished and I'd agreed unwillingly, watching as my fellow cast members dispersed, laughing with each other and trading friendly jibes. He stood in front of me with his arms crossed, his doughy butt resting against the back of a chair. His bulbous swamp-brown eyes were flat and cold and his fleshy lips glistened as he ran his tongue around them.

"No. But why?" I asked, bewildered and dismayed. There was still another two weeks left

on my contract and I needed the job badly. It had been months since I'd had a paying gig.

"You're just not convincing in the role," he shrugged with feigned disinterest, casually scratching his scalp, releasing a blizzard of dandruff. "The audience doesn't believe in you. I can see it in their faces."

They were the worst words an aspiring actor ever wanted to hear. But considering the role I was currently playing and the audience, they were also unbelievably ridiculous.

"Barnaby. I'm a piece of fruit," I reminded him in a reasonable voice, eyeing him steadily. In fact I was a slice of watermelon, bedecked in an unwieldy, triangular-shaped foam costume. My green and white rind swung out wide in a semicircle past my hips and my legs were encased in green tights sticking through the bottom of the rind. The red foam wedge of the costume climbed to a point above my head and my arms poked awkwardly through its sides while my face showed through a hole at the front.

It was an easy month-long gig – a series of short concerts across the city's primary schools to promote nutritious eating for the under-twelves. Funded by the Department of Health, it paid well enough to keep my lecherous landlord off my back for a few months. And it didn't involve me taking my clothes off, as did so many of the other 'acting' jobs that I applied for and consequently refused. So of course I'd been thrilled when Barnaby had rung to tell me that I'd auditioned successfully.

I'd been cast in two roles in the show. Wearing a school uniform with my hair tied into two plaits, I had a starring role in the first half as a small girl who refused to eat her vegetables. One night in her sleep she was dragged away to VegieLand by a bossy, know-it-all carrot to personally meet and learn about the different vegetables. In the second half, I climbed into costume as the watermelon for an all-singing, all-dancing fruit salad extravaganza. Luckily for me it was an ensemble cast, because I don't have a good singing voice and was happy to let the melodious, but overloud, pineapple next to me sing for both of us.

Barnaby shrugged again. "Your little girl isn't so great either. Let's be honest – it's a hard role for you to pull off," he countered, deliberately lowering his gaze to sweep across my generous chest, mercifully hidden behind the bulky foam costume. I met his eyes at that comment, saw the spiteful gleam in them and suddenly understood what was happening. He had asked me out to dinner the previous day and I'd turned him down, finding him unattractive and dull. I was being punished.

He was a community liaison officer with the Department (whatever that meant) and was the concert organiser. He had the ponderous manner of a born bureaucrat and the smug certainty in life of someone who could count on receiving a regular pay cheque. Pompous and humourless, he was full of an undeserved self-belief in his great artistic managerial skills. In short, he was a complete tosser and I had taken an instant dislike to him that I had tried to hide. I was struggling to hide it right then.

I blinked my light brown eyes down at him, far taller than him even in my flat shoes, and relaxed my facial features into my sweetest expression. "Oh, but I really need the money. Isn't there *anything* I can do to change your mind about letting me go?" I pouted at him, wondering momentarily how far I would go to keep a job.

"Well, now that you mention it," he smirked, placing his hand with caressing familiarity on my upper arm, running his fingers lightly up and down. "Perhaps I might be persuaded to reconsider. Why don't you slip out of that costume and we can . . . discuss . . . it further in the dressing room."

I knew then that I wouldn't go very far at all, because I couldn't repress the shudder of repulsion that rippled through my body at his touch. He obviously wouldn't change his mind about firing me if I didn't give him some sugar, but my sugar-bowl was empty. I prised his

fingers free from my arm.

“If you touch me again the only fruit you’ll be fondling today is your own bruised plums after I kick them,” I said pleasantly, flashing him a brilliant smile and burning my bridges with him forever. I turned and walked backstage, my mind consumed with the sheer joyful thought of taking off the watermelon costume. I doubted it had ever been cleaned in its long life, redolent with the body odour of its many previous wearers. The incredible heat of the day had only added my own to the noxious casserole.

I reached around to unzip myself. No matter how hard I tried though, I only ended up struggling uselessly, twisting myself around back and forth trying to reach the zip. But it stubbornly remained in the centre of my back, totally unreachable from either side. Someone had always been around to unzip me after the other concerts, but because Barnaby had kept me late, the place was now deserted.

Damn.

I heard footsteps behind me and spun to find that Barnaby had followed me backstage, bad-tempered rejection oozing from his pores, mouth sulky with petulance.

“Can you unzip me, please?” I asked politely, showing the nice manners that my mother had taught me. Just because I thought he was a creepy pervert who’d been sickeningly turned on by my little schoolgirl role, didn’t mean I shouldn’t mind my Ps and Qs.

He grunted and stalked over to me, yanking ungently on the zip. He was responsible for the costumes, so his irritation with me wouldn’t stop him from performing his duty as the brave protector of such important government-owned property. As if I wanted to steal an ancient, faded and stinky foam watermelon outfit anyway! I was equally amused and insulted at the thought. What on earth did he think I would do with it – wear it around town? I mean, how embarrassing would that be?

The yanking continued for what I judged to be an excessive amount of time with no resultant zipping noise signifying any success at bringing me closer to freedom from the costume.

“What’s the matter? Why are you taking so long?” I snapped at him, suspicious that he was using the exercise as an excuse to get his hands on me again. I hoped he realised that I had meant it about kicking him in his plums. My foot was primed and raring to go.

“Your little thingy’s broken,” he said, frustration clear in his voice.

“I’ll break your little thingy in a minute if you don’t hurry up,” I threatened, throwing away any pretence of being civilised with him. “It’s frigging hot in this costume. And it reeks. I have to get out of it urgently.”

“The little thingy,” he repeated sullenly. “You know? The little bit you hold to move the zip up and down. It’s snapped off. And now the zip won’t budge at all.”

I spun around to face him. “Are you telling me the zip’s broken?”

“Yep. Looks like it,” he informed me blandly, his features expressionless.

“So I can’t get out of this costume?”

“Mmm, it’s not looking good,” which was said with the definite hint of a bitchy smile.

“Barnaby, it’s forty-one degrees today,” I reminded him.

“It *is* a very hot day,” he agreed, fanning himself briefly with both hands, suddenly cheerful.

“Barnaby, I have to catch the bus home.” His smile widened.

“Sorry Tilly, there’s nothing I can do. These costumes are old. I guess the Department should think about retiring them and buying some new ones.” His accompanying smile brimmed with *schadenfreude*. “Tell you what. I’ll let you go home where you’ve a better chance of finding something to help you undo the zip. Maybe some pliers might help?”

He gave me another fleeting flash of his pearly whites, except they weren’t white at all,

more of a weak pee yellow. I was seriously starting to hate him.

“But you have to return the costume tomorrow to my office downtown,” he ordered, abruptly aggressive. “Any damage to it will be docked from your pay. You understand?”

I stared at him angrily. I hadn’t even been paid one cent yet for the two weeks I’d already worked and there he was, threatening to take some of that much needed money away from me. Didn’t he realise that my landlord had exorbitant rent and busy hands?

“Your costume will be returned in pristine condition,” I promised, with all the frostiness of a snowman sucking on a snow cone during a snowstorm in Siberia.

He snorted at me rudely and carefully scooped up all the other discarded foam fruit and vegetable costumes while I stood immobile at the back of the stage, the full awfulness of my plight slowly sinking in. I’d been counting down the minutes until I could remove the hot and smelly costume for the day. Guess I’d have to restart the timer.

Shoulders slumped, my small backpack of clothes and belongings dangling from my hand, I left the school hall and trudged to the bus stop. Dark thoughts swirled around my mind as I tramped the streets. I’d enjoyed the rare experience of having a job, had liked the work and the regular hours and had been looking forward to receiving some pay. But now I was fearful of my immediate future, not so much because of the penury, but because of the boredom. I wanted to have a job. I wanted something to do in my life. I wanted to earn some money. And I really didn’t want to have to move back home with my parents because I couldn’t pay my rent. I had turned twenty-five a month ago, for God’s sake! It was humiliating to still be so dependent on them at my age.

By the time I reached the bus stop I was drenched in sweat. The stop had no shelter and was situated on a busy road, so I was forced to stand in the blistering sun, inhaling exhaust fumes while I waited. And waited. The bus was twenty minutes late and I was the only passenger waiting for it at the stop. But I didn’t feel the slightest bit lonely, accompanied the whole time by a barrage of horn-tooting and catcalls thrown from the vehicles zooming past me. *Very funny everyone*, I thought sourly, *let’s all make fun of the poor, unemployed piece of fruit*.

I was in an exceptionally foul mood when the bus finally arrived, struggling to even get through the door in the stupid costume. The driver didn’t bother to hide his gales of laughter when he set eyes on me. I was a surly piece of fruit by the time I paid for my ticket, deciding to hide at the back of the bus so as not to attract any more attention.

Too late, I realised as I clutched my ticket and manoeuvred myself in that direction. Every pair of eyes on the bus was glued to me. That was when I also noticed that the entire bus was full of males, every passenger either a student from the local private boys’ high school or a construction worker knocking off for the day from a nearby building site. I groaned to myself, because we all know how sensitive a bunch of teenagers and labourers would be towards a young woman caught in such an embarrassing situation.

I lumbered my way down the narrow aisle, accidentally knocking the hats off every schoolboy with my wide rind butt, causing a commotion as I progressed. Even if there had been a spare seat, I wouldn’t have been able to sit down, my butt was so big. I had to stand sideways in the aisle just to fit, clinging to a pole as the bus lurched back into the traffic.

Soon enough, I became fed up with the staring and the snickering of the other passengers.

“What’s the matter?” I demanded angrily, looking around. “Haven’t any of you ever seen a slice of watermelon before?”

My mistake for engaging them.

“Not as sweet and juicy as you, sweetheart,” quipped one labourer, and the whole bus erupted into laughter.

“You look good enough to eat,” said another, sniggering.

“Too right she does! Darling, I would give my right nut for the chance to munch on you,” piped up a third.

“In your dreams,” I told him sullenly.

“Geez, I wouldn’t mind getting two pieces of fruit into me every day, if they looked like you,” said one man.

“I’d rather get *me* into a piece of fruit, if it looked like her,” laughed his mate, and there was much hilarity between them at that crude comment.

“I’ve got a banana and a couple of kiwifruits here,” said another, grabbing his crotch. “We could make a beautiful fruit salad together.”

“More like a baby pickle and two cherries, if you ask me,” I retorted scornfully. “And you can keep your produce to yourself, thanks very much.” He licked his lips and made a slurping noise. More laughter. I rolled my eyes and returned my gaze to the ad for haemorrhoid cream plastered on the wall of the bus, trying valiantly to block them all out.

On and on they went though, throughout the whole nightmare of a journey, all the way across the city. Casting my eyes to the heavens in suffering silence as I clung on, I realised that I was experiencing what had to be the absolute nadir of my life. And there had been a few low points already along the way for comparison, but that bus trip beat them all by miles.

When the bus finally reached my stop, I shambled my way to the exit, receiving a friendly cheer from the remaining passengers. I gave them a sarcastic royal wave in return and almost fell out of the bus when I propelled myself forward after discovering that my rind was wider than the door. Stumbling as I stepped out onto the footpath, I fell flat on my face because fate had obviously decided that my day hadn’t been humiliating enough already. I staggered to my feet, dusted myself off and rued my grazed and stinging knees and hands. Ignoring the shouts of laughter from the bus passengers and the curious glances of passers-by, I straightened up, mustered as much dignity as I could, and made my awkward way down the three blocks to my home. I reminded myself that I was proud to be an actor and that no matter what Barnaby had said, I knew that I’d made a convincing piece of fruit.

I lived with my best friend, Dixie, and two nerdy male engineering PhD students, Jon and Don. The four of us crammed into a poky two-bedroom flat located in a distant western suburb still waiting for the housing boom to arrive. Our slummy unit block was squeezed between an illegal rave club and an all-night kebab shop, which made sleeping every night quite a challenge. There wasn’t a lot of privacy or space available in the flat, especially as Jon and Don’s main goal in life appeared to be to ‘accidentally’ brush up against Dixie or me as often as possible. They had the social niceties of league players and the hygiene of cockroaches, but also the family means to pay more than their fair share of the overpriced rent, so we tolerated them. Well, Dixie tolerated them. I couldn’t stand them, or tell them apart.

By some small miracle the lift in the building was actually working so I caught it to the seventh floor. Once inside though, I pinched my nostrils closed with my thumb and index finger to avoid smelling the putrid mix of body odour, urine, hot chip grease and dirty nappies that permanently hung around. The lift doors opened to a dim and dingy hallway, fronted by four closed doors. Our flat was at the end of the hall and as I passed the other doors I noted the familiar sound of the Samadi family’s screaming twin babies from behind the first door, the thumping bass and marijuana smoke of the two stoners from behind the second door, and the eerie silence of the unsmiling, shadowy loner who never made a sound or said a word, from behind the third door.

When I unlocked the door to our tiny flat, it was soon apparent that nobody was home because it was so quiet. Damn! Who was going to help me out of this costume? I was beginning to think I would be stuck in it forever. Of course I could have asked a neighbour to

help me, but the Samadis didn't speak any English, I wasn't confident I'd make it from the stoners' place unmolested, and I simply didn't want to know what the loner was doing so silently in his flat.

I decided that I had no option but to wait until Dixie came home from work, so poured myself a large glass of chilled water, the only thing in the old, cavernous fridge. Gulping it thirstily, I scavenged in the pantry for some food. I was starving, having had nothing to eat since breakfast when I'd scoffed a tub of yoghurt that was worryingly past its expiry date. After a thorough search, my available choices appeared to be a couple of stale crackers or a small shrivelled apple.

I chose the crackers, but spat them out after my first mouthful. They were really stale. Optimistically, I checked the food kitty, an old cracked pottery jar we used to store our pooled grocery money. Totally empty – not even five cents to spend. It was so empty that a spider had built a web inside. It glared up at me with hostility when I picked up the jar, so I hurriedly put it back down on the bench again. I don't like spiders.

With no alternatives, I unenthusiastically peeled the apple of its wrinkled skin and ate it, flopped on the cracked brown vinyl lounge. Late afternoon TV entertained me until Dixie came home. She announced her arrival with a loud stream of obscenities before she'd even opened the door. From previous experience, I gathered she couldn't find her keys in her chaotic, oversized handbag, so I struggled to my feet and opened the door for her.

She took in my costume without a word, barely even glancing at me, bursting through the door in the middle of what turned out to be a very long-winded and vitriolic rant about her boss. She raged about his idiocy, his vile personality and his complete lack of respect for her as both a human being and an artiste. Dixie's been my best friend since we started high school together and was petite, cute and curvy with a Malaysian mother, Australian father, gorgeous black eyes and a terrifyingly large libido. She had short spiky hair that she regularly coloured and this week she was bright green, her hair standing on end like electrified AstroTurf. She was also one of the most self-centred people I'd ever known. The entire universe revolved around Dixie and her needs and wants and the rest of us could go jump. But despite this, I was a loyal kind of person and didn't give up on her, even when she was at her worst. We did have a lot of fun together.

Her outrageously large handbag came in handy sometimes, as I was about to rediscover when she pulled out from its fathomless depths some burgers and fries. I gave a silent cheer. She had managed to smuggle home some food from her part-time job as a burger-flipper at a nearby fast food chain restaurant. She wasn't always successful in her attempts as her well-cursed boss was rather suspicious of her and kept an eagle eye out when he wasn't distracted by a disaster. Fortunately for us though, disasters were frequent at that restaurant, especially in the kitchen. Some were probably even deliberately caused by Dixie herself. So she found many occasions on which to supplement our impoverished lives with greasy, heart-attack inducing food. Yum!

I grabbed one of the burgers, greedy with hunger, only to have it snatched out of my hands.

"That one's mine! I made it myself and it's got loads of extra extras. I call it the Dixie Special. You can have the other one," Dixie ordered, and I had to settle for its poorer, less-endowed cousin. Why she just couldn't make two Dixie Specials so we could both have one was beyond me, but that was Dixie for you – rarely a thought for anybody else. I felt my customary pang of guilt at eating stolen goods as I bit into the burger and shovelled the fries into my mouth, but hunger does a good job of realigning your moral code.

After we'd demolished the food, Dixie sat back and finally noticed that there was something different about me.

“What the fuck are you wearing?” she asked, eyes wide with incredulity as she realised she’d just dined with a giant slice of watermelon.

“I’m kind of stuck in it,” I admitted sheepishly. “I need some help to take it off. I had to catch the bus home wearing it.”

She laughed for a solid five minutes at that confession, tears pouring down her reddened face, gasping for oxygen. I thumped her on the back and waited with patient resignation for her to finish. Finally she subsided, only the occasional watery snort of laughter disrupting the quiet.

“You’re such a moron, Tilly,” she said, wiping her eyes.

“Yeah, yeah. Skip the personality analysis, will you, and help me? It’s so hot in here,” I snapped with annoyance, standing up and turning around so she could unzip me. “You might need some pliers. The little thingy’s broken off.”

“No, it isn’t,” she said, unzipping me easily. Realisation that I’d been duped swamped me in an instant.

“No! That bastard! He tricked me,” I groaned, slapping my forehead in disbelief at my own stupidity. “I trusted him and he lied to me. I’ve just completely humiliated myself in public for no reason.”

Dixie started giggling again. “Tilly, you’re a mega-moron. You shouldn’t be so trusting. Especially of men.”

I frantically began peeling the costume from my body, only to have it tear apart in my hands. Shit! There went any chance of receiving my money from that job, because I suspected that Barnaby was the type of person who would calculate the cost of replacing the costume to the exact cent that I was owed in backpay. I collapsed on the lounge with my head in my hands, my singlet top and gym shorts plastered to me with sweat. I had just worked my butt off for two weeks for nothing.

Dixie screwed up her face and recoiled in disgust as I sat down. “Oh yuck, you stink! You need a shower.” She pulled me to my feet and gave me an ungentle push towards the bathroom. “Go have a shower and then I’ll buy you a drink. Sounds like you could do with one after the day you’ve had.”

She was right, twice over. I was rank with BO and I certainly could do with a drink after making such a fool of myself. I scrabbled around in our bedroom for some clean clothes and headed to the bathroom. It was its usual mess, dirty clothes and damp towels covering the floor. Dixie’s makeup took up most of the tiny vanity bench-top and her toiletries hogged the mirrored medicine cabinet. That was okay with me, because I didn’t have much of either anyway, so didn’t need much space. And neither of us cared whether the students minded or not. I wasn’t sure if they even bathed much at all.

The shower cubicle had never been cleaned once the entire two years that I had lived in the place, and I sure as hell wasn’t going to be the one to start a precedent. Its disgusting state did mean that I took the fastest showers I’d ever had in my life though, and that day was no exception. I quickly lathered, shampooed and rinsed, finishing as soon as possible. I ran a comb through my longish, wavy dark chestnut hair and slapped on some deodorant and moisturiser, noticing that my container was nearly empty. I cursed Dixie out loud. She was a frequent and unrepentant borrower, user and keeper of my clothes, makeup, shoes, boyfriends – anything she could get her hands on.

I dressed in a short denim skirt and stretchy black v-neck t-shirt and pulled on some flat sandals, carelessly applied some makeup and dried my hair while Dixie showered and changed. I emptied my purse on my bed and counted my available money. Twenty dollars was all I had in the world, which had to cover food, rent and utilities, not to mention bus fares and some new moisturiser. If I didn’t find another gig soon, I would either have to move back

home or sign up for a low-level temping job in an office. With those depressing options crowding my mind, we walked down to our local pub. It was busy that evening and almost chilly inside, its air-conditioning turned up full blast to compensate for day's high temperature. Evidently, everybody had decided that night to go out to dinner to escape the heat, because the pub was packed.

"You buy the first drinks while I find us a table," commanded Dixie, haring off before I could protest. I gazed after her in annoyance, distinctly remembering her offering to buy me a drink. I muttered to myself as I ordered, handing over half of my precious twenty dollars to purchase two glasses of the nasty house white wine that I watched the barman blatantly pour from a catering-sized cask. Dixie had managed to find us a small table up against a wall and I dodged over-excited children and doddering pensioners, carrying the drinks safely to the table.

We chatted casually for a while, filling each other in on our day. I unwisely made the mistake of complaining to her about my seemingly endless and depressing single status. She immediately sprang into action to find me someone.

"What about him?" she asked, nodding her head towards a good-looking, fair-haired man in dark blue jeans and a red polo shirt waiting at the counter to order dinner. He was nibbling on his bottom lip, indecision stamping his face as he dithered between the chicken schnitzel special and the roast of the day.

"Nah, he's not tall enough," I dismissed. "You know I hate towering over a man."

She sighed impatiently and looked around. "Well, what about that guy over there? He's tall and cute."

"He sure is," I agreed. "But I think that very pregnant woman standing next to him is his wife."

She shrugged as if to say *so what?* Her eyes roamed the crowd again. "Ooh, what about him? He's tall, cute and with no knocked-up chick nearby."

"True, but I think he's gay," I pointed out. "Look at his t-shirt. It says: *I want to flout that I'm out*. Sounds sort of gay to me. Plus, he's got his hand on that other man's butt."

"I suppose," she conceded unhappily. "Okay, okay. I'm not giving up. I love a challenge. Hmm." She scanned the room again, then smiled triumphantly. "What about him?"

"He *is* tall and cute, but he's way too young for me."

"How can you tell?"

"Because he's wearing a school uniform! It's probably not even legal for us to be looking at him."

"Don't be silly – he's over the age of consent."

"Barely."

She continued to stare at the teenager who must have been dining with his parents directly from a school function, an appreciatively calculating smile teasing her lips. "He's very cute, though. I could teach him a thing or two that he won't learn in school."

"Dixie, stop it. You're scaring the poor kid." The teen glanced over at us nervously, his protective mother hustling him back to their table to join the family, throwing us a disgusted look as she did.

"What a bitch! I was only looking," sulked Dixie.

I laughed. "It's the way you were looking at him that was bothering her."

Dixie turned her attention back to me. "I give up. Your problem is that you're too fussy," she said, taking a sip of wine. "You have to stop being so picky. Just shag the next man who asks and your problem's solved. That guy we met at the nightclub the other night was okay. You should have shagged him. I would have."

"He was married! And he tried to grope my boobs when we danced together."

“You do have great boobs, so you can’t really blame a man for trying to have a feel,” she said, sipping her wine again, halfway through her glass already.

“Yes, I can! And besides, you know I’ve sworn off one-night stands. I’m sick of them, especially after the last one. I always feel so cheap and dirty afterwards.” My mind took me back to that horrible feeling I’d had a few months ago waking up in an unfamiliar house, head pounding with a killer hangover. I’d rolled over to find myself naked in bed with a snoring stranger who’d sure seemed a lot better looking the previous evening when I’d been wearing my vodka goggles. I’d dressed quietly and sneaked out of his place in my bare feet so as not to wake him, praying that I hadn’t given him my phone number. It was on that journey home on the bus that I’d vowed to myself not to do that ever again.

“You’ll never get laid with that attitude,” Dixie warned, not having any compunction herself about one-nighters, married men, or apparently, teenagers.

“I don’t want to just get laid,” I grumbled. “I want . . . I dunno. I want something more than that.” She shot me a scathing look, rolling her eyes with deep scorn. We were worlds apart in our attitudes to sex.

I sighed in self-pity. Not only was I unsuccessful romantically, I was also pretty much a flop at scoring jobs in the two years since Dixie and I had both decided to chase our dream to become actors. Well, to be honest, it was more Dixie’s dream than mine. I followed her because I couldn’t think of anything else I wanted to do with my life and it had sounded fun. But it wasn’t. I’d only managed to notch up a bare handful of acting jobs since I started. One had been a non-speaking role as an extra in a locally-made turkey of a movie that I’d done primarily for the free catering. I’d also managed to land an unfortunately long-running commercial for a high-fibre breakfast cereal. My overjoyed and un-constipated enthusiasm for bran had mortified me every time the ad showed on TV, but gave my family and friends endless fodder for teasing.

About six months ago, in what I mistakenly believed was going to be my big break, I’d scored a brief stint on the soapie *Summer Days*. I’d played the conniving and slutty half-sister of the town’s doctor, but she was killed off after a few weeks in a gigantic fireball after sleeping with half the town and breaking up a popular character’s marriage. I was still getting hate mail about that.

My other big role was as the Third Hottie in a low-budget and low-talent slasher film called *The Harvester’s Crop*. My character was hacked to death in the first ten minutes with a scythe by a madman known as The Harvester. It still rankled that I’d missed out on the First Hottie and Second Hottie roles. As far as I know the movie didn’t make a single cent, bypassing all normal avenues of distribution and ending up on some obscure horror website. I’d always had my suspicions that it was never meant to be released at all, and was made solely for the private entertainment of the three pimply, but well-off young directors. That made me especially glad that I’d refused to wear a bikini during the shoot. I mean, seriously, who wears a bikini and high-heels running around the fields at night when a psychopathic murderer was trying to kill you with a primitive farming implement? The other two Hotties didn’t object to wearing their bikinis though and that’s probably why my character was bumped off first. But you see, I do have *some* artistic integrity.

I sagged into depression thinking that I was almost down to my last dollar and if I didn’t find some acting work soon, I wouldn’t be able to pay my share of the rent. I really didn’t want to ask my parents for money yet again. I pictured Dad’s stern face, his eyebrows slightly drawn together, mouth pursed, as he gave me what I had dubbed ‘The Lecture’. I could recite it by heart: how I should be more responsible in my life and get a steady job like my two older brothers; how when he and Mum were twenty-five they were already married with a toddler, a baby and a mortgage; how I should settle down with a good man. *Have to find one*

*first, Dad*, I always said back to him at that point, looking up at him with my big eyes, my most pitiable expression on my face. That made him pause for an instant and pat my cheek with affectionate consolation before resuming his spiel. And even though each time he coughed up some cash in the end, I was becoming tired of hearing The Lecture. I didn't need any reminding about exactly what was wrong with my life. I was the one living it, after all.

My mobile suddenly chirped. Dixie and I exchanged hopeful glances as I answered, hearing the grating, coarse voice of our shared third-rate agent, Kristo.

"No good, Tilly," he rasped down the phone line. He inhaled from a cigarette, paused briefly, then exhaled with a disagreeable deafening roar of air in my ear. I could almost smell the nicotine through the phone. "Sorry, love."

"Yeah, no problem, Kristo," I said, dejected but unsurprised.

I'd tested earlier in the week for a role on *Learn or Earn*, a shockingly bad show set in a fictional university town that relied heavily on the tense standoff between the university folk and the townsfolk for its story-lines. The character was the psychotic, alcoholic secret love-child of the university's vice-chancellor. She gets it on with the married town mayor then tries to kill him, sparking – yep, you guessed it! – a tense standoff between the university folk and the townsfolk. Just like every other frigging week. It was utter shite and the director had stared at my boobs the whole audition. But at least it would have kept the landlord off my back. Not that the creepy jerk hadn't offered several times to climb onto my back in lieu of me paying my share of the rent.

"They gave the part to that blonde bird with the big tits. They said she had the attributes they were looking for," Kristo told me.

I replied tartly, "Is that what they call them now?"

"What? Very talented girl, that one though. Very promising. I've offered to look after her career. Already found another job for her when she's done with *Learn or Earn*."

That made me see red. "Well, bully for her! But what about *me*? What have you lined up for *me* next?"

There was an awkward silence down the line. He cleared his throat noisily. "I've been thinking about you lately, Tilly."

Uh-oh. "Thinking what exactly?"

"Thinking that you might be better off with another agent. That I might not be the best fit for your . . . ah . . . talent."

I stared at the phone, mouth open in shock, before slamming it back to my ear. "You're *dumping* me as a client?"

"Now don't go putting it like that. Let's just say that I'm freeing you from your contractual obligation with me to allow you to explore other options."

"What about Dixie? Are you going to dump her too?"

Another silence. "Dixie's more serious about being an actor. And at least she turns up to the auditions I organise for her."

"Kristo! You've sent me to three porn movie auditions this year! I've told you a million times that I refuse to do stuff like that. I want to keep my clothes on!"

His voice hardened. "Like I said, Dixie turns up for her auditions, no complaints." I glanced over at my friend with fresh eyes. "And besides, I haven't made a cent from you for months. I don't do this for fun, you know." He thawed a little. "Look, love, take a word of advice and find another job. Acting's not for you."

I couldn't argue with that, but I was so angry that I hung up on him. The asshole! I'd put up with a lot from him in the last couple of years. He'd tried it on with me a few times in his shabby downtown office, but I'd played dumb, staring at him with my eyes wide, a slightly puzzled expression on my face as if I didn't quite understand his *double entendres* and dirty

suggestions. He gave up on me after a while, writing me off as someone with great boobs but sadly lacking in the brains department. And he thought I couldn't act!

*Well, that was your last chance*, I warned myself. If I wanted to pay the rent this month and avoid the landlord's lechery, I had to find a real job. I leaned over to the next table where someone had abandoned the local news rag. I skimmed the employment ads, dismissing them offhandedly. *Boring. Boring. Boring. . . no wait.* I read the ad more carefully. *Nah, boring. Boring. Really boring. Weird. Boring.* Then I noticed the little ad wedged at the bottom of the second page. It was inconspicuous, not designed to catch your attention, restrained and uninformative. I wondered briefly if noticing it was the first recruitment test, given the nature of the business.

*Client Manager  
Security & surveillance business  
Must be discreet and experienced  
Enquiries: 0400 xxx xxx*

Hmm, client manager? Security and surveillance? That sounded a bit cloak-and-dagger, a bit exciting, maybe even a bit dangerous. I was immediately interested, my boredom slipping off my shoulders like a silk cloak. Before I became a professional actor (and please don't laugh when I say that), I'd done some client relations work. As long as you could stay calm under extreme provocation, keep a straight face while blatantly brown-nosing and could tolerate being a drudge, there were worse ways of earning some money. *Like acting*, I thought bitterly as I carefully ripped out the ad from the paper. I'd ring about the job first thing in the morning.

## Chapter 2

I pressed the buzzer next to the glossy black front door and waited as I'd been instructed. When I rang to enquire about the position I was told by a polite and mellow male voice to send in my CV via email. I had sneaked onto Jon's (or Don's?) laptop to do so and barely an hour later received a phone call from the same man inviting me for an interview the following morning and providing me with directions. The suburb was one I'd never visited before. It was shabby, previously industrial but slowly morphing into an uneasy mixture of high-density residential and white collar commercial businesses. Property there would be worth a fortune in about ten years, but it was still distinctly grungy right then.

I glanced up at the old redbrick building in front of me, calculating that it was about six stories high. It had probably been a warehouse/office combination in a previous life. It had a grim facade with no interesting features except for its sash windows, the front door and a large garage door off to its left. No external signage indicated that the Warehouse (which is what I decided to call it) was a business premise. There was nothing but a shining brass street number neatly centred on the door and an unusual number of security cameras focussed on the entry, garage door and all sides of the street.

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other as I waited. I'd decided to dress conservatively despite the continuing heat, aiming for a slightly prim and proper look. My makeup was discreet and although I didn't think that my bargain reproduction designer suit (half-price on sale), in a demure shade of pale rose, was too crushed from the long bus trip across town, I smoothed down the skirt with my hands just in case. I'd left the top two buttons of my white cotton blouse undone and pulled it down slightly to expose a bit more cleavage. I wasn't above using my assets for my own benefit when necessary and hopefully my interviewer would be male. My scuffed rose-coloured court shoes were pinching my feet

after the walk from the bus stop and I was having serious regrets about wearing them. Thankfully it wasn't as hot today, but I still felt twin trickles of sweat making their ticklish way down my spine and between my breasts and hoped they wouldn't leave damp patches on my blouse.

Glancing down, I cursed, noticing a run in my left stocking and prayed it wasn't visible from the front. I patted my hair to make sure it hadn't escaped from its neat chignon. I'd taken a lot of care to make sure I looked respectably presentable. I had a feeling that first impressions would be important in this position.

The door flung open suddenly, startling me. A small, sharp-faced teenaged Goth stood in the doorway, so androgynous in appearance that I had to heads-or-tails in my mind over whether it was a girl or boy. I chose boy, but I wasn't one hundred per cent confident in my choice as there were no discernable lady or man lumps to give me any decisive clues about gender. He stared up at me through his carefully sculpted jet black fringe, thick black kohl encircling his big, pale blue eyes. He wore black skinny jeans, a belt studded with small silver skulls, a striped black and purple t-shirt and chunky black combat boots. His left ear held six silver piercings, his right ear five, and his nose three. He wore a silver skull ring with red jewelled eyes on his right ring finger.

"Hi," he said in a friendly voice, "you must be . . ." His eyes dropped to his hand where I could see something scribbled in black pen. "Ms Chalmers, right? I'm Niq. That's Niq with a Q, by the way".

No help there even. That could be a girl or boy name. "Very pleased to meet you, Niq with a Q," I said politely.

"Follow me, please." His voice was also decidedly ungendered – not too deep for a female, not too high for a male. The boy/girl led me down a hallway to a lift and repeatedly stabbed the up-button with a black-painted nail. I thanked the heavens for the building's frosty air-conditioning and stole a surreptitious look around me while we waited. The walls were bare redbrick and the floors polished but well-scuffed dark hardwood. A stairwell led both up and down stairs. Besides the front door, there was only one other door on that level, and it remained firmly closed. There were no paintings, rugs or plants. It was pure jailhouse and as quiet as a tomb except for the clunking and clattering of the lift slowly grumbling its way down to us.

As we waited for the lift, the inner door was thrown open and four of the biggest men I'd ever seen in my life spilled out into the hallway, laughing at something one of them had said. They were tall, broad-shouldered and seriously muscled. They were dressed identically in black polo shirts with a gold **H** embroidered in script on the pocket, tucked into black cargo pants, with black utility belts around their hips and the same black boots that Niq was wearing. The four men stared at me with open curiosity and I smiled at them sweetly, eyes huge with sheer astonishment at their size. They looked intimidating, but nodded at us with a reassuring affability as they passed.

"Guys," Niq acknowledged indifferently, barely casting his eyes in their direction. They didn't notice, their eyes fixed on me as they clumped downstairs. The word SECURITY was plastered across the back of their polo shirts in gold lettering. As I watched their retreating backs, they all threw me flatteringly attentive glances over their shoulders as they left. One of them turned back a second time to give me a cheeky wink. I decided that I liked this place already.

The lift landed with a thumping shudder and the wooden doors slowly opened with an agonising screech. We stepped in and Niq repeatedly pressed the button for the second floor. The doors reluctantly closed. A nervous energy seemed to radiate from the little Goth as he chewed on a thumbnail while staring up at me intently through his fringe. He seemed, not

hostile, but strangely excited by my presence. What was *that* about?

“You look like that chick in that lame ad. You know, the one about the cereal,” Niq said. He suddenly burst out in a shrill, overjoyed singsong voice, “*I’m the happiest girl in the nation now I’ve cured my constipation!*”

I cringed at hearing that corny jingle again. I wasn’t going to admit to that, so I shamelessly lied. “It wasn’t me, but I hear that all the time. I guess I do look a bit like her.” Niq stared at me suspiciously as if my protest wasn’t quite believable. I gazed back with wide-eyed innocence. I had to admit I was impressed though – it was an uncanny impersonation of my hammy acting.

One of those awkward silences descended. I smiled at him briefly and raised my eyes to the lift ceiling, surprised at its intricate timber inlay. I thought that must mean that the lift was quite old because lifts weren’t built like that anymore. I hoped it was safe as it slowly ascended, screeching misery all the way. To take my mind off that worry, I turned back to the little Goth.

“So Niq, do you work here?” I teased gently. He was only thirteen or fourteen at most and so slight in stature that one of those huge security men could have crushed him with his bare hands.

“No,” he smiled shyly and peered up at me through that black fringe. “I’m still at school, but I will work here when I finish. I want to work here now, but Heller says it’s important for me to get a proper education first.” He rolled his eyes at that sensible piece of advice like a typical teenager.

“And who’s Heller?” I asked conversationally, barely stifling a yawn. The rave club next to our unit block had been pounding out thumping bass until five o’clock in the morning. I had finally properly fallen asleep at one minute past five, only to be woken up at three minutes past five by a garbage truck noisily making its way down the street.

“You don’t know who Heller is?” he asked me with genuine surprise. “But –”

Before he could finish, the lift shuddered and stopped suddenly for a few ticks before continuing again, unbalancing the both of us. Alarmed, I clung like a gecko to the lift wall, my palms flat against the side to brace myself.

“Are you sure this thing’s safe?” I asked, slightly shaken.

“Hasn’t crashed yet,” he replied, brushing the hair back from his face and smiling up at me again.

And thankfully it didn’t today either. At last the lift stopped with a terrifying lurch that made me reel against the side of the cabin, my hands out for balance again, my stomach leaping into my mouth. The doors opened and I prepared to step out to face my interview ordeal, but unhappily the lift hadn’t made it to its destination. Instead, it had decided to discontinue the journey about two metres short. We were caught between floors.

“Uh-oh,” said Niq, pressing the close-door button frantically. Nothing happened. He then pushed on the up button. Again nothing. Niq turned to me. “I think it’s died.”

“You think?” I asked, a little sarcastic.

“*Daniel!*” Niq screamed suddenly, making me jump. “*Daniel!*”

From the gap in the lift, I saw a pair of legs walking quickly towards us.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry,” a man apologised profusely to me, kneeling down to peer awkwardly into the lift cabin. “Don’t panic. I’ll get you out of there as soon as possible.” Then he turned to Niq, crossly. “Niq! I knew I should have brought Ms Chalmers up myself instead of trusting you. I told you not to use the lift. You know it’s not safe.”

I shot Niq a smug *told-you-so* smile.

“Sorry Daniel,” Niq replied, pulling a face back at me.

“Okay, let me think for a second. Niq, I’ll get you out first and then you can help me with

Ms Chalmers. Grab onto my hands and use your feet to climb up the walls of the cabin.”

Daniel leaned down into the cabin and grasped Niq’s hands. He hauled the little Goth up until Niq was dangling from the floor of the next level, legs kicking out wildly as he tried to maintain his grip. I watched with interest, wondering how I was ever going to complete the same obstacle in my suit and heels when one of Niq’s chunky boots unexpectedly cracked into my nose. I shrieked in pain and staggered against the lift wall, holding my face, my eyes tearing up uncontrollably.

“Oops, sorry!” Niq shouted down to me, finally managing to swing one leg onto the floor and quickly scrabbling to pull the other one up as well, escaping the lift. Niq and Daniel stared down at me anxiously.

“Oh dear. Are you all right?” Daniel asked with concern.

I touched my nose tenderly. It hurt like hell. I hoped it wasn’t broken.

“Sure, it’s nothing,” I lied bravely, blinking away the tears. I took off my tight shoes and tossed them up onto the floor above. I threw my handbag up as well. This was going to be very inelegant. Thank goodness I had worn my best pair of panties today!

Daniel grabbed my hands and I tried to do what Niq had done, climb up the wall of the cabin using my feet until I could throw one of my legs onto the floor above my head. Unfortunately my stockings made my feet slippery and I couldn’t maintain a grip on the polished timber panels of the lift wall. Daniel was trying valiantly to drag me up, almost pulling my arms out of their sockets in the process, but it was no good. He just wasn’t strong enough and Niq wasn’t able to reach. Daniel let me go, promising to be back in a second. I thought briefly of removing my stockings, but decided that there was no way that I was going to start taking off my clothes in a place that appeared to be full of men.

Daniel returned quickly, talking softly to someone else. Another pair of shoes appeared in the gap, fashionable glossy pointed black shoes.

“Heller will be able to get you out, Ms Chalmers,” Daniel told me in his soothing voice. “You’ll be free in a minute.”

A different man knelt and reached his arms down towards me. I couldn’t see him well from where I was but lifted my arms up helpfully and before I could even take a breath, he gripped my forearms and forcefully pulled me up. He wasn’t gentle and I scraped my entire body as he dragged me out of the gap between the top of the lift and the floor. I stumbled with the momentum of being hauled up and fell with a great lack of dignity on my hands and knees at his feet.

I sat back on my haunches and looked up at him. I had to look a long, long way because he was very tall, well over two metres, with a muscular fit body, cheekbones you could slice your hands on and a sensuous mouth. A light tan emphasised his spiked, razor-cut blond hair and incredible glacial blue eyes. His teeth were very white and even. He was exceptionally well-dressed, completely in black – black silk shirt (with a gold **H** monogrammed on the pocket), black suit, black shoes. He wore an expensive silver watch with a black face and a chunky silver ring with an engraved **H** logo on his left ring finger.

He was the most astoundingly beautiful human being I had ever set eyes on in my whole life. He was more beautiful than an entire host of heavenly angels, more beautiful than the progeny of the most beautiful gods who had ever reproduced. He was simply drop-dead deliciously divine. My eyes goggled and my pulse quickened. My mouth dried up. I had to urgently press my lips together to stop my tongue from lolling.

I had just met Heller.

### Chapter 3

He bent over, grasped my arms again but more gently this time, and pulled me to my feet. I managed to steady myself, gazing up at him in stunned, stupid, silent wonder. My eyes were gigantic in my face and not one cogent word formed itself in my brain and made its way down to my mouth. I was literally dumbstruck. I'm from a tall family and am very tall for a woman at 180 centimetres (about six feet for you old-fashioned folk), but I felt tiny standing next to him. His eyes raked my face intently and frowning slightly, he took a monogrammed handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to me.

"Your nose is bleeding," he commented, a charming northern European accent tingeing his voice. German? Danish? I took the handkerchief and gingerly dabbed at my aching nose, eyes fixed on him still. Would I ever be able to look away?

"I kicked her in the face," Niq confessed. Heller turned his frown on Niq before stepping alarmingly close to me. My heart started racing. He reached towards me, gently grasped the bridge of my nose with his fingers and moved it around carefully. Somehow I managed to stifle my yelp of pain, although my eyes watered again. When he stepped back afterwards, I suddenly wished he hadn't, despite the extra pain he had caused. I wanted to catch the scent of his tantalising cologne again. He stared at me and frowned once more, his blue eyes boring into mine relentlessly.

"It's not broken," he diagnosed coolly. I delicately held the handkerchief to my nostrils to stem the flow of blood, trying to ignore the screaming pain. I despaired of the terrible first impression I was making with this extraordinary man, dripping blood onto my suit and onto his carpet. He was immaculately groomed and you could tell at a glance that appearances were important to him.

"Niq, what in God's name were you doing in the lift? I have told you a hundred times that it is not safe!" Daniel seethed. Heller spun his blue spotlights back to Niq, giving me a brief reprieve. The little Goth hung his head and seemed to shrink a bit smaller at the rebuke. I was immediately sorry for him. He was just a kid, after all.

"It's my fault," I spoke up, my voice muffled through the hankie. "Niq wanted to take the stairs, but I insisted on the lift. I'm a fan." Three pairs of eyes – two blue, one brown – regarded me with doubt. Heedlessly, I blustered on. "Of antique lifts, that is. A huge fan. I just can't resist them. Have to ride in them every time I find one, no matter what condition it's in."

Niq smiled up at me gratefully through his fringe again. The other two were uncertain what to say at my unexpected and far-fetched explanation, so wisely ignored it.

Heller turned to Daniel. "Please give Ms Chalmers some first aid and a few minutes to compose herself before bringing her into my office."

Daniel nodded and Heller returned to his office. *God, what a hard-arse*, I thought, watching him walk away. I'd been about to suggest that I turn around and go home, that we all cut our losses and pretend that today had never happened. Instead I was getting a few minutes to 'compose myself' before carrying on with an interview.

Daniel smiled faintly at me. "Let's start again, shall we? Thank you for coming here today, Ms Chalmers. I'm Daniel, the office manager for our business, *Heller's Security & Surveillance*. And that was Heller, the owner of the business. You've met Niq, our little troublemaker, already. Did you have any problem finding us?"

His friendly, dark chocolate eyes assessed me subtly. I wondered how I stacked up in comparison to the other applicants for the position, thinking that surely none of them had experienced such an unpromising start to their interview. He was a lean, well-dressed young man, wearing a nicely tailored dark gray suit and a black shirt with an **H** monogrammed on the pocket in gold thread, identical to the **H** on the security men's polo shirts. He was about the same age as me, mid-twenties, with a stylish haircut and an attractive face, long lashes

and a sympathetic welcoming smile. I was fairly sure it was his lovely voice I'd heard on the phone and warmed to him instantly.

But his good looks were shockingly marred by an old jagged scar that ripped his face in a semi-circle from the edge of his left eye down to his mouth. My eyes flicked involuntarily to the scar, before I forced myself to look back into his eyes. I wondered briefly what kind of accident could have caused such terrible damage. His eyes searched my face for my reaction to his disfigurement. Fortunately for me, I can on occasion muster a poker face that rivals the Sphinx. I smiled at him and he relaxed perceptibly.

"I had no problem finding the building at all," I replied in what I hoped was a suitably business-like tone. "Your instructions were very precise. And please, call me Tilly."

"Tilly? Short for . . .?"

"Matilda," I admitted ruefully. "But I never answer to that. It's an old family name and before you even dare ask, no, I do *not* want to come a-waltzing with you."

He laughed and peered at me more closely. "Have we met before? You seem familiar."

"No," I replied quickly, cursing that bran ad for the millionth time. I stupidly added, "I'd remember if I'd met you before."

"Oh. Of course you would," he said, losing his smile, his fingers fleetingly rising to touch his scar. He spun away and I felt like a heel. I could not believe how thoughtless I was sometimes.

Briskly, he instructed Niq to put some ice in a clean cloth. He led me over to twin plush black leather armchairs, arranged together near a small kitchenette that was situated along the wall adjoining Heller's office. I sat down in the closest armchair and took the chance to look around while Daniel and Niq fussed with the icepack.

I was sitting in a light-infused, open-plan office. It was furnished with three modern timber workstations, one near the kitchenette and the other two opposite Heller's office, all with a computer sitting on top. A row of filing cabinets and cupboards filled the side wall. On the back wall was a very discreet brass sign with *Heller's Security & Surveillance* etched out in black script writing, the stylised **H** underneath, identical to the monograms on the men's shirt pockets. The office walls were plain redbrick, similar to the ground floor, but the room itself was marginally less austere with a generous number of tall white-trimmed sash windows. The floor was lushly carpeted in beige, now unfortunately stained over near the lift with my blood. There were no decorations that I could see in the office, but everything was neat and orderly. It was very quiet, the ticking of the wall clock audible over Daniel's soft instructions to Niq.

He handed me the icepack and I placed it gently on the bridge of my nose while continuing to hold the hankie to my nostrils. He sat in the other chair next to me and Niq hovered anxiously at my side.

"Niq," Daniel glared, noticing the little Goth standing around. "Don't you have some schoolwork to do?" Niq pulled a face at him and slouched off to the workstation next to us.

"I can't apologise enough about your nose. Niq should never have taken you in the lift. It's been malfunctioning for months and I've been trying to find someone with the expertise to fix it. Unfortunately I've not had any luck. It's over a hundred years old." I opened my mouth to protest again that it was my fault that we used the lift, when Daniel raised his hand. "Please Tilly. A fan of antique lifts? Come on!"

I laughed self-consciously. "Sorry. It was the first thing I could think of at the time. Niq looked so forlorn at getting into trouble. I couldn't stand by." My reward for that tiny act of compassion was a beautiful lop-sided smile from Daniel, the terrible scar tissue on the left side of his face preventing him from smiling fully.

The blood stopped flowing from my nose after a few minutes. I handed back the icepack

and stood up to survey the wreckage. My precious (my only) suit was smeared with engine grease and blood, my stockings were shredded, my hair escaping wildly from its chignon and I didn't want to put my shoes back on because of the blisters they'd given me.

"I can't do an interview dressed like this," I sighed, shaking my head sadly. "I'm going home. Please apologise to Mr Heller for me."

"No! I don't want you to go, Tilly. You deserve a chance after what you've been through." Daniel thought for a moment. "Wait there," he said and took off through the door to the stairs, returning a few minutes later with some clothes. "These are mine. They'll be too big for you, of course, but probably not too bad. We're about the same height. You can get changed in the bathroom. The door's over there behind my desk." He pointed to the desk closest to the lift, next to the desk directly opposite Heller's office.

*Why not*, I thought, optimism surging to the fore again. I had nothing to lose. I took the clothes from him, picked up my handbag and shoes as well and walked to the bathroom. I quickly changed out of my ruined outfit into what appeared to be the *Heller's* work uniform – the black polo shirt and cargo pants. Daniel had thoughtfully provided me with a belt, which I needed to keep the cargo pants from falling down. I tucked the polo shirt into the pants neatly. I used the bathroom's mirror to try to mend my makeup and fix my hair back into some kind of order, though there was no helping my poor nose. The bruising was starting to show already and I didn't have any concealer with me. The clothes looked odd with my court shoes, but beggars can't be choosers, I reminded myself. Then I told my reflection that a beggar was exactly what I would be soon if I didn't nail this interview. I stepped back into the office.

"Heller will see you now. Good luck, Tilly," said Daniel, giving me an encouraging smile and waving me into the room. I glanced over at Niq tapping industriously on his computer's keyboard. He looked up and gave me another shy smile. I smiled back, thinking how sweet he (she?) was and headed for Heller's office.

## Chapter 4

"Mr Heller?" I knocked softly on his door, aiming to restore some semblance of a confident, professional tenor as I entered his office.

"Just Heller," he instructed brusquely, staring in surprise at my new outfit. I squirmed under the relentless blue inquisition. He probably thought I was being very presumptuous, turning up wearing his business uniform before I'd even been interviewed.

"Daniel lent me some clothes. My suit was ruined. Lift grease. And blood," I babbled in explanation.

"I will pay for your suit to be cleaned or replaced, of course," he said coolly.

It was wrong of me after such a generous offer, but my first thought was that I'd never find a suit that cheap again. It was *half-price*, for God's sake! And even then I'd be too embarrassed to tell him that it was only reproduction designer or to confess how much it had cost me. By the look of his elegant, well-fitting suit – and he was a big man, not easy to fit – he had his suits hand-made, probably somewhere exotic like Italy. He would never believe how little I'd paid for my cheap suit and I suddenly felt hugely out of my depth in this office with a man like him. I should have left when I had the chance. I knew instinctively that this interview was going to be a disaster for me.

He gestured for me to sit in a small meeting area he had positioned away from his desk and next to the large sash windows. His office was quite spartan, but the modest amount of furniture seemed to be of very good quality. It was probably modern Danish designer

furniture, the type of which I'd only ever seen in magazines, but which I knew cost a bundle.

He sat down across from me in a sleek black armchair, between us a folder resting on a small black coffee table. I perched nervously on the edge of the sumptuously soft black leather lounge, pinned like a faded postcard on a corkboard by that intense blueness. A glass of chilled water had considerately been placed on the coffee table near my knees and I eyed it longingly, wanting to gulp the entire contents as my throat was suddenly parched. I took a genteel sip instead.

His eyes were like lasers, cutting right through my body, almost as though he could see past my skin and bones, past my veins and organs, deep into my individual cells themselves. My toes curled involuntarily in my tight shoes as I tried not to look away or blink obsessively. *Good eye contact is important in interviews*, I told myself desperately as my eyes watered with concentration. He was giving me a thorough once-over.

I clasped my hands together to prevent myself from fidgeting nervously. I clamped my knees together too, but only to stop myself from jumping up from the lounge and flinging myself on him in shameless abandon. He really was an extraordinarily stunning man. I offered up a quick prayer of thanks for his existence. I couldn't wait to tell Dixie about him. Even if I didn't get the job, I'd have enough material from this meeting alone to entertain myself on those many, many lonely nights between boyfriends.

He glanced down at my CV, giving me a brief respite from the arctic blast of his eyes. I didn't relax an iota though.

"Let me tell you about my business," he began in his attractively accented voice. "I offer a range of security and surveillance services. I've been in business for myself here about five years now. It wasn't easy breaking into the market in this city. There are some big, well-established players who aren't very keen on more competition, no matter how small. Things can be quite . . . challenging with them sometimes. But I've managed to build up a solid clientele, targeting mainly top-end business. I'm ready to expand now and I'd particularly like to attract more business from female clients. But I've had some, er, difficulties in the past with female clients."

*I bet you have!* I thought with a silent chuckle.

"Let me explain the position I advertised," he continued. "I need somebody who is skilled in managing relationships with very exclusive clients, particularly demanding ones. They must be exceptionally discreet. I'm looking for somebody who is calm, organised and efficient. Someone who can think on their feet, but who also has excellent interpersonal skills." He paused. "I'm looking for someone who can handle all the, shall we say, 'soft' side of my business. Because I don't do 'soft', Ms Chalmers." Staring at me intently again.

*Oh God!* My pulse quickened. *Don't think of him being hard! Not now! Not now!* I thought frantically. God! He was giving me enough material here to last a year at least. I nodded repeatedly to indicate that I was listening, my eyes fixed on him, while those lewd thoughts swam around in my head. I hoped he wasn't a mind reader.

He sat back in his chair and rested one ankle on a knee, arms crossed. "Tell me about your experience."

I appreciated that, for whatever reason, he at least gave me the courtesy of taking my application seriously. He could have easily dismissed me as the lightweight that he surely had summed me up as by now. I took a deep breath and began to talk myself up, eking out my meagre experience in retail and office work.

I described to him one of my previous positions. "I was responsible for managing all client relations directly at the point of sale, and –"

He regarded me, unimpressed, and interrupted bluntly. "You were a cashier at a checkout."

“Um . . . yes . . . I guess that’s what you’d call it.”

“No client management at all, then?”

“Um . . . gee . . . well . . . not as such. But I did fulfil the customers’ preferences for how their groceries were packed into the plastic bags, and . . .” I petered out, unsettled by his icy blue eyes that were staring at me with unmoved stoniness.

I hurried on to the next position. “I worked for a top-end store providing ambulation assistance and support to valued clients in moving costly possessions from one receptacle to another.”

“You carried rich women’s packages from the store to their car,” he translated.

This was proving harder than I had expected. I swallowed noisily, eyeing the glass of water again, before carrying on nervously. “I – I – I attended to the women’s every need –”

“You placed the packages into the boot or the back seat as requested,” he carried on, interpreting my weasel words.

“– and it was a personal joy to me when I gave excellent service.”

“In other words, when you received a big tip.”

I blinked at him in silence. I had hoped that he would be easy on me after my ordeal this morning, but I was wrong. He hadn’t been lying about not doing soft – he was a very hard man. Disconcerted, I rushed on to speak about the last period of work experience that I was now pinning all my hopes on.

“I was a conduit for ensuring that client’s needs and requirements were managed in the most efficient and expedient manner.”

“You worked as a casual in a call-centre for the local council,” he stated, mockery evident in his ghost of a smile.

I didn’t respond, debating in my mind whether I should immediately stand up and leave without dignifying him with another word, or if I should dump the glass of water over his head first.

He continued, not giving me the chance to do either, his head tilted to one side. “Your experience is very limited,” he noted. “I have interviewed other people for this position who have much more relevant and recent experience.”

I sat immobile and silent and took a deep breath. Trouble was coming.

“You’re not really interested in this kind of work, are you? Your real career is ‘acting’, isn’t it?” he scorned.

I gritted my teeth. “I haven’t mentioned anything about acting in my CV,” I pointed out, determinedly polite. “What would make you think that?”

He threw me a nasty half-smile as he rose, pacing across the office so that I had to twist my head back-and-forth to keep watching him.

“Ms Chalmers, let me make something perfectly clear to you,” he stated coldly. “My business is security and surveillance. This building contains extremely sensitive information and also valuable and dangerous equipment. I have made it as close to a fortress as is humanly possible. Nobody comes into my building without my say-so and nobody comes to work for me without being completely scrutinised.”

He stopped pacing for a moment and turned to hold me again with those eyes.

“For example, I know you are the youngest of three children. Your father is a retired university lecturer and your mother a retired primary school teacher. You were an average student at school and dropped out of your undergraduate arts degree in the third year without graduating. You had a patchy work history and then decided to make ‘acting’ your career.” That emphasis again, as if he thought that acting ranked right up there next to being a hooker on the scale of dodgy career choices.

“How did you find out all that? It’s a breach of my privacy!” I squeaked indignantly.

He sat down again and pushed the folder that was lying on the coffee table towards me. "Do you want to read your dossier?" he asked, a taunting tone to his voice.

I stared at the folder with mistrust. Unfortunately though, I've always been a very nosy person and didn't have the seamliness or the presence of mind to ignore it. So I picked up that folder, rested it on my lap and opened it, though not without a sensible dose of dread.

My mouth gaped wider with every page I read. It was a nightmare version of *This is Your Life*, starring me, Tilly Chalmers. The dossier recorded every detail of my life, down to the most mundane aspect. Every school I'd been to, every friend I'd ever had, every subject I'd studied, my university entrance score, my family's occupations, every boyfriend I'd had, their ages, the cars they'd owned, every job I'd had back to my first career as a checkout chick when I was fifteen-years-old. All documented right in front of me in black and white, with a couple of coloured photos thrown in for variety. Everything about me except my bra size was in that dossier, although I'd probably find that too if I read it more closely. I was gobsmacked and glanced up at him, appalled and now more than a little wary. Who was this man anyway?

He leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers behind his head. "I know more about you than you could possibly imagine. I know, for instance, that your last acting role was a small part in *Summer Days* over six months ago." He added, unkindly casual, "Not great acting in my opinion."

The blood rushed to my face. *Screw you, buddy!*

"And what about that execrable movie with the bikini women and the madman? Not to mention that advertisement."

Despite my increasing anger, I was impressed with his knowledge. He had certainly done his homework.

"They paid the rent," I said defensively. "I know it's not great acting, but what I really want to do is . . ." I stopped suddenly and remembered that: one, I was at an interview; and two, I couldn't finish the sentence anyway because I didn't know what I really wanted to do. So instead, I smoothed back my hair and composed my features, gracing him with a beatific Mona Lisa smile. "What I really want to do is work for you, of course, Mr . . . um . . . Heller," I said calmly, my eyes big with angelic sincerity.

He gave a rude shout of laughter at that and my temper flared again. I threw the folder on the table and stood abruptly, clutching my handbag.

"I can see clearly that I'm not the right person for this position or your business, so thank you for your time today. I'll show myself out." *Arrogant jerk!*

What a complete waste of a day for me, not to even mention my sore nose, the ruinous loss of my only suit and the cost of the bus trips that I couldn't afford and had virtually depleted the remainder of my precious twenty dollars. I stalked to the door of his office, head high. On a sudden impulse, I turned around to say one final thing to him.

"And anyway, you're wrong. You don't know everything about me, after all."

He was taken aback by that. "I'm confident in my research."

"*Summer Days* wasn't my last acting role. I've had another one since then."

He frowned. "What is this other job?"

Suddenly I wished I hadn't mentioned it. "It doesn't matter," I mumbled. "You're just wrong."

"It does matter. You tell me my information about you is incomplete. That might affect the outcome of the interview." He said it with no expression, but I couldn't shake the suspicion that he was secretly laughing at me.

Why had I opened my big mouth? All I'd wanted to do was to puncture his self-assured arrogance, but instead I would be the one to end up looking like an idiot. As usual.

As I turned to leave again, pondering my self-inflicted predicament, one of the big sash

windows in his office exploded inwards with a shattering crash. Shards of glass flew through the air, wickedly embedding themselves in every exposed surface, including our skin. Before I even registered what was happening, I was knocked to the ground. Heller covered me with his body, protecting me from further explosions I presumed, rather than an uncontrollable desire to get closer to me. I lay there winded, ground into the carpet, glass shards painfully pressing in to my face and hands, with his incredible weight forcing the air from my lungs. If it has ever been your fantasy to have a tall sexy Viking smothering you, let me tell you it's nowhere near as much fun as it initially sounds.

"*Daniel!*" Heller bellowed through the door, almost rupturing my eardrum. "Take Niq downstairs to the basement! Now!"

I heard them scurrying away obediently down the stairs and subsequently heard heavy footsteps jogging into Heller's office. He rolled off me. I gratefully gulped in some air, coughing and gasping, pushing myself up onto my hands and knees. My skin was stinging everywhere. It was like a thousand paper cuts.

"Stay down!" he yelled at me, then to one of the people who arrived at his door, "Take her next door." Rough hands helped me to a crouching position and I was half-dragged, half-carried to the main office where I was unceremoniously dumped behind Daniel's desk before being abandoned. I hunched up against a wall and cowered there for some minutes, painfully picking shards of glass out of my hands and quietly bleeding over Daniel's clothes and the floor. I hoped nobody minded. I didn't know if blood came out of wool-blend carpet.

I'd decided by then that I was going to get the hell out of this place the second I could and would never look back. I stood up, a bit shakily to be honest, and cautiously moved towards the stairs, not wanting to attract any attention. I would mail the clothes back to Daniel when I'd washed them. Then I remembered – my handbag was still in Heller's office. I couldn't leave without it. It contained my almost empty purse, house keys and my return bus ticket. *Fuck! Fuck! Fuckity-fuck!* I sidled over to his office door and guardedly peered around, spying my handbag lying on the floor, half-hidden under the lounge where it had landed after Heller had crash-tackled me.

Heller stood with two other gigantic men, his arms crossed, listening and nodding while they conversed heatedly. They were intently examining the projectile, a crudely fashioned solid metal sphere, like a small cannon ball. It had found a resting spot in the exact place I had been sitting only moments before it had burst through the window. I stared at the ball in horror. If I hadn't stood up in a huff to leave, it would probably have smashed directly into me! Bile rose in my throat and it was a battle to choke it back down again.

"They're long gone," commented Heller with detachment, glancing out of the broken window down to the road. "Must have used some kind of catapult or mini-cannon."

"It's those fuckers from Select Security. We all know it," spat one of the other men angrily.

"They won't be happy until they kill one of us. I'm sick of those bastards, Heller. It's time for pay-back," growled the other man.

"Check the footage from the cameras out the front. You might be able to make out a number plate," Heller directed one of the men, his calm voice a foil to the other men's fury.

*None of my business*, I told myself, *just concentrate on getting out of here*. I warily edged around the door towards the lounge. My shoes crunched loudly on the broken glass scattered on the carpet and the three men immediately stopped talking and swung around in unison to stare at me. I stood frozen in mid-step, eyes wide with apprehension, blood gently dripping onto the carpet.

"Just getting my bag," I babbled nervously, helpfully pointing at it where it nestled tantalizingly out of reach. "Then I'll be off. I promise I'll mail Daniel back the clothes. Don't

worry about my suit.”

My glance moved from one man to the other. I blinked rapidly. Twins! But like no twins I'd ever seen before. The two men with Heller were built like tanks and completely identical, down to the same suit. They had the whole 1950s London gangster-look happening, doubles for Ronnie and Reggie Kray. Imposingly tall and broad-shouldered, their dark pinstriped tailored suits stretched tightly across their chests. Their craggy, acne-scarred faces were carved out of stone and topped by black, slicked-back quiffs. They had matching cold, flat, unfriendly dark gray eyes and fleshy small grim mouths, and one man had broken his nose at some point in his life. One of them by himself would have been intimidating. Together, they scared the absolute hell out of me. My immediate instinct was to turn and flee, which I reminded myself, was exactly what I was trying to do at that very moment.

“Who the hell are you and why are you wearing one of our uniforms?” the broken-nosed one demanded in a hostile, gravelly voice. He glanced at Heller. “You need me to take care of her, Boss?” And coming from a big brute like him, that comment sounded more menacing than considerate.

“No Clive, this is Matilda Chalmers. I was in the middle of an interview with her for the client manager position when this happened,” Heller explained, indicating the window. “Ms Chalmers, this is Clive Trilby and this,” hand waving to the other one, “is his brother, Sid Trilby. Clive runs my security section and Sid's in charge of the surveillance team.”

“I'm sure you'll understand if I don't offer to shake your hands,” I said, holding out my bleeding palms to them like a tortured saint begging for mercy. “Very nice to meet you both though. I'm just leaving.” Clive stared at me coldly and Sid nodded and smiled. Well, I think it was a smile. It cracked his stony countenance, revealing surprisingly tiny regular teeth. But his smiling face was only marginally less alarming than his angry face.

“You're not going anywhere,” Heller ordered. “You need more first aid and we haven't finished our interview yet.”

My mouth opened and closed like a slow-witted fish. Did he honestly think I was going to hang around to be physically and mentally tortured some more? Oh man, he was a real piece of work! The interview was well and truly over as far as I was concerned.

“What do you mean *more* first aid?” asked Sid.

“Niq kicked her in the face earlier,” Heller answered, regarding me unsmilingly.

“Trouble-magnet, is she?” Clive scorned, his lip curling.

“Apparently,” replied Heller, and they stared impolitely, almost as if waiting for some other disaster to befall me. When I failed to oblige, they turned away and resumed their discussion. I bristled indignantly with the unfairness of it all. As if being kicked in the face and nearly blown to pieces by a ball thingy was my fault!

“Look, I appreciate your willingness to resume our interview, Mr . . . um . . . Heller, but I'm slowly bleeding to death here and I'm sure you understand that after everything today, I just want to go home.” I carefully picked up my handbag with my stinging hands, the blood smearing all over the cream leather-look material. “Oh, now look what's happened! That will never come out. This has been the worst day I've ever had.” I could have cried in frustration.

“Stop!” Heller ordered again. Before I could blink he was standing closely in front of me, looking down. “You haven't told me what that other job was yet.”

I raised my eyes to him and sighed. What did it matter if I embarrassed myself before him one last time? I'd never see him again and my parents had always told me to take pride in my work, no matter what I did. So I took their advice and met his eyes as I spoke. “I played a slice of watermelon in a fruit salad song-and-dance routine. It was a big hit with the primary school kids.”

He closed his eyes briefly and his beautiful lips clamped together as if to suppress a shout

of laughter. He couldn't stop them twitching at the ends though. Fed up, I spun around, determined to finally leave. He grabbed me by the arm and turned me back around again.

"I was just about to offer you the job on a one month trial. I'm impressed by your ability to handle unexpected events in a calm and collected way. You haven't fallen to pieces, despite today's many, er, misfortunes. I didn't see that in any of the other applicants, and frankly it's a vital skill in this office." He paused for a moment. "Plus, you're very entertaining."

I shook off his hand angrily. "I'm not here to entertain you! I was looking for a job, but I'm no longer interested in this one," I said huffily as I started to stalk out of the office again, not without some satisfaction I confess. But I also knew that I had to get out of here before something else happened to me.

He mentioned the salary and I stopped dead in my tracks at his office door, hesitantly rotating, sure I'd misheard.

"How much?"

He repeated the offer. My bank manager sat up with interest.

"That's a very generous salary."

"You'll earn every cent of it," he said, which sounded like a threat to me.

"Does this kind of thing," and I waved my hand around his ruined office, droplets of blood spraying freely, "happen often?"

"No, this is nothing, a little unfriendly rivalry with one of my competitors. I'll sort them out soon enough." He looked me up and down critically and I clutched my bloodied handbag to my chest protectively. "I'll also pay for your clothing and styling. I need you to look absolutely professional at all times. With my clientele, appearances are critical to my success."

I suddenly felt dowdy in my borrowed clothes.

"Hmm," he added, looking me over again unfavourably. "You really are going to require quite a lot of styling. And some toning as well. You aren't as in shape as you ought to be for a young woman, though I think there are good bones underneath there somewhere."

Make that fat and dowdy.

"And like most of my office staff, I want you on call twenty-four hours a day. That is why I pay so well." He added casually, "It would be best if you moved into the building."

"Live here in the office?" I asked in surprise.

"Yes, several of us live here in this building."

"You want me to move in with you?" I squeaked. My stomach did a double-flip.

He grinned nastily, flicking his eyes up and down me again. "If you want to, but I was thinking rather of a small place I have on the fourth floor. One bedroom, self-contained. No rent."

I blushed ferociously at my *faux pas* and gathered together the remnants of my battered dignity. As if I really had any choice. It was either working for Heller or humping the landlord. Unsurprisingly, on remembering the landlord's greasy hair and fat belly, I chose Heller.

"That would be most satisfactory, thank you, um . . . Heller. When would you like me to start?"

He shot me a withering glance. "I have offered you a job and you have accepted. You have just started working for me. I'll ask Daniel to show you around and then you will return to your flat and pack your belongings. You will move in today."

And with that imperious order, he went to his phone and summoned Daniel and Niq back upstairs.

## Chapter 5

After he organised a glazier and a cleaning crew, Daniel led me up two flights of stairs to my new little flat on the fourth floor. It had the same redbrick walls and starkness as the other areas in the building that I'd seen, but there was pale green carpet on the floor and the furniture was white, bright and modern. The flat had a cheerful IKEA-look about it, although I was quite sure it was actually very posh furniture. I glanced around me happily, thinking that with a few little personal touches it would be quite cosy. And I would live here alone, not with three other people! Sheer luxury! It wouldn't be hard to turn my back on my current dingy little flat, with its rickety and lumpy tenth-hand furniture.

The bathroom was modern white and sparkling clean and also housed a washing machine and dryer. The bedroom had a comfy queen bed complete with good quality white linen and a small walk-in wardrobe. The kitchen was very compact, but fully-equipped with utensils and cooking implements. The combined living-dining room was pocket-sized, but so well-designed that it still felt spacious. Lots of natural light flooded in from the white-trimmed sash windows, and with its high ceilings the flat had a pleasant airy feel. I couldn't wait to move in. Daniel watched my progress through the rooms with enjoyment.

"Everything looks so new!" I exclaimed. "Has it been lived in before?"

"No," he replied. "Heller converted it from some storage space only recently when he decided we needed another staff member. You're the first tenant." I was speechless with delight. He continued, "There should be some towels in the bathroom cupboard and I've grabbed another set of clean clothes for you to change into. When you're finished here come back down to the office." He'd kindly brought up some soap, shampoo and conditioner for me, as well as some disinfectant cream and bandaids.

I took a quick shower in my lovely new shower cubicle, the water jets on full-blast to dislodge any stubborn remnants of glass. One check in the mirror afterwards confirmed my suspicion that I now resembled Edward Scissorhands' sister, and I patched myself up as best I could. I slipped into the expensive man's jeans and long-sleeved t-shirt that Daniel had left me. *The people here seem to love dressing well*, I thought. I presumed the clothes were Daniel's again and I hoped I didn't also end up bleeding all over them.

Back in the office, Daniel guided me through the appointment paperwork and arranged for my staff card and keys to the building. As he did that, he filled me in on me a few work rules, including one that reinforced my impression that the Warehouse was not a place where you could spontaneously invite people over. Heller hadn't been joking when he said that he screened everyone who came to the building. I wondered if he would let Dixie visit.

We were about to commence our tour of the Warehouse when Heller walked back through the door. He had obviously showered as well and like me, was covered in scratches and cuts. He had changed out of his suit into black jeans and a tight, muscle-hugging dark green t-shirt. Having already been bowled over by his stunning good looks, you would expect that I'd be better prepared this time. But you'd be so, so wrong! Just at the sight of him again, my heart stopped, my stomach flipped, my brain froze and my private parts grew hot and tingly. God, he was absolutely heavenly. I tried to settle myself, swiftly looking away so that nobody could see my desperate expression. I really needed to find a boyfriend. Fast.

"Thank you, Daniel. I've decided to take Ms Chalmers to collect her belongings myself now," he said.

"No worries, Heller," Daniel told him. "We've finished with the paperwork for now anyway." He turned to me. "Welcome to *Heller's*, Tilly. I hope you enjoy working here." I smiled at him. He was a very nice man and I could tell I was going to like him a lot. With a

surreptitious wink, he sauntered away, whistling to himself.

“Let’s go,” Heller said abruptly and disappeared quickly down the stairs. I hurriedly followed him down to the basement level, hobbling in my tight court shoes, puffing by the time I got there.

“You’re not very fit,” he remarked scornfully, and if I hadn’t literally been fighting for breath I might have shot him an acidic response. He climbed into a shiny black Mercedes 4WD, its vanity number plate gold-coloured with black lettering spelling out HELLER. *No question over who owned this one*, I thought with a well-hidden smile as I clambered into the passenger side. I had barely begun doing up my seatbelt when the vehicle squealed backwards and shot off up the driveway to the entrance to the garage. On the street though, he drove carefully. I noticed that he regularly checked his rearview and sideview mirrors, prudently stuck to the speed limits, and cautiously obeyed all road signals – almost as though he was trying not to attract attention. It was the complete opposite of my driving style. I regularly attract far too much attention from the traffic police. That was on the rare occasions when I was flush enough to actually own a car though. Mostly I was forced to use the bus for my transport needs.

Heller didn’t even bother to ask me where I lived, but confidently guided the Mercedes in the right direction. *Of course, he already knows*, I thought sourly. We didn’t speak on the trip. I stole some glances at his perfect profile, but he kept his eyes firmly fixed on the road. I went at one stage to turn on the radio, but he glared at me so ferociously that I hurriedly leant back in my seat and looked out the window instead.

Finally we pulled up outside my slummy block of flats. Unaccountably, Heller was able to find a free parking space right out the front when in my entire two years living there, none of us had ever been able to park closer than four blocks away. I stared at him with suspicion. He was almost supernatural.

Unsurprisingly, the lift was now out of order and he followed me up the stairs, which today smelt of urine, curry and cat crap. Shame burned my cheeks and I kept my eyes on the ground. By the time we reached the seventh floor, I was puffing like a steam train and a sweat had broken out on my forehead. Heller remained cool, his breathing normal. He shot me a look.

“Yes, I know!” I spat out between heaving breaths. “I’ll start working out tomorrow.” He raised a cynical eyebrow but said nothing. I fumbled in my handbag for my key and opened the door. It was stifling hot inside the flat and the smell of unwashed dishes and clothes hit me as soon as I entered. I desperately did not want Heller to witness the shabbiness and impoverishment of my life, and tried to close the front door on him.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” I insisted. “Wait there.” He wedged his well-shod foot in the doorway. I tried again to shove the door shut on him, but he pushed it open with minimal effort. I gave up. He stepped into the slovenly mess and wrinkled his elegant nose.

“Quickly please,” he commanded, as if he couldn’t bear to spend one extra moment in the putrid surroundings. Thoroughly humiliated, I slipped into the bedroom I shared with Dixie. She was asleep, snoring lightly, windows wide open to catch a non-existent breeze with the bedclothes thrown back in the heat. A longish t-shirt barely kept her decent. This time I shut the door firmly, gloweringly daring Heller to object. He didn’t.

“Dix! Dix!” I said urgently. “Wake up.” I shook her shoulder, feeling guilty because she’d worked the red-eye shift at the fast food store the previous evening. She roused slowly and drowsily.

“What?” she grumbled, annoyed, sitting up and yawning. “What the fuck, Tilly? Why are you waking me up? You know I just got to sleep.” She rubbed her large black eyes, ran her fingers through her spiked hair and looked at me properly. “Shit! What happened to you?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Had a small argument with an exploding window,” I said, brushing her query aside. “Dix, guess what? I’ve got the job! You know, the interview I went for today? I got the job! And guess what else? It comes with its own little flat. It’s adorable. And I get free styling. I’m so excited!”

I jumped up and down on the spot in a happy dance. The thing I love most about Dixie, despite her many flaws, is that she is emotionally generous. It doesn’t matter how terrible her life is or how awful her circumstances, she is always genuinely pleased when her friends catch a break.

“Awesome!” she cried, leaping out of bed to join the happy dance with me. We clung to each other and jumped up and down together for a moment laughing before she properly registered what I had said. “What? You’re moving out? No! You can’t leave me here alone with those two losers.”

“I have to. Heller said.”

“Who said?”

“Heller.”

“Who the fuck’s Heller?”

The door opened forcefully and Heller stepped into the room. Dixie’s eyes flew open and so did her mouth. Her nipples stood to attention.

“You’re taking a long time,” he said impatiently.

“Heller,” I said politely, “I’d like to introduce my best friend, Dixie. Dixie, this is Heller, my new boss.”

Heller nodded at Dixie and she simpered back at him. She has a thing for accents, especially European accents. And she definitely has a thing for hot men. Heller didn’t even have to try – she was hopelessly in lust with him from the second he opened the door. I looked on in exasperation.

“Dixie!” She reluctantly tore her eyes away from Heller’s face. “Help me pack, please?” I was hoping Heller would leave us, but he sat on the edge of Dixie’s rumpled bed and watched while I pulled my tattered backpack from the top of my wardrobe. Dixie helped me shove my clothes into it.

“You should fold your clothes before packing. That way they won’t become wrinkled,” he criticised.

“Yes, I know that, but I’m trying to hurry. As you requested,” I replied crossly. It was disturbing to have him watching me as I pushed my panties and bras into the backpack.

“Hey, that’s my top,” Dixie said, attempting to snatch a red shirt from my hands.

“No, it’s not. I bought it in that sale last year. Remember?”

“Yeah, but I’m the one who wears it all the time. It’s my favourite top,” Dixie complained.

“Yes, but I paid for it,” I replied hotly. “Therefore, it’s mine!”

“Leave the shirt,” Heller ordered. Dixie smiled at him and plucked it from my hands triumphantly.

“Thank you, Heller,” she said sweetly. I glared at them both and stomped into the bathroom to gather my toiletries and makeup. With those safely, though not tidily, stowed in my old backpack and sweeping the few books and CDs I owned in as well, my packing was complete.

“Is that all your belongings?” Heller asked in surprise. “I thought you’d have a few suitcases, not just one bag.”

“Yeah, well, I like to live lightly,” I said loftily, tossing my hair over my shoulders. “I want to be free, not encumbered by possessions.”

“She’s flat broke,” Dixie confided to Heller, who raised an eyebrow in amusement. “Last

month she had to hock the camera her parents bought her for her birthday to pay the rent. I don't know what she was going to do this month. She's run out of things to sell. She was probably going to have to screw the landlord."

"*Dixie!* Will you shut up? You know I'd never do that!" I shrieked in embarrassment. She shrugged as if it was no big deal to screw the landlord, which only made me wonder if she had ever done so before. Frankly, it wouldn't have surprised me.

Heller's eyes rested on me in cool contemplation, but he refrained from commenting. "Let's go," he said instead, standing up to tower over both of us. He leant over to pick up my backpack and I caught Dixie ogling his butt. I couldn't blame her; it was well worth ogling. I gave myself a mental slap. *Be professional! He's your boss now.*

Dixie and I shared a quick hug and I promised to be in touch. I felt like a louse leaving her in that dump while I waltzed off to start my lovely new life. Heller promised to cover my share of the rent until a new flatmate could be found. Knowing Dixie, she wouldn't be hurrying to replace me and Heller could come to regret that generous offer. As I climbed into his Mercedes, I saw Dixie waving sadly from the bedroom window. I bit down hard on my bottom lip to stop the tears coming. Heller didn't strike me as someone who would be particularly empathetic in emotional times like this.

No sooner had we driven off, then my phone beeped. I took it from my handbag and saw a text message from Dixie.

It read: *that man is sizzling HOT HOT HOT!!!!*

*truth!* I texted back.

*omg! his accent! his body! im in lurv*

*i noticed!*

*hes a bilf*

*wtf???*

*boss id like 2 fuk!* I snorted out loud with laughter. Heller flicked his cold eyes to me.

I wrote: *norty girl!*

*ooh! does he like norty asian girls?* Another involuntary snort from me.

"Ms Chalmers," he warned.

*gotta go. my new daddys strict,* I texted.

*spankz for u 2nite!*

*lolz! only if im lucky! c u soon xx*

I put my phone away and stared out of the window the rest of the way back to the Warehouse.

## Chapter 6

When we returned, we went upstairs back to the office and I was surprised to see the cleaning team and glazier that Daniel had organised already busy at work repairing the damage in Heller's office. My new boss handed me over to Daniel and left for parts unknown.

"So, what do you think of Heller?" Daniel asked as we started our tour, his intelligent eyes betraying more than just a casual interest in the response.

"He's a very interesting man. Quite demanding and more than a little terrifying," I answered honestly, deciding not to say any more. After all, I had no idea about office loyalties yet.

Daniel laughed. "Oh, you've got that right, Tilly. He's not the easiest person to get along with. And he can be very intimidating."

“How long have you known him?” I asked curiously.

“About ten years,” he replied.

I thought for a moment. “I’m sure Heller told me during the interview that he’d been in his own business for only five years. You worked for him before now?” I sensed Daniel stiffen beside me, but his response was mild enough.

“Something like that,” he said simply. “Let’s start the tour here in the middle of the building. This is the main office area and Heller’s office is over there in the corner, as you’ve seen. This is my desk, and Niq’s is that one near the kitchen, across from mine. Your space will be that desk in the corner there.”

It was the desk directly facing Heller’s office. *Oh great!* I’d get to look at him all day. I wasn’t sure if that would be a good thing or not.

Daniel continued. “The rest of the office staff are situated off-base for logistical reasons. That includes our legal, IT and HR sections. It’s my job to supervise their activities, take care of the accounts and try to keep the place running as smoothly as possible.”

“Wow! That’s a lot of responsibility for someone so young,” I admired. “You must be super-efficient.”

He unsuccessfully tried to suppress the modest smile that forced itself across his face at my praise, which I thought was sweet.

“And what about Niq?” I enquired.

“Niq’s still at school, but he’ll eventually work here too when he’s finished.”

*So Niq IS a boy!* I thought, glad to have that finally clarified.

“Is he a relative of Heller’s?” I asked innocently, curious again.

“Not really,” Daniel said vaguely and it seemed as if that that line of questioning would lead to a dead-end. I scabbled about for acceptable conversation topics.

“Who else lives in the building?”

“Sid and Clive share a flat on the third floor. You share the fourth floor with me, and Heller, Niq and Victor live on the fifth floor. It’s quite preferable in some ways, because Heller really does expect you to be on call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. That’s one of the reasons why looks after us all so well.”

“I was hoping that he was joking about the being on call bit,” I said. Daniel shook his head with a smile.

“Heller’s not one for jokes, I’m afraid. Anyway, back to the tour. The building has two basement floors. I won’t take you down there. The lowest is the carpark for the business vehicle fleet and the other holds the armoury and equipment store, and Heller’s own vehicles, which Sid, Clive and I all drive as well.”

My eyebrows lifted when he mentioned an armoury. I had a sudden mental image of me bursting into a room full of baddies, a gigantic gun in my hands, a smart-arse comment on my lips, Charlie’s fourth angel. I secretly smiled to myself in delight – I’d always wanted to be a tough chick.

“On the ground floor is the security section. They have their own kitchen, eating area and gym down there because Heller insists that they be in top shape. In fact, he insists that we all be very fit. You’ll find out all about that soon enough,” he said dryly, then continued. “The first floor is for the surveillance guys. Top secret stuff going on there. I don’t have a clue what they’re doing and even I have to get permission to go in there. It’s strictly off-limits.” I nodded to show that I understood, burning with instant curiosity. “The second floor is the office here and some storage space. The third floor houses Sid and Clive’s flat and the gym for the those of us who live here to use. Let’s go look.”

We climbed to the next floor and Daniel showed me a compact but well-equipped gym with a large plasma screen hanging on one wall. It smelt like sweat and agony. To me all gym

equipment looked like medieval torture devices.

“If you’re like the rest of us, you’re going to experience some pain here,” Daniel said, smiling wryly.

“Oh, I can guarantee it.” I pulled a face. “According to Heller, I need a lot of toning.”

“Ouch! That’s cruel. Guess you’re in for a world of pain then,” Daniel sympathised.

“Always good to know what’s ahead,” I replied bravely. Apparently, lots of suffering for me.

We climbed up to the fourth floor. There were only two doors in the hallway.

“This is my place,” said Daniel, opening the door on the right. I could see a very neat and modern flat from the brief glimpse I was allowed. “And you already know that yours is on the left.” I had a warm feeling all over when I glanced at *my* door.

We kept climbing up to the fifth floor. “Heller and Niq live there,” Daniel pointed to a door, “and his valet, Victor, lives in those rooms. The rest is more storage. A word of advice, Tilly. Don’t come up to this floor unless you’re invited. Heller takes his privacy very seriously.” I made a mental note not to ever do that and we climbed up to the sixth floor.

“Here’s the store.” Daniel opened a door and again I was completely gobsmacked. Inside was a large pantry, its shelves and fridges stocked with a colourful riot of different foods – fresh, canned, frozen. I turned and looked at Daniel, my eyes wide open. He smiled at my astonishment. “It’s true. We get to choose all our food from here. Whatever you want, whenever you want it. Heller keeps it well-stocked. And it’s all free.”

I walked around the small room, marvelling at the variety of food available. It all looked very healthy. “You mean that I just come up here to do my grocery shopping from now on?” I said in amazement.

“Yep!” said Daniel smiling. “Isn’t it wonderful? Heller is a health-nut though, so it’s all salmon, tofu and alfalfa sprouts.” I crinkled my nose. “Mind you, he does keep a decent cellar that is through there,” pointing to a door at the far end of the pantry, locked with a swipe-card mechanism. “Your staff card will open the cellar as well as your flat. We only keep the wine cellar locked because Niq has access to this store too. But I have to warn you, Tilly, that Heller is very strict about us not drinking when we are on duty. Which is all the time, basically.” Daniel shrugged apologetically. “Heller doesn’t drink himself and doesn’t like it when other people drink. I think he’d prefer us all to be teetotallers, but the twins and I like a tippie now and then and he reluctantly lets us.”

An unpleasant thought started to wind its delicate way through my mind. “Daniel, am I going to be the only woman living here?”

He nodded. “Not just the only woman living here, but the only female, the first female, employee ever! You’re a pioneer of sorts.”

I was incredulous. “Heller’s never employed a woman before? Not ever?”

“Nope, never. He says that women are too much of a distraction in the workplace, especially with all the security men we employ. So he’s certainly taking a chance with you.”

I tried to process this information, but wasn’t sure how I felt about it. The feminist in me wanted to rail against such Victorian-era nonsense, but a shameful part of me felt a bit pleased. What woman wouldn’t like the opportunity to work in a male-only environment for a while? I only hoped it would work out and Heller wouldn’t come to regret his decision. And neither would I.

We left the pantry and entered the other room on the sixth floor. “This is the library,” Daniel said ushering me in. It was a surprisingly bright and airy space, even though every square centimetre of its walls was shelving, filled with DVDs and books. My eyes widened again.

“There must be thousands of DVDs in here! And look at all of these books! It would take

years to read them all.” I walked around in wonder. “What kind of books and DVDs are there mostly?”

“Mostly thrillers, mysteries, police procedurals, war, action, horror, some comedy, some supernatural. No relationship or romance stories,” he said apologetically.

“Good. I hate mushy stuff,” I returned with a smile. “And I love a good thriller. Do we just help ourselves here too?”

“Sure. There’s also a collection of games in that corner. For Niq’s Xbox, although I have to admit that the twins and I like to play occasionally too.”

“Not Heller?”

Daniel laughed. “No, not Heller. He doesn’t have much patience for wasting time on frivolous activities like that. He has, um, other interests. But he’s tolerant. To a point.”

Nothing I’d heard so far about Heller made me any more relaxed about accepting a position working for him. I started thinking that the next month was going to test me in ways that I probably wouldn’t be competent enough to face.

Unaware of my inner thoughts, Dan carried on the same conversational topic. “Niq’s only supposed to play once he’s finished his schoolwork though. Do you play?”

“Sometimes. Depends what you like to play.” A thought struck me. “Daniel, where does Niq go to school?”

“He doesn’t. He’s home-schooled, through distance education.”

“Why?”

Daniel sighed and sat down on the arm of one of the library’s lounge chairs. “Niq struggles to fit in with other kids. He missed a lot of school when he was younger and wasn’t well-socialised. He can’t adapt to the rigid routine and well, you’ve seen how individual he is. He’s not good at conforming.”

I nodded and parked my rear on the arm of another chair as he continued.

“When Heller first bought this building, not long after Niq . . . um . . . came to live with us, we enrolled him at the local primary school. He was badly bullied from the first day but didn’t tell any of us for ages. It was a very damaging experience for him, totally destroyed his self-confidence and when Heller found out, he became quite . . . ah . . . angry. I went with him to the school and there was a . . . hmm, um . . . an extremely unpleasant scene between him and the school principal that I suspect might have ended with . . . might have ended a lot worse for everyone if I hadn’t been there to calm things down. But the result was that Heller withdrew Niq from the school permanently. He wasn’t willing to risk the bullying happening again at another school so we enrolled Niq for distance education instead.” He shrugged. “Niq’s coping remarkably well now, so what we’re doing seems to be working for him. Everybody’s happy.”

I nodded again and didn’t push it any further, although I felt that Daniel had been choosing his words very carefully as he spoke. I was growing increasingly curious about their relationships with each other. Heller was undoubtedly the boss, but where did everyone else fit in?

We finished our tour by climbing up to the roof-top. I was pleasantly surprised to find it decked out as a leisure centre, with a couple of sun lounges, a sheltered area with a barbeque, picnic table, pool table and a hot tub. There was also a small herb garden off to one sheltered sunny corner.

“We come up here to relax,” Daniel smiled, “and to get some sunshine.”

“I like this place,” I said, looking around happily. “Heller’s a very generous boss.”

“Well, I suppose that’s because we are all more like family to him than staff,” Daniel considered. “The twins, Niq and I have all lived with Heller for a while now. To me, he’s more like an older brother than a boss. I guess it’s not like a normal office.”

“I figured that out all by myself,” I teased. “Seriously though, the relationships between you all intrigue me. Take Niq. You said Heller isn’t related to him, but he’s a minor, isn’t he? I don’t want to be nosy, but shouldn’t he be living with his family?”

Daniel gazed at me for a few long moments, his lovely brown eyes filled with a pained emotion I couldn’t decipher.

“Tilly,” he said sadly, “you come from a fairly happy and normal family, I assume.” I nodded, thinking of my much-loved parents and two older brothers and their families. “That’s not the case with some people. Niq’s family is us. He doesn’t have another family. Neither do I. Nor the twins. Nor Heller, as far as I know. We’ve made a family, and a business, between us.”

“Oh hell. I’m so sorry, Daniel,” I said contritely, cursing my nosiness. “I didn’t mean to pry. I was just curious about my new work-mates.”

“I know, I know,” he soothed, holding out his palms in a defensive manner. “Heller told us that a new person would be inquisitive. It’s cool. Let’s just say that without Heller I wouldn’t be here today. I know that sounds melodramatic, but he really has been a saviour for all of us here. He took us in and brought us up when the rest of the world had kicked us to the gutter.” Daniel paused. “I suppose you could say that Heller likes to collect damaged people.” And he smiled at me sadly with his terribly beautiful crooked smile. I felt lower than the bottom of a politician’s shoe at that moment.

Daniel’s mobile rang and he spoke for a few moments, then apologised because he had to leave as Heller needed him back in the office. I returned to my flat and spent my first afternoon and evening at the Warehouse unpacking, ‘shopping’ in the pantry and luxuriating in a long hot bath. It was blissful and so quiet. Everything was clean, fresh and tidy, and my cupboards were full of good food. And best of all, there were no pimply, horny engineering students around, trying to cop a feel at every opportunity. I was in heaven.

I pulled on some old track suit pants and a baggy t-shirt. On my way to the kitchen to begin dinner preparations, I was startled when Daniel and Niq walked into my flat. I must have forgotten to lock the door behind me when I came back from the pantry.

“We came to see how you were settling in,” Daniel smiled, examining my dinner ingredients. “Ooh, that looks great. What are you making?”

“Baked salmon with dill and caper sauce, baked baby potatoes and an avocado and rocket salad. Followed by some fresh strawberries and cream.” All the food I craved when eating stolen burgers night after night.

Daniel and Niq exchanged glances.

“That sounds yum! Can I have dinner with you?” asked Niq.

Daniel scolded, “Niq, it’s rude to invite yourself to dinner.”

I smiled. “That’s okay. He can have dinner with me. Would you like to as well, Daniel?”

“If it’s not any trouble, Tilly. It does sound delicious and much better than what I was going to cook.”

“Which is the same thing he cooks every night,” complained Niq with all the scorn a teenager can muster – a veritable Mount Everest of scorn. “The only thing he knows how to cook. Pasta! Nothing but pasta, all the time. Pasta today, pasta yesterday, pasta tomorrow.”

Daniel blushed, but admitted sheepishly, “It’s true. I haven’t got a clue how to cook.”

“You’re going to have to run some errands for me though,” I demanded. “I need two more pieces of salmon and some dill and flat-leaf parsley from the herb garden.”

“What’s dill?” asked Daniel with a puzzled expression.

“We haven’t got a herb garden,” frowned Niq.

“Yes, we have. It’s on the roof-top,” I explained patiently.

“Is that a herb garden? I thought it was a bunch of weeds.”

I slapped my forehead with my palm. “You two have a lot to learn. Come on,” and we all trooped up to the roof-top.

I spent the next thirty minutes giving them a lecture about herbs, their different tastes and uses. By the end I was confident that they could identify the major herbs by sight and smell.

Niq regarded me seriously, something approaching respect in his big pale blue eyes. “How do you know all this stuff? I don’t learn anything like this at school, but it seems really useful to know.” Daniel nodded his agreement, equally serious.

I shrugged, trying to appear offhand, but secretly thrilled that they thought I knew anything worthwhile. “Well Niq, my mum and my two grandmas taught me how to cook and they all taught me all about herbs and spices when I was a kid. Also, Mum’s a mad keen gardener and has a lovely herb garden that I used to help her maintain when I was younger.”

“Cool,” he said and pondered for a moment. “Can I meet your mum one day?”

I ruffled his hair, causing a flurry of urgent rearrangement of those carefully poised locks. “Of course you can! She’d love to meet you. Word of warning though, because you’re so skinny she’ll try to feed you until you explode. And she’ll give you a lecture about your piercings. She’s convinced you get diseases from body piercings. I was never allowed to get any done except for my ears.”

“That would be okay, I guess,” he said with his shy smile, still fixing his hair. I watched him, a surprising rush of fondness flooding me. *Maybe he would enjoy the attention*, I thought. I determined then to give him loads of my time while I worked at *Heller’s*.

“You’ve done me proud today, boys. I’ll make Jamie Olivers out of you both yet,” I praised as Daniel correctly chose both the dill and the flat-leaf parsley.

“Who’s that?” asked Daniel, eyes wide.

“Jamie who?” Niq asked simultaneously.

I stared at them and palm-smacked my forehead again. “Oh brother! This is going to be harder than I thought. Okay, let’s get dinner started and I’ll walk you both through the steps.”

I turned around to go back down the stairs with the herbs and ran smack-bang into Heller who had been quietly standing behind me. It was like hitting a brick wall. The impact crushed the parsley and sent me reeling, but didn’t seem to have any effect on him. He grasped my upper arms to steady me. I glanced down at the parsley, pulled a face and looked up at him.

“You broke my parsley,” I reproached and held out the ruined stalks for his inspection.

The corners of his mouth twitched. “I believe that you ran into me,” he pointed out reasonably.

“Yes, but I wasn’t expecting you to be standing behind me, otherwise I wouldn’t have run into you,” I observed, equally reasonable.

“I was enjoying listening to your demonstration. I hadn’t realised the garden had such a variety of herbs. I’ll let Victor know that his hard work is finally being appreciated. He will be pleased. Niq, pick out some more parsley for Ms Chalmers, please,” he instructed. “We don’t want her dinner to be delayed.”

“Victor? He’s your valet, right? I haven’t met him yet,” I said, smiling my thanks as Niq passed me a fresh bunch of parsley.

“And you never will. Victor is an imaginary mythical creature that Heller invented to scare the kiddies,” said Daniel mischievously. “No one ever sees or hears him. And yet the pantry stays stocked, the place is kept clean and the herbs are nurtured. Spooky!”

Heller’s lips twitched again. “Daniel is teasing,” he explained to me seriously. “He knows perfectly well that Victor is not imaginary. He’s just a very private person. He doesn’t enjoy socialising. I accept that.”

“He’s the Loch Ness Monster of the business,” insisted Daniel, grinning. “Often spoken about, even allegedly sighted on occasion, but no reliable proof of his existence has yet been

produced.”

“Daniel,” Heller admonished gently, not without some tiny hint of laughter. It was obvious that there was a great deal of affection between the two men.

“Okay, okay. I’ll stop,” he promised. “We have to go anyway. Tilly’s making us dinner tonight.”

Heller frowned. “Make sure you go to bed at a sensible time,” he said to me, his good humour evaporated. “You will have a busy day tomorrow with the stylists.” His wintry blue eyes raked over me, taking in the unattractive and unflattering old clothes that I’d thrown on earlier. “Not a moment too soon either,” he said unkindly and walked away. I tried to cover the hurt that his mean comment caused with a gigawatt smile as the three of us went back to my place.

We had had a very pleasant dinner and evening together. I was very relaxed with them, enjoyed their company and we all laughed easily. They were both gentle sweet boys and I felt myself easily bonding with them. I learned that Niq ostensibly lived with Heller, but in fact flitted nomadically between Heller, Daniel and the twins as the mood struck him. I had the distinct impression that he was preparing to bunk down on my lounge after dinner, but Daniel moved him on, pointing out that perhaps I might be allowed to spend one night alone in my new abode. Niq reluctantly agreed.

I obeyed orders and was tucked up in bed by ten. I had expected to toss and turn in a new bed, but instead slept for a solid and blissful eight hours, not missing the incessant thumping dance music from the rave club and the smell of cooking meat from the kebab shop.

I slid out of bed in the morning and changed into some exercise gear, thinking that I’d better start shifting my flab before Heller made any more rude comments. I crept down to the gym on the floor below, hoping nobody else would be around. Luckily for me they weren’t, so I spent thirty minutes on the treadmill and then did some light weights. Better start easy, I thought as I left, eyeing the intimidating huge bar weights waiting for someone stronger than me to use.

I returned to my flat, showered and ate breakfast. I didn’t have a wide choice of business apparel, the loss of my pale rose suit fairly well depleting it, so I slipped on runners, a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. I left my hair loose that morning. A light application of makeup finished my preparations, but couldn’t hide the bruising that had fully developed across the bridge of my nose, or the scratches from the exploding glass. I looked like I’d been scrapping on the street downtown on a drunken Friday night.

I walked down to the office and sat at my workstation. No one else had turned up for work yet. Not surprising perhaps, because it was only seven-thirty. Maybe I was a little *too* eager this morning. I spent ten minutes rummaging around in the three drawers to the right of my desk. There was a very nice supply of good quality stationery provided, including some *Heller’s* letterhead paper and pens with the stylish black and gold **H** logo, matching the sign on the office wall.

I turned on my computer and while it was loading made myself a coffee at the machine in the kitchenette. I’d done some casual barista work before so was able to make myself a credible cappuccino, only burning my arm once on the steam. Back at my desk I brought up my favourite news site on the computer. I was reading about yet another terrible natural disaster when Heller walked in. He looked good, wearing tight-cut black suit pants, a dark green monogrammed shirt, opened at the neck, and elegant black crocodile shoes. He casually carried his suit jacket in his hand. I threw him a dazzling smile. He raised his eyebrows and glanced down at his watch. Then frowned as he took in my casual appearance and bruised face.

“You don’t have another business suit?”

I shook my head, instantly shamed at my impoverishment.

“Come to me in about ten minutes and we’ll discuss the next few days,” he ordered, striding past me into his office. I watched him all the way. Nerves struck me suddenly and I could already feel the coffee pressing on my bladder. I stood up and walked around the office, trying to appear inconspicuous, looking for another bathroom other than the one near Daniel’s desk in which I’d changed before my interview. There wasn’t one.

*Problem!* I thought as soon as I opened the door and walked inside, taking in my surroundings properly. There was just one toilet in the room, seat up. The toilet paper hadn’t been replaced and there were no female hygiene provisions. Daniel’s desk was only a few metres away. I balked at the thought of sharing this space with the two men and Niq. I guess I’m not big on unisex bathrooms. I quickly backed out and dashed upstairs to my own bathroom. After checking my hair and makeup and brushing my teeth again to remove any coffee-breath, I walked back to my desk. *Living where you worked certainly had a lot of advantages*, I thought happily. I hadn’t even had to pack any lunch because I could just saunter upstairs and prepare it fresh at lunchtime.

## Chapter 7

I sat back at my desk and continued perusing the news until I judged that the requested ten minutes were up. I hesitantly approached Heller’s office and knocked gently on the door. He looked up from his writing and gestured me in. I sat at a chair on the other side of his desk.

He continued writing for a while and I took the opportunity to watch him. He was left-handed, his script confident, bold and surprisingly neat. His fingers were long and elegant, his nails manicured. There was what appeared to be faint scarring around the knuckles of his right hand and more recent scarring on his left. I was transfixed, staring at his hands, wondering how it would feel if they were caressing my skin. It was only when they stopped writing, placing the gold pen on the desk, did I realise that he was speaking to me. I looked up quickly, desperately focussing on what he was saying.

“. . . and I’ve no doubts you’ll be happy to hear that,” he continued, unaware that I had missed the first part and therefore had no idea of my level of happiness at hearing what he’d just said. “So Rumbles will take you there at ten and then Mei will look after you.”

“Rumbles?” I queried, wishing I’d been listening.

“I know, it sounds improbable, but he swears that is his real name. He will collect you from your desk before ten. You should be back this afternoon by no later than five. Then tomorrow we have appointments with some potential new clients. Your first test, you might say. That’s all,” he said, dismissing me and turning back to his work.

Great! Something or someone named Rumbles was taking me somewhere and then someone named Mei was taking me somewhere else. I didn’t have a clue what I’d be doing, but I’d be back at five. Mental note to self: *stop perving and pay more attention next time*.

Rumbles turned out to be an incredible giant wearing the *Heller’s* uniform. He was an older man and one of the more senior security officers. He told me that he was second-in-command in the security section under Clive and also did a spot of discreet chauffeuring of VIP clients on Heller’s direct instructions. He was to be my escort for the day and confided that he had been given strict and detailed instructions by ‘the Boss himself’ on safely delivering me to wherever I was going and home again. That made me feel special.

He was quite chatty and told me more about the security part of Heller’s business. They did one-off assignments for visitors to the city, and also had ongoing relationships with

certain events managers who provided regular security work and crowd control at concerts, weddings, and other large gatherings. The bread-and-butter of the firm though was long-term security work at businesses and large building sites. Heller also loved winning private security jobs where his surveillance teams would tip off his security teams of any breach in the security systems previously installed by the business. That was win-win-win for him because he received income from the initial installation of the security equipment, the ongoing surveillance services and the follow-up security services, all in the same job.

Rumbles detailed some of the assignments he'd been involved in as part of a *Heller's* security team, including for a couple of A-list movie stars, a drug-addled major international sports star and a very famous but alcoholic and promiscuous young singer.

"Sounds so exciting," I breathed, desperate to hear more salacious details. "I hope I get to meet some famous people too."

He looked at me pityingly. "You think it's going to be exciting being around celebrities or rich people, but it's generally not. A lot of them are arrogant shits who don't even notice you or even forbid you from making any eye contact with them, and the rest are addicts or just plain crazy. Even with the ones that are slightly normal, you have to deal with the paparazzi and those bastards are clever and persistent. And every now and again you'll get a fanatical fan. So it's not all that it's cracked up to be."

I nodded agreement, but I still secretly had stars in my eyes. This job was going to be fantastic! There couldn't have been a luckier woman in the world – free everything as well as the chance to meet celebrities. I was in heaven.

We pulled up outside a deluxe and discreet hotel. Rumbles rushed out of his door and around the front of the black 4WD to open my door for me.

"Thank you," I said appreciatively, not sure that had ever happened to me before in my life. He led the way through the lavish foyer to the hotel's spa retreat.

"Here you go, Miss," he said, with a gallantry that I assumed had died a few centuries ago. "After you're finished here, Miss Mei will pick you up and take you for the afternoon. I'll return for you at the end of the day."

"Thank you so much, Mr Rumbles," I said, and we shook hands, much to his amused delight.

"I hope you enjoy yourself today, Miss," he said sincerely. "The Boss made a good decision to hire you. You're a real breath of fresh air at *Heller's*."

I wasn't sure what to say in response to that, so merely smiled brightly at him and walked into the spa. There I was greeted warmly by professional and considerate staff. And for the next three hours, I was pampered to within an inch of my life. I was massaged, pedicured, manicured and waxed. I had a deep facial (the staff being careful of my poor nose) and the skin specialist enthused over my pale skin – *so beautiful, so clear, just lovely* – and I was given an armful of expensive products to nurture my specific skin type. I had my hair treated and cut expertly and was given another armful of expensive hair products. I had my makeup applied and was given many tips on doing it properly, ominously including how to cover bruising.

At the end when I peered at the mirror I barely recognised myself. My skin looked smoother and clearer. My hair was glossier than I could ever have imagined and fell around my shoulders in soft and gentle natural waves. My makeup complemented my large light brown eyes, my fingernails shone and my body tingled all over from the massage. I felt like a princess.

As I mentioned before, I'm a naturally nosy person, so I had no hesitation in asking whether the rest of the *Heller's* team came here for styling, and was told that a stylist visited them at the Warehouse once a month for haircuts, manicures and other grooming

requirements. I was also told, to my amazement, that I now had a standing booking once a month to come in for my own styling. Oh boy, I was loving my new job more and more every minute!

I was finishing a delicious light lunch of smoked salmon sandwiches and a glass of champagne, compliments of the spa, when a petite lady approached me. She had a wise Yoda-face framed by a geometric black bob so precise that her hairdresser must have used mathematical apparatus to plot the cut. Calm black eyes peered out from under the severe black fringe.

“Good afternoon, Miss Chalmers,” she said as we shook hands. “I’m Mei Wong and I’m your personal shopper for this afternoon.” I told her to call me Tilly and we spent the rest of the day trawling through some of the city’s designer stores, assembling outfits for work and some casual clothes as well.

“Heller instructed that we must replace your entire wardrobe,” Mei told me as we stepped into the fifth boutique. I really wanted to take offence at Heller’s comment, but the truth was that I was ecstatically happy at that moment and just couldn’t squeeze out even one tiny drop of indignation no matter how hard I tried. We bought so much that we would have struggled to haul it around, so we didn’t carry our purchases, but left them behind at each store for poor Rumbles to come along and pick them all up later.

“Do you help Heller shop too?” I asked, curious as ever.

“Heller doesn’t shop, Miss!” she exclaimed with glee, laughing out loud. “Good heavens, the very thought!” She laughed again. “He’s a big, tall man and can’t readily buy clothes off-the-rack. No, he gets all of his suits, shirts, shoes and uniforms tailor-made. Very expensive clothes, he has. I pick out his casual gear for him. Always designer clothes, though. He’s very fussy about his appearance. Same with the twins and Daniel. Niq isn’t so fussy, but his Goth tastes keep me busy, I can tell you. I have to order most of his clothes online from Europe.” I smiled at her unusual workload. In my world it wasn’t common for men to be so interested in their appearance. I wasn’t used to it and wasn’t sure what to make of it.

After a while, I decided that it was a joy to shop with Mei. She worked hard to cover my flaws and had a wonderful eye for a good ensemble, including jewellery, shoes and handbags. I was certain that I wouldn’t embarrass Heller in any of these outfits. She confided that with my height and lean (albeit untoned!) body, I was a dream to outfit. And best of all, she was paying for everything, using a credit card that she told me billed directly to Heller’s account.

However, no matter how fervently a woman loves shopping, there was always a time when she becomes completely and utterly exhausted. By about five-thirty, Mei and I had both had our fill and she rang for Rumbles to pick me up. I hugged her sincerely as he drove up in the 4WD and she promised that I would be seeing her again in the future. The boot and back seat of the car were full of bags.

“Looks like you bought the whole shop, Miss,” Rumbles joked as we drove back to the Warehouse.

“Just about! Do you know that I am almost too tired to even breathe,” I confessed, and leant back into the soft leather seat, closing my eyes. It had been possibly the best day I’d ever had in my life.

It took Rumbles and me several trips to the basement to bring up my new packages. When I went to put my new clothes away, I realised that all my old clothes had disappeared from the cupboards and drawers. *Who had done that?* I thought with irritation. Luckily I even had new underwear to replace that which was now gone, because I don’t know what I would have done otherwise.

My poor empty stomach growled and I opened the fridge to prepare the quickest meal possible. Seeing there were no stolen burgers around, I made the next best thing – a cheese

toastie washed down with a glass of wine. Satiated, I sleepily watched some TV and then happily fell into bed.

That night I dreamt that I was on the roof-top sitting on one of the sun lounges and Heller was giving me a pedicure. For some reason I was completely naked, sipping champagne and enjoying the caress of the sun on my bare skin. Heller was fully dressed in one of his expensive hand-made suits. He moved from grooming my toenails to massaging my feet. Then his elegant hands moved slowly up my ankles and calves, massaging them gently and over my knees to my thighs, edging closer, all the while mesmerising me with his incredibly captivating blue eyes. I parted my thighs willingly in anticipation, barely daring to breathe. He inched closer, leaving my skin tingling as he progressed up my thighs. The heat grew within me. He was about to touch me intimately with his long, graceful fingers, a seductive smile playing across his lips, when I woke up suddenly, breathing heavily, tangled in my sheets and intensely aroused. *No!* I panted. *Don't end now! Not now!*

It took me a long time to go back to sleep afterwards.

## Chapter 8

The next morning I remembered that Heller had promised me that I'd meet with clients, so again I was up early, gently exercised, fed and showered before eight. I chose my outfit carefully, thrilled to have such a selection from which to choose. I decided on a smart little navy skirt-suit with a very feminine soft white chemise. I tied my hair back in an elegant loose clasp as the hair stylist taught me and applied my new skin products and makeup. I twisted back and forth in front of my bedroom mirror trying to check my rear view. I'm not normally a vain person, but I thought I looked pretty good. I certainly felt fine, the expert haircut and beautiful clothes greatly boosting my self-confidence.

I walked down the stairs, taking care with the ten-centimetre navy stilettos I was wearing. I hadn't wanted to buy high heels, already being so tall, but Mei had talked me into a few pairs, arguing that I would get used to walking in them eventually. I hoped she was right, because I was sure I was going to break my ankle at any moment. When I stepped into the office, Heller and Daniel were already there, discussing some paperwork at Daniel's desk. Conscious that they had both lifted their heads to stare at me, I carefully made my way towards my desk.

Daniel wolf-whistled loudly. "You look *amazing*, Tilly!" I smiled at him gratefully for his kindness.

Heller put up his hand to stop my progress. I stood there, embarrassed, while he walked around me, intensely scrutinising my hair, suit, shoes, jewellery, skin and makeup. I guess he had a right to do so as he had paid for it all. When he had finished, I looked up at him in silence, nervously awaiting his verdict. He held my glance steadily until I had to blink and look away.

"Not bad," he reluctantly conceded.

"You overwhelm me with your praise, good sir," I replied tartly, and gave him a little curtsy.

"My praise, *if* I felt like providing any, would all be for Mei. She can make anyone look good."

"She obviously doesn't dress you then," I snapped, stung by his words. But from the dangerous flash in his eyes that followed, I knew I had stepped over a boundary.

We engaged in eye-lock until I had to break away again, burned by that glacial blueness. The man was talented at staring people down. He spoke to me sharply. "I have two client appointments today. I want you to come to both of them with me. We leave for the first one in

an hour. You need to be prepared so I've put some material on your desk to read before then." And with that, he strode off into his office.

I sat at my desk and spent the next hour reading about the business's security and surveillance offerings, only too aware that Heller's eyes were resting on me frequently as I did. *Probably making sure I was working as hard as he expected*, I thought ungraciously. Luckily for me though, one of the few acting skills I'd had any talent at was memorising text, so I was fairly confident that I'd be able to discuss the services offered by *Heller's* with some degree of knowledgeable professionalism. I casually threw some of the brochures into one of my new top-label handbags.

Just before we were due to leave, I dashed upstairs to check my makeup and hair. When I came back down, Heller was waiting for me impatiently.

"Ready?" he asked with irritation. Without waiting for an answer he shot off down the stairs, leaving me to follow him, clattering slowly in my dangerous high heels. I finally made it to the garage and climbed up into his Mercedes 4WD with some difficulty in my tight skirt. I started feeling cross. Why should I have to dress up in all of these uncomfortable clothes while he was free to dress in a way that made moving actually possible?

We drove out to one of the affluent, leafy suburbs surrounding the CBD. Heller pulled up in front of a grand, turn-of-the-century sandstone mansion surrounded by beautifully kept gardens. I smoothed back my hair and tugged at my skirt. I was quite nervous. I wasn't sure if I was able to pull off this job in the manner that he expected and I was growing very attached to the perks. It would have been a devastating blow to be fired and forced back to my old life for failing at this job. I was feeling the pressure to succeed, but considering that I had never succeeded in anything else in my life, I wasn't overly confident about this venture either.

We walked up the sandstone path and Heller pressed on the doorbell. As the door started to open, he pushed me to the front so that I would be the first person visible. I turned to throw him a puzzled look, but immediately composed my features into a pleasant mask as the door fully opened. A large, pale chubby woman, her black hair pulled back in a tight bun, stood in front of us wearing what appeared to be a maid's uniform – a frumpy black dress teamed with a small white apron.

Wow! It was a real, live maid! I had never before witnessed such a thing outside of television or the movies.

"Good morning," I said politely. "We're from *Heller's Security & Surveillance* and have an appointment with Miss Worthy." We showed her our staff cards. She threw a hesitant glance at Heller before hurriedly transferring her eyes back to me, as if he frightened her.

"Yes Miss, please come this way. Miss Worthy is expecting you." We followed her through the labyrinthine rooms of the lovely, well-maintained house. The maid showed us into a pleasant, yellow-wallpapered, brightly lit parlour with a stunning vista out to the beautiful gardens.

An elderly lady perched on the edge of an enormous dark blue, Victorian-era leather sofa reading the day's newspaper. She turned as we entered but did not stand up. She was tiny, with elegantly curled white hair, wearing black slacks and a pearl-coloured, full-sleeved silk blouse, her arthritic feet covered with soft leather ballet-style slippers. Discreet but perfect pearls studded her ears and draped in three strands around her neck. Her pointed features arranged themselves into surprise when her eyes alighted on Heller, relaxing slightly when she spotted me.

"Good morning, Miss Worthy," I said quite formally, sensing that she would approve of this approach. "My name is Matilda Chalmers and this is Mr Heller. We've come to discuss your surveillance needs."

"Mr Heller?" she asked sharply. "You are the proprietor of the business?"

He opened his mouth to respond, but I interrupted smoothly. “Yes ma’am. Mr Heller has accompanied me to ensure that you will receive the best quality surveillance service possible.” She seemed satisfied with that, belonging to a class of people who believed that everyone else existed to support them. I’m not sure why I cut Heller off, but I had a distinct impression that she was quite old-fashioned and would prefer not to undertake business with a ‘foreigner’. He slid me a curious glance, but let me take the lead.

The maid brought in some tea for us all while Miss Worthy and I chatted about inconsequential stuff that I couldn’t even remember afterwards. Although she was conversing with me seamlessly, I noticed that she was keeping an eagle eye on the tea proceedings. The maid fussed around setting the crockery and cutlery out before us in perfect lines, her eyes flicking anxiously to Miss Worthy all the while. Maybe having a spoon out of alignment with a saucer was a reprimandable offence in this household? I was glad that I didn’t work for her.

“Now, Mr Heller advised me that you are concerned about some of the burglaries that have occurred in this neighbourhood recently and would like to protect your precious belongings,” I began, and on and on I droned, detailing the types of surveillance offered by *Heller’s* – discreet or obvious, alarms that rang out to alert the neighbours, or silently alerted the *Heller’s* dedicated security force, trip cameras, lights, the whole gamut of surveillance options.

After our third cup of tea, she became most adamant about what she wanted. Silent alarms directly alerting the *Heller’s* security force. No cameras. She was willing to pay for priority service. “After all, Miss Chalmers,” she divulged, her hand on my arm fondly, “one detests those incessant alarms that screech for hours, irritating the neighbours.”

I gathered from the snideness of her tone that some of her near neighbours had such alarms. I promised that some surveillance experts would be sent to her house later in the day to scope the job and ensure that everything was installed promptly. They would also bring the paperwork for her to sign. She thanked me profusely and I promised that she could ring me at any time if she had any more queries, although to be honest I had already exhausted my skimpy knowledge of surveillance systems.

As we were leaving, she said, “Matilda is *such* a lovely name. It was my eldest sister’s name but we all called her Matty.” I told her that I was called Tilly, which made her smile at me dotingly. “You’ve quite made me think of her again today, my dear. She had beautiful dark hair like yours.” Miss Worthy sighed sadly. “She passed away a few years ago now. I must get out the photo albums to look at again.”

As she walked us to the door, she lowered her voice to a confidential whisper, glowering at Heller with suspicion. “I’m not sure about that man. He’s *overly* handsome. In my experience, men like that are nothing but trouble. I’d stay away from him if I was you.”

“That’s very good advice, Miss Worthy,” I said, surprised. “But he’s my employer. I don’t need to worry about him.”

“Mark my words,” she tutted and turned to go back inside, softly closing the door on us.

I wasn’t sure if Heller had overheard any of that conversation, but we walked silently down the path to his vehicle. As we climbed back in, he said, “Ongoing work such as that is very important to me. Thank you for winning me a new client, *Matilda*.”

I smiled at him amiably. “My pleasure, *Mr Heller*.” And I’m almost positive there was a faint smile in reply as we drove off.

Our next client for the day was a bored, wealthy, middle-aged woman who was convinced her husband was screwing his PA and wanted to catch him in the act. I could barely capture her attention for even a second as her eyes remain glued to Heller the entire time. However, when I explained that we could bill her credit card as ‘manicure services’ for the surveillance, she was all ears. It tickled her that she could catch out her love-rat husband

and ensure that he would pay for the privilege. With some lingering glances at Heller, she promised to sign a contract for three months of full surveillance. I advised that the paperwork would be organised today. As Heller and I stood up to leave, she took me aside.

“God, he’s such a honey! Does he, you know, ever offer ‘extra services’ for clients?” She pulled such a crude face that I almost felt sorry for Heller.

“I believe that he does have a ‘special relationship’ with his VIP clients,” I fabricated, continuing with a touch of regret, “They’re the clients who have a great deal of business with us, Mrs Smythe. For example, those who have their ongoing home security packaged with us as well. That kind of thing.”

“Have you got any brochures?” she demanded before adding thoughtfully, “This neighbourhood *is* growing more dangerous every year. We probably do need more security.” And, without even the slightest trace of irony, “I’ll talk to my husband about it.”

I left her one of the *Heller’s* glossy promotional brochures, and Heller left her his business card because I didn’t have any yet. Her eyes lit up and I think she believed that he was giving her a special message or something.

“What are you so happy about?” he asked as we drove back to the office.

“She might turn out to be some repeat business for you in the future,” I replied, smiling at him innocently.

He nodded, unaware of the tempest soon heading in his direction. “By the way,” he said mildly, “I’m not sure that we can bill surveillance as ‘manicure services’.”

“Better get Daniel on to it then, hey?” I smiled at him again. “She seemed to really like the idea.”

He gave me a long thoughtful sidelong glance before returning his eyes to the road. We drove home.

## Chapter 9

The next morning, I woke at a very early hour. I wanted to sleep in, but remembering for the millionth time Heller’s scornful comments about my fitness condition, I dragged myself down to the gym for another workout. I walked in casually, humming to myself, only to screech to a halt when I noticed that for the first time since I’d started working here, I wasn’t alone. Heller was busy doing an intense weights workout. He was shirtless and wearing nothing but small black sports shorts, his incredible muscles flexing and rippling with the effort of the bar weights he was lifting. My first instinct was to turn and flee, but he had noticed me in the wall mirror in front of him and, although not stopping his repetitions, his eyes tracked me in the mirror.

I had no choice but to continue my original plan unless I wanted to appear cowardly and that helped me make up my mind. I wagged my fingers at him in acknowledgement, averting my eyes from his sweaty body and determinedly headed for the treadmill. I wanted to block out the sight and sound of him and fortunately all the mirrors in the gym were surrounding the weights area. I was mirror-free and would have been able to pretend to myself that I was alone except for the grunting noises he was making as he lifted and lowered those heavy weights. I desperately wished I had an iPod at that moment. I promised myself that I would go shopping and buy one the next chance I had. I’d now earned a pay cheque since I’d started working at *Heller’s* and had a bit of spare money for the first time in forever.

I started slowly on the treadmill, giving myself a proper five-minute warm-up. I revved up to a decent running speed, zoning out everything, staring straight ahead at the blank plasma TV, thinking about random things: what I would cook for dinner that night, the

complicated plot of the thriller I was reading, the revoltingly gory movie I had watched with Daniel and Niq the other night that was still giving me nightmares. I ran for another twenty minutes before I slowed down again for a warm-down. When I finally stopped, puffing heavily, I gave a small scream of fear when I turned around to dismount to find Heller standing behind me, arms crossed across his insanely wonderful chest. He must have been watching my running session and my first thought was to hope that he hadn't been looking at my butt the whole time.

I couldn't help but notice again that he was virtually naked except for those tiny skintight gym shorts. *Oh God, give me strength*, I prayed frantically. He was a beautiful man with a beautiful body, a huge temptation for any woman, but especially for a poor girl who hadn't had any action for a while. Luckily for my self-control that morning though, sex was the last thing on his mind.

"You have a good running style, but running's not enough," he criticised. "You need to do weights as well."

"I know. I haven't finished yet. There's more to my workout," I said mildly between breaths, scrambling away from him over to the mirrored weights section to grab the two-kilogram hand weights. I went through my normal routine, proud that I had recently graduated from the one-kilogram weights I'd used when I'd first started. I was deliberately taking it slowly.

"That's not enough," he disapproved, repeating himself. "You won't build big muscles with those." His contempt for my little weights was manifest.

"I don't want to be too muscled," I explained patiently as I exerted myself with my little weights. I desperately kept my gaze ahead at myself in the mirror, trying not to make eye contact with him. God only knew what weight he had just been lifting. I had no doubt it would put me to shame.

"Why not?" he demanded.

I suppressed my sigh as I finished my last bicep curl. "Because I'm a woman and I want to look womanly, not manly."

There was a significant pause as his eyes roamed freely over my body. "Oh, I don't think you need to worry about that," he finally said, with a calculatingly suggestive smile.

*Okay, he probably had been looking at my butt while I ran*, I decided. I sighed, hoping I wouldn't, but already feeling a pinkness creeping into my cheeks at his words. I wished he would just leave and stop watching me, especially when he was standing there with almost nothing on. I wasn't wearing that much myself either to be honest, regretting the small Lycra shorts and mid-riff revealing top I had pulled on. He was getting a good look at my flesh.

"I'll move up to larger weights when I feel competent with these ones," I promised, trying to distract him from his scrutiny of my body.

"Talk to me when you do. I can help you devise a program." He strode towards the door, but in the mirror I could see him casting me a prolonged glance as he left.

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After a couple more weeks, I felt like I had settled in at *Heller's*. I'd helped bring in a handful of new and ongoing clients, which I knew pleased Heller even though he didn't say so. I was also becoming incredibly fit and had developed close bonds with Daniel and Niq. I was on friendly terms with the twins. Well, Sid was friendly at least, but Clive not at all. I hadn't yet set eyes on Victor and Heller himself remained an enticing enigma. Occasionally I caught a glimpse of humanity inside, but mostly to me he was still a solid barrier of cool, mocking aloofness.

However, there were some issues to sort out before I could really feel like part of the family.

One day, Heller called me into his office and heatedly remarked that I seemed to be disappearing every couple of hours and was I a *secret smoker*? To him, this was clearly a severe crime and a major betrayal of his trust, and I think it came as a relief for him to learn that it was my female fastidiousness that kept me jogging upstairs to use my own bathroom. There was an awkward moment when I was explaining about the importance of female hygiene bins and that at a certain time of every month . . . I'm not sure Heller had ever considered the necessity before, and I will swear that he even reddened a little when I brought it up. But he never questioned me about my disappearances again.

Then I tackled everybody's free access to my flat. On a number of occasions I had been startled by finding one of them in my flat when I thought I was alone. On one particular occasion I had left my bathroom after a long shower, clad only in a towel, to find the four men in my flat, drinking my coffee and casually discussing the security of my windows. After that, I called a special staff meeting. There I gave a very angry and detailed lecture about privacy and why it was so important for a woman, particularly a woman living with a bunch of men, again especially at certain times. Daniel, Niq and the twins were aghast, if not actually traumatised. Heller instructed everyone to respect my privacy and to knock on my door in the future.

After those successes, I decided to confront Heller about the decor in the office. I begged him to let me soften it up, shrewdly arguing that it would offer Niq a better study environment if we provided some indoor plants and stimulating paintings. He finally agreed, wearily worn down by my daily assaults. That afternoon, Rumbles, Niq and I drove to the local mega-hardware barn. Niq was so excited by the rare outing that he chatted away the entire trip, barely drawing one breath. Rumbles and I exchanged glances, smiled at each other and listened patiently, joining in when we were given a chance. We purchased a number of potted indoor plants, and I impulsively added a small water feature to the trolley as well, paying for it all with a *Heller's* credit card. We arranged everything strategically around the office. I made sure I had one of the plants on my desk to partially hide me from Heller's view.

The next day I invited around an art dealer (after he was screened by Heller, of course) who looked around in dismay at the severity of the brick walls and promptly supplied us with three modern and beautiful watercolours by a rising local artist. He assured a flat-expressed Heller that the paintings were worth every cent of the exorbitant price and would become quite valuable in the future as the artist became better known (he was right). Daniel and I spent the following morning hanging them and when finished, I glanced around, satisfied with my work.

Heller came out of his office, raised his eyebrows at the gently gurgling water feature I'd placed on a small table in a corner near Niq's desk, rubbed the leaf of one of the philodendrons, spent a moment contemplating each painting and walked back into his office without saying a word.

"He likes it," Daniel whispered to me.

"How can you tell?" I whispered back, disappointed at the lack of feedback.

"Because he didn't say that he hated it," he replied with a smile.

I thought about that and realised it was true. If Heller hadn't approved of what I'd done, he would have let me know with no uncertainties. Happier, I secretly patted myself on the back and went to collect my notepad and pen. It was time for the weekly staff meeting that was held in Heller's office and attended by him, Daniel, Sid, Clive and me. I wasn't quite sure why I was included as I was rarely expected to contribute a word.

As was the practice at these meetings, Daniel gave us a briefing on new enquiries that he

had logged during the last week and upcoming confirmed assignments. He advised us of a potentially big assignment coming up in the next few days that we would be competing for against other firms. Heller allocated work to us individually and then we each gave a brief summary of our activities since we'd last met. Sid described a new line of micro-cameras he had recently read about that seemed worth investigating, and promised to provide Heller with some more information. Clive grunted his way through a problem the security staff were experiencing on assignment with accessing buildings before and after hours. Daniel promised to look into it and then it was his turn to discuss the accounts, noting with pleasure that receipts were up for the past month. Heller's eyes flicked over to me momentarily, but he didn't say anything. He mostly sat in silence, listening intently. He gave everyone an opportunity to talk, not dominating the meeting but firmly making decisions when required. And then the meeting was over and that was that for another week. Everyone trooped out back to work.

After about the fourth week of working for him, I walked into Heller's office uninvited. He finished what he was writing with a flourish and gestured for me to sit down. I had plucked up a lot of courage to come in, deciding that I had to do it and that quickly was best, which I vaguely remembered as kind of a quote from some Shakespeare play.

"When you appointed me, you said that I was on trial for a month," I reminded him after I'd taken a seat.

"Did I?" he pondered coolly, his head on one side, eyes resting on me, uncharacteristically vague.

"Yes, you did," I replied firmly. "And that month has now passed. I would like some permanency, so do you confirm my employment or not?" My heart was thumping.

"Hmm," he said thoughtfully, swinging back on his chair, "let me think. You've cost me a lot of money in start-up and upkeep but you have brought in quite a few new clients, mostly women, which is the reason why I hired you. But on the other hand, I do believe that you have made some outrageous promises in the course of bringing in these new clients. It will probably take an era to untangle them, and I'm not even sure that some of them are physically or morally possible." He looked at me and considered. "On the plus side you have become quite the favourite of Daniel, Niq and the twins, and even Victor had something complimentary to say about you the other day."

"Really?" I found that hard to believe. I hadn't yet met the man, if he even existed, which I was beginning to doubt.

"Yes. He said that your literary tastes were impeccable, and that every time he goes to the library to get a book, you have already just borrowed it."

"Is that so?" I was sceptical.

"Yes, quite so," Heller replied laconically. "But to continue, on the minus side, you do drink more than I prefer. Every day, I believe, you have some wine."

"A glass or two is beneficial for your health," I recited piously.

"And also on the minus side, you're very untidy."

I sat up in my seat. "What? Exactly where am I untidy?" I burst out, exasperated. I had made a super-human effort over the last month to be as neat as possible and to be accused of untidiness really pissed me off.

"Your desk," Heller said. "You leave it messy each day. Look at it now." I glanced back at my desk and noticed a pen resting near the keyboard, a file lying open on top and my coffee cup sitting to one side.

"I think you're really stretching now, Heller," I said bluntly.

"And you're very noisy as well. This office used to be peaceful but now all I hear is the three of you laughing and chatting all day long." I stared at him in disbelief. "I'm not sure

everyone is working as hard as they ought to be.”

I wasn't able to control my rude snort. “Heller! We're having what is commonly known as ‘fun’. You should try it some time. You might enjoy it.” He was beginning to try my patience. “And for your information, it makes us all more productive. And anyway, Daniel and Niq love having me around. They would hate it if I had to leave.” *So there!* I thought childishly.

He didn't respond, but merely leant back in his chair and gazed back at me with an irritating serenity.

“Now, just tell me. Am I confirmed or not?” I pushed back my chair and stood up, ready to stamp out of the office in high temper if I didn't hear what I wanted to hear. I have a problem with my temper sometimes and I'd been reining it in for four long weeks.

“What happens if I say no?” Heller asked, standing up also and coming around to face me, arms crossed.

I put my hands on my hips and looked daggers up at him. “I will immediately turn around, go to my flat, take off this outfit and everything you have bought me, put on my old clothes, grab my backpack, say goodbye to the boys and walk out the door. Forever,” I replied, silently daring him to say ‘no’ so I could do as I threatened.

“You have none of your old clothes left,” he reminded me with the ghost of a smile.

I floundered for a moment. “Well, I . . . I guess I'll have to wrap myself in a towel then.”

“But all the towels belong to me,” he said, his smile becoming more open, his white, even teeth gleaming in his lightly tanned face. “And I'm afraid that I couldn't possibly let you take one with you.”

Our eyes duelled for a long minute. “Fine,” I snapped, defiant. “Be like that. I'll walk out of here with nothing on at all. Is that what you want?”

He looked down at me with an expression on his face that implied he was greatly entertained by my theatricals. When he spoke, his voice was cool and reasonable, far from how I was feeling. “Calm down, hothead. No matter how alluring that scenario might be to me, as it happens what I want is for you to continue working here and I will confirm your employment. You haven't been the complete disaster I predicted, and frankly, Niq and Daniel would murder me if you left because of me. You're right – they do love having you around. Are you happy now?”

I beamed at him and nodded in relief, my anger melting away instantly. I loved working in his business and would have hated to be fired. Not to mention losing my flat and wardrobe and styling and free food . . .

“I don't understand you,” he confessed, eyebrows pressing together in genuine puzzlement. “One minute you are angry at me, the next you are smiling. How can your mood change so quickly? I don't know what to make of you sometimes.”

I laughed out loud. It was as if he had only discovered women. Impulsively, I hugged him. “Thank you, Heller,” I said, smiling up at him. “I won't disappoint you. I promise.” And in my defence for such unprofessional behaviour, I was overjoyed at that very moment.

His body tensed and I immediately regretted my impetuous act, feeling like a fool. He clearly wasn't used to receiving spontaneous gestures of affection from his staff, but after a second he put his arms around me too and drew me close. We stayed like that for a very pleasant moment before he pushed me gently away and returned to his desk. I refused to leave though and waited until his eyes moved back to mine.

“Now that I'm confirmed, you have to stop calling me Ms Chalmers. I hate it.”

He gave me a searing blue stare and said quite deliberately, “Can you bring me in the Wilcott file please, Matilda. I want to discuss some approaches with you before we meet him next week.”

I glared at him. *Matilda?*

“Tilly,” I remonstrated, not moving.

“Did you hear what I said, Matilda? The Wilcott file please.”

“Heller! Not Matilda. Tilly.”

“Matilda, the file please.” He looked at me with frosty detachment. It was clear that he wasn’t going to budge, so I did what I was told, but I wasn’t happy about it.

## Chapter 10

A few days later a ringing noise intruded into my sleep and it was a moment or so before I realised that it was the phone next to my bed. I sat up bleary-eyed and fumbled for it, pressing buttons wildly before managing to hit the answer button.

“Yeah?” I croaked.

“Get dressed,” Heller’s voice commanded. “We have to meet the VIP client Daniel was telling us about at the staff meeting the other day.”

“What?” I tried to focus on my clock. “But it’s four-thirty in the morning.”

“He’s just flown in and wants to meet with us before resting. You’ve got fifteen minutes to get ready. I’ll pick you up on the way down.”

I couldn’t argue – after all I was being very well paid to be on-call. My mouth felt furry and I had a slight headache. As I stumbled into the shower I wished I hadn’t had that last glass of wine the previous night, Daniel and I staying up far too late chatting up on the rooftop. Somehow I managed to get ready in time in a russet skirt-suit with gold-coloured silk blouse and was popping a couple of paracetamol when there was a soft knock on my door. I snatched my handbag off the dresser and answered.

“Good morning, Matilda,” Heller said pleasantly, looking fresh and gorgeous in a dark charcoal suit and pale blue shirt that emphasised his eyes. I grunted something unintelligible in reply. As we drove he briefed me on the client, a very wealthy Jordanian businessman in town to close a multi-million dollar development deal. He wanted his young wife chaperoned during the next week while he was occupied with business. We were the last of three firms he was interviewing, the others were two of the city’s biggies and it would be a lucrative job for the winner.

They were staying at the city’s only six-star hotel. We were met by a well-dressed respectful servant in the opulent foyer and conveyed to the penthouse suite. The sheer luxury of the suite was overwhelming and I glanced around it in awe. Antique furniture vied for attention with gilt-framed oil paintings and beautifully crafted and magnificently-coloured authentic Persian rugs. I couldn’t even imagine being rich enough to afford this splendour.

Mr Hayek was a small, self-important man with clever black eyes, a thin mouth and matching moustache, dressed in a beautifully tailored suit. I didn’t care for the way he stared at me during our introduction though, his eyes lingering on my boobs and legs. His wife sat demurely by his side on the brocaded eighteenth-century sofa, her eyes modestly downcast. She was dressed more traditionally than him, her hair covered by a black scarf and her entire body covered by a long shapeless black smock and loose pants. She looked very young, no older than twenty I would have guessed, which made her perhaps half the age of her husband. I watched her carefully as the men discussed business and was relieved to see her dare to peek up at Heller a few times – she was human after all! She glanced at me through her eyelashes and when I gave her a friendly smile, she smiled back shyly.

She leaned over and whispered in her husband’s ear. He turned back to speak to Heller.

“My wife would like to know if it would be this young lady here,” indicating me, “who

would be her escort if your business was successful?"

"Yes," Heller confirmed.

"And I would be very pleased to take Mrs Hayek to some of the city's attractions or shopping during the week. As she prefers," I added, in my most persuasive and charming manner, smiling nicely at her again.

She leaned over to her husband and again whispered in his ear.

"My wife has indicated that she would like me to offer the job to you, Mr Heller. We are both very pleased that you are able to provide her with a female escort at all times during her stay. Unfortunately neither of the other firms was able to guarantee that for us, and it would not be acceptable to me for my wife to be in the care of another man. Please have a contract delivered to me at noon for signing. We are going to rest now, but it would be appreciated if the young lady would return in the early afternoon, as I have meetings today that will continue well into the evening."

I nodded agreement and we all stood up and shook hands.

Mr Hayek faced Heller again. "I almost forgot to ask, but I assume the young lady has security training? I wish to ensure my wife's safety during this visit as well as her entertainment."

"Oh yes," I lied blithely, before Heller had an opportunity to open his mouth. "Rest assured, Mr Hayek, I'm fully-trained in all aspects of security."

I felt Heller stiffen beside me as Mr Hayek nodded in satisfaction and his wife gave me another shy smile. We made our farewells and left. I deliberately avoided Heller's livid eyes in the lift and while we waited for the valet to bring around our car. His anger crackled in the air like lightning. When we were safely alone inside his Mercedes and driving away, he turned to me, enraged.

"You shouldn't lie to clients! It's unethical."

"It was only a little white lie and if I hadn't, he might have changed his mind," I argued. "I mean, how hard is it going to be? I'll take her to the zoo and for a harbour cruise or something and we'll do some shopping. There's nothing dangerous about that. There's no need to be so uptight about it."

He closed his eyes briefly as if he was marshalling his temper and gave a sharp shake of his head in exasperation.

"Besides," I cajoled, "you can give me some quick training this morning. I'm a fast learner."

"I'll have to, won't I?" he flung back through gritted teeth. We drove in silence for a while.

"Can I have a gun?" I asked.

"No!"

"Just a little one? For my handbag? It'll give me some street cred with the client."

"*No! No! No!*" His clenched fists pounded the steering wheel with each word.

"Geez, take a chill pill," I sulked, slouching in my seat.

We screeched down the driveway of the Warehouse and into the basement. He slammed the door of the Mercedes when he got out and bolted up the stairs. I followed, scurrying to catch up to him in my high heels. At the ground floor, he detoured to the security section and flung the door back. Even at that early hour, several security staff were at work and glanced up startled as the Boss burst angrily into the room.

"Where's Clive?" he barked. One of them pointed to the far corner where Clive was talking to a small group of men. He noticed us with surprise and Heller gestured him over. He pulled Clive to one side to speak in private.

"This idiotic woman has just told a client that she is a fully-trained security officer," he

spat out, looking at me with disgust. I noted that his accent became more pronounced when he was angry, which he certainly was at that moment. Clive stared at me in disbelief.

“It was just a little white lie . . .” I began again, rolling my eyes at their over-reaction. Heller held up his hand to silence me, his eyes sparking with fury. He turned back to Clive.

“I hate to do this, Clive, but you’re going to have to give her a crash course this morning. She starts working this afternoon. Just the basics so she doesn’t look even more like a fool than she is. And do not let her talk you into giving her a gun.” And with that said, he stalked off slamming the door behind him.

I pulled a face after him, once he was safely out of sight. “He’s got a real temper on him, hasn’t he?” I marvelled. I was looking forward to this – Clive would actually have to speak to me! But I was to be disappointed. He called over one of the men he had been conferring with and they murmured together quietly. The man looked over at me with incredulity.

*Oh great!* I thought angrily, *why don’t you just bloody well tell everybody? Let’s just put an ad in the paper while we’re at it: ‘Tilly Chalmers is a moron!’*

Clive walked back to his office and the man came over to me. He was a big beefy black guy, with closely shaven tightly curled black hair, a square head and no neck.

“I’m Tysen,” he said in a gruff voice. “Clive said I’m to give you some basic training. You’ve got five minutes to change and we’ll regroup down here in our gym.”

*Nice to meet you too,* I thought sarcastically, as I virtually sprinted upstairs in my heels to be ready in time. He didn’t look like the kind of guy you kept waiting.

We spent the next four hours in that smelly, testosterone-laden room going through the fundamentals of his job – scanning, securing, negotiating, protecting. He taught me a couple of easy self-defence moves and some quick tricks for disarming and disabling attackers. Despite what I’d initially thought, he was a good teacher – patient and methodical.

“These moves will come in handy at the mid-year sales,” I joked as I ran through them for the fifth time. Tysen stared at me dourly.

“Security’s no laughing matter, Miss.” I rolled my eyes again. Everyone in the place appeared to have had a humour bypass. “You could get the Boss in trouble telling people you’re a security officer when you’re not. You have to have a licence with the government to be one, you know.”

And no, I didn’t know that and felt myself suitably reproached. I hoped my thoughtless actions wouldn’t cause Heller any trouble. Especially with the government. He might change his mind about keeping me on otherwise.

By the end of our session, my mind was spinning and I had a headache. Tysen finished by asking Clive to unlock a cabinet in his office and handing me a canister of capsaicin spray. “Put this in your handbag, Miss. Remember how I told you to use it, and only use it if you really need to. It’s quite dangerous.”

I thanked Tysen sincerely and raced up to my flat. I barely had time to shower, change clothes and bolt down a sandwich and diet soft drink before Rumbles knocked on my door, ready to drive me back to start work for Mrs Hayek.

When he dropped me at the hotel, I said with grave courtesy, “Thank you, Mr Rumbles.”

He laughed hugely. “It tickles me when you say that, Miss. Mr Rumbles indeed! Nobody’s called me that for years.”

I promised to ring him when I needed to be picked up again and gave him a friendly wave goodbye.

## Chapter 11

I caught the lift to the top floor and was admitted into the Hayek's suite by the same respectful servant who greeted us this morning.

"Madam won't be long," he told me politely and led me over to a chair to wait, advising me that Mr Hayek had left already for his business meetings. I didn't have to wait very long before she appeared and stood up to shake hands with her. She was tiny, very petite, and I felt like a half-back on steroids standing next to her. She had bathed, but was dressed similarly to the morning with a scarf covering her hair and modestly attired in long loose dark clothing.

"What would you like to do first?" I queried. "We could take a cruise of the harbour or would you like me to take you to the art gallery? There are some beautiful impressionist paintings on show at the moment."

"That sounds lovely," she said. The servant handed her an oversized handbag that completely dwarfed her.

In the lift she smiled shyly. "Have you worked for Mr Heller long, Miss Chalmers?"

"I've worked there for quite a while," I answered vaguely. I didn't want her to think I was an inexperienced newbie. "And Mrs Hayek, please call me Tilly."

"Then you must call me Lily." We smiled at each other.

When the lift hit the ground floor, we walked across the foyer and I was about to ask the concierge to call us a cab, when she clutched my arm and said that she really would prefer to walk – to stretch her legs. She exited the hotel and started walking up the street at a cracking pace.

"Lily!" I chased after her. "You're going the wrong way. The art gallery is in the other direction."

She shouted over her shoulder, "I need to make a detour first, if you don't mind."

I shrugged. *You're the boss*, I thought, scrambling to keep up with her. Damn heels. She kept walking for a while, randomly crossing streets, until she suddenly stopped in front of one of the city's many business hotels, well-appointed but busy and impersonal.

"I want you to go in to that hotel and book a small suite for me. From now until I leave. In your name though. Pay for it with your credit card and you can add the cost to your final bill."

I stared at her.

"Go on," she urged impatiently and gave me a little push. So I went in and did what she requested. She sat quietly in the foyer while I booked the suite. When I had been given the access swipe card, she stood up and led me to the lifts. We travelled up in silence and it wasn't until we were inside the suite that she spoke.

"Thank you, Tilly," she said, smiling broadly. She reached up, ripped off her headscarf and unplaited her hair. It fell in a soft cloud down to the middle of her back. She fluffed it out and took off her long-sleeved smock to reveal a tight, low-cut red designer blouse that half-exposed her small breasts. I watched on in surprise. She removed her long pants and rummaged in her gigantic handbag retrieving a black leather miniskirt, quickly pulling it over her narrow hips and lacy panties. Her sensible flat shoes went flying across the room as she kicked them off, in their place slipping on bejewelled stilettos that would have cost more than my entire outfit.

She took a makeup case from her handbag and spent ten minutes liberally applying it to her face. The final touch was to exchange the modest sleepers piercing her lobes for a set of enormous gold hoops. She was transformed. I wouldn't have recognised her as the modest married woman I had met that morning. She stood in front of the mirror, ogling herself.

"Ta-da!" she exclaimed to me, twirling around.

"Spectacular," I said, clapping in approval. Privately I thought she looked like a hooker, but I wasn't being paid to sit in judgement on her fashion taste.

“You still want to go to the art gallery?” I asked doubtfully. She wasn’t really dressed for it anymore.

“Screw the art gallery! I couldn’t give a shit about art.” She had a strong English accent that seemed incongruous with her looks. I commented on it.

“I *am* English. From North London. Arranged marriage,” she confided. “I’ve been married to that boring shithead for a year now. He and his bitch of a mother keep a close watch on me all the time. I haven’t had any fun for ages!”

I suddenly felt sorry for her. She was only young and should have been out with her girlfriends meeting lots of boys, not stuck in an arranged marriage with a much older man.

“He is very rich though, which is nice. I can buy whatever I want. Almost makes up for all the cocksucking I have to do,” she told me. I was lost for words as to how to respond to that. She looked at me questioningly. “I chose you because you looked bold. I thought you seemed the kind of person who would let me have some fun and not go telling my husband. I hope I was right?”

“I’m here to help you have as much fun as you like, Lily. I’ll give your husband very detailed and dull reports on the shopping we did and the art we viewed, if you like.” She smiled and nodded her head mischievously.

“And I’ll bore him to death every night telling him the same. He won’t even ask after the first time.” We smiled conspiratorially. *This will be fun*, I told myself. *I can’t believe I get paid to do this*.

She made some adjustments to her makeup, asking casually, “Are you packing?”

I was studying my nails and said distractedly, “Why? Are we going somewhere?”

“No, dummy! Are you *packing*? You know – carrying a gun?”

“Not today,” I said truthfully, then was slightly less truthful. “Usually, but not today. It’s a bit awkward to explain when you’re going to art galleries and shopping,” I embellished. “I only take it with me when there might be some danger.”

She was disappointed. “We could have gone somewhere and fired off a few rounds. Scared a few tourists. That would have been fun.”

*Thank God I don’t have a gun*, I thought gratefully.

“What’s the deal with that guy Heller? He is hot! I’d do him in an instant. Have you done him?”

“No, I haven’t *done* him.” Well, only in my dreams. “He’s my boss, Lily. And it’s not a good idea to do your boss.”

She spun from examining herself in the mirror to look at me in surprise. “Isn’t it? I wouldn’t know ‘cause I’ve never had a job, but why not? I bet loads of women do their bosses every day.” She turned back to her reflection and added another layer of mascara. “When my disgusting husband was fucking me this morning after you left, I pretended it was Heller instead,” she confided. I didn’t know what to say to that either. I didn’t know if Heller would have been flattered. Maybe? She finished her makeup. “Let’s go to the casino. I’m feeling lucky today. Especially lucky now that I’ve got you to have some fun with.” She hooked her arm through mine and we headed off to the casino.

She was an enthusiastic but reckless gambler, betting thousands of dollars at a time, winning and losing equally. I could hardly bear to watch all that money being risked so casually. My phone rang. It was Heller. I walked away from the table.

“How’s everything going?” he asked, seemingly much calmer since I last saw him.

“Okay, so far,” I said, straining to hear him over the general noise.

“What are you doing at the casino? I thought you were going shopping.”

“How do you know where I am?”

“Your handbag has an implanted tracking device. Primitive, but it’s doing the job for

now. We'll fix up something better later."

I didn't know whether to feel pissed off or pleased.

"Is Mrs Hayek enjoying herself?" he asked. I glanced over at the roulette table. She was drinking champagne and laughing up at a good-looking, but unctuous, young man standing on her left, who was cheering her on to higher and higher bets. She had her hand on his arm.

"I think so. It was her idea to come to the casino. She's not as demure as she first appears."

He gave a very sexy low chuckle that made my stomach feel funny. "Women seldom are, Matilda."

The shifty young man leaned down and kissed Lily lingeringly on the mouth. She wasn't pushing him away. In fact, she had her hand on his butt.

"Oops, looks as though she having a bit too much fun now. Gotta run. She needs rescuing from a lounge lizard." I hung up and sauntered back slowly to the table, not wanting to cramp her style but not wanting anything untoward to happen either. She whispered something in Lizard's ear and he nodded, laughing. She gulped the last of her champagne and grabbed his hand, pulling him away from the table.

I followed at a discreet distance as they wove their way through the crowd. They stopped in front of a ladies bathroom and Lily went in. She came out immediately and said something to Lizard, smiling, pulling him through the door. I gave them a diplomatic minute before silently opening the door. All the cubicles were vacant, doors open, except the cubicle at the far end. I stealthily crept up. It was obvious from the repeated grunting and occasional moan what was going on inside. I didn't want to hear any more, so quietly left, keeping watch out the front.

I deterred one very drunk woman from entering by telling her that someone had thrown up all over the floor, it was currently being cleaned up and directed her to the conveniences at the other side of the room. She didn't even blink, but staggered off obediently. *I have authority!* I thought exultantly, an emotion that died a quick death when I heard Lily's very extravagant and noisy orgasm from where I was standing outside the bathroom. I glanced around nervously, hoping nobody else, *especially* the mountain-sized casino security men, could hear her ecstatic screaming over the constant clamour of the nearby pokie machines.

Eventually, Lily poked her head out and ushered Lizard from the bathroom. She looked mussed, her lipstick smeared and her hair wild, but with a cat-with-the-cream satisfied expression on her face that frankly made me jealous, given my own current frustrated status. She favoured Lizard with a prolonged kiss and a final squeeze of his arse. He asked her something and she rummaged around in her handbag for a pen, writing on his hand. Another kiss, another squeeze, and they separated. She slinked over to me.

"God, I needed a good fuck, and he was exceptional! A million times better than my limp dick husband." She gave a whole-body shudder of pleasure that turned my shade of envy from pale green to emerald. "I'm *so* famished. Let's go eat."

"Did you give him your phone number, Lily? Do you think that's wise?"

She flung me a pitying look. "I gave him a fake number, dumb arse! I don't want to see him again. I just wanted to borrow his dick for ten minutes.

*Well, okay then,* I thought, my Sphinx-face firmly in place. *Glad we sorted that out.*

We dined at the casino's five-star restaurant and it was a very enjoyable and rare treat for me. We shared a bottle of wine and she told me about her life in Jordan, how she missed her family and friends in England and her fear of ending up with ten kids by the time she was thirty. I couldn't blame her, maternity not being high on my list of priorities either. Her phone beeped. She looked at the message.

"Shit," she said sullenly. "Fuckwit's back from his meeting and wants me to socialise

with his boring business partners and their ugly old wives tonight. We have to go.” She threw a bundle of money at the waiter and we briskly walked back to her secret hotel room, where she showered, brushed her teeth and gargled, transforming herself back into modest and reserved Mrs Hayek.

I walked her back to her husband where she gave a brilliant performance as a shy young woman who had been intellectually stimulated by an afternoon surrounded by the Masters, and not physically stimulated in a bathroom by a young stranger in tight pants with a nice arse. Her husband’s eyes glazed over with boredom as she enthused at length about stroke work and lighting. He wasn’t going to question her any further about her day’s activities. She was so good I almost stood up and applauded.

I agreed to return at ten the following morning and made my farewell. I gave Rumbles a quick call in the lift and waited in the foyer for about fifteen minutes while he drove over to pick me up. He delivered me home safely and I trudged up the stairs, absolutely knackered. I had just walked in my front door when Heller walked in behind me.

“Debrief me,” he ordered.

*Oh yes, thank you God!* I offered up gratefully, until I realised that he wasn’t asking me to take off his clothes. Disappointed, I wearily pulled off my shoes, loosened my hair from its chignon and gave him a heavily censored summary of my day. He rubbed his mouth pensively as he listened.

“She’s going to be a handful, but I can keep her under control,” I insisted, sounding more confident than I felt.

“You must let me know immediately if you have any trouble. Just try to keep her happy. The fee for this job is astronomical. I want a satisfied client.”

That struck me as an extremely funny thing for him to say and I started to laugh uncontrollably. “Don’t worry about that,” I managed to choke out, tears coursing down my cheeks. “She was *very* satisfied this afternoon.”

He stared at me as if I’d gone crazy, shook his head in bewilderment and left me lying on my lounge, helpless with laughter.

## Chapter 12

“Let’s do some shopping first today,” Lily decided, peering at herself in the mirror, carefully applying her lipstick. We were in the secret suite again, and she was wearing blue jeans so tight they looked as though they were spray-painted on and a long-sleeved, low-cut, body-hugging deep purple top. She staggered around on ten-centimetre heels and had on more makeup than a drag queen. Her diamond earrings dangled, touching her shoulders every time she turned her head. She was pimped to the max. Next to her I looked stodgy and conservative in my business suit.

“I want to spend a serious pile of money today. That cocksucker husband of mine owes me big time. The things he makes me do. It’s demeaning! He’s so horny lately too.” She turned from contemplating herself in the mirror to look at me. “I think it’s you.”

I was startled. “Me? What do you mean? I haven’t done anything.”

“I think you’re turning him on, and he’s taking it out on me.”

“You must be joking! I’ve barely even spoken to him. I’m not even dressed provocatively.”

“Yeah, but he gets off on that librarian look. *Duh!* You’ve obviously got a hot body and keeping it covered in those suits, with your hair up and your makeup so discreet, you’re giving him a boner every day.”

“Gross!” I pulled a face.

She rolled her eyes. “Tell me about it! I’m the one who has to hump him every night. Thank Christ he can only last for about five minutes before he’s done. Saves me a lot of boredom and staring at the ceiling.” She snatched up her handbag. “Let’s go.”

We hit the boutiques with a vengeance. I thought that I had spent a lot of money on my trip with Mei, but Lily was the master of the credit card. Thousands of dollars in this store, thousands in that store, paying extra to have her purchases delivered to the hotel. She seemed detached about everything she bought too, as if she didn’t really care if she owned it or not, but she might as well buy it. It was just something to do.

At every store, she would hold an item up in front of me. “That would look great on you . . . This one’s just your colour . . . You would look so cute in this . . .” Each time I declined, not sure of Heller’s policy on accepting gifts from clients.

Think of the devil and he rings you. I answered the phone, moving away from the dressing room where Lily was trying on six different skirts.

“Having fun shopping?” He was monitoring our location again.

“Not really. I’m kind of bored. Lily wants to buy me stuff. What should I say?”

“Don’t offend her. If it makes her happy buying you things, then let her. You’re allowed to accept gifts from a client.”

“Oh. Okay. I wasn’t sure.”

A pause. “You’re doing a good job, Matilda. I had a phone call from Mr Hayek this morning thanking me for you taking such care of his wife yesterday. Apparently she didn’t stop talking about the art gallery all night.” His tone was amused.

I laughed knowingly. “I better go. Lily’s finished shopping in this store,” I said and hung up, smiling. Praise from Heller! Nothing could spoil my day now.

In the end, Lily bought all six skirts and I let her buy me some earrings and a scarf. I declined the watch (too expensive), the shoes (too high) and the lingerie (too kinky). Exhausted, we dined at one of the city’s three-chef’s hat restaurants and I thoroughly enjoyed every delicious bite. We drank wine, and I tried to ensure that she drank the greater part of the bottle, Tysen’s warning about drinking on the job ringing in my ears.

“What next?” I asked, after we left the restaurant.

“A bit of fun!” she said, smiling mischievously. “I want to go pole dancing.”

“To a pole dancing show, you mean?”

“No, *I* want to pole dance. I don’t want to watch someone else.”

“Do you mean take a class in pole dancing?”

“*No!* God, you’re so thick! I want to be on stage. I want men looking at me. I want them lusting for me. I want them to wank while I dance in front of them.”

She cast her eyes up at me with a bawdy and meaningful smile. Thinking fast, and trying not to appear as shocked as I felt, I summoned a taxi and requested that we be dropped in the heart of the city’s red-light district. It was gaudy and threatening by night, but during the day simply seemed desperate and grimy. A few unkempt prostitutes wearily plied their over-ripe wares, little enthusiasm in their actions and even less from their prospective clients.

I was scornfully turned down by the first club I approached, strong-armed out of the second, but hit the jackpot with the third. A greasy little man, who didn’t lift his eyes from my boobs the whole time we spoke, agreed to let Lily perform on stage for an outrageous sum of money. The place was a real dive; the carpet sticky, the atmosphere laden with cigarette smoke, unwashed bodies and congealed fat, and the clientele some of the most pathetic examples of humanity I have ever seen. I think some of them actually wore trench coats. While Lily went backstage to get ready, I loitered uncomfortably at the bar before deciding to hide in the shadows of a dark corner. I had ordered a plain mineral water from the doddery

ninety-year-old barman and it arrived completely flat in a smudged, chipped glass with a twist of shrivelled lemon, served by a sixty-something woman with tired eyes and inappropriately skimpy attire. My phone rang.

“What are you doing there?” Heller demanded.

“Don’t ask,” I warned, watching the woman’s retreating crepey backside sagging loosely out of the sides of her tight pink hotpants. I felt ill. She was my mother’s age.

“Are you safe?”

“I think so. I’m more in danger of catching a disease than anything.” I glanced at my drink. There was something black floating on top, waving its legs around. I pushed the glass to one side of the table.

“Keep in touch,” he ordered and hung up.

A burst of lascivious crackly pre-recorded music piped shrilly from the speakers above my head. The faded and torn curtains opened and there was Lily on the stage, wearing nothing except her own miniscule g-string, high heels and a saucy beret of unknown provenance. There was desultory applause from the audience. A thumping, grinding tune burst out from the speakers and Lily launched into an energetic, and I have to admit, fairly erotic dance. She performed acts on the pole that I would never have imagined possible. Her face was filled with such ecstasy that I had to wonder if she was pleasuring herself while rubbing up and down it. The audience perked up as her show progressed, and started to cheer her on enthusiastically. I saw some furtive hand movements in some of the trench coats and thought her wish had probably been granted. Her grand climax (and I use that word deliberately) involved an acrobatic manoeuvre with the pole worthy of its own act in the next Cirque de Soleil show. Finally she finished and stood on stage, panting loudly, glistening with sweat and drinking in all the catcalls and applause. Even the barman mustered enough strength to clap in appreciation. She gave a cheeky wave, ignoring the money thrown on the stage and with exaggerated hip swinging ambled off.

I met her at the dressing room. She was glowing with happiness and talked about her performance excitedly while she dressed. She grabbed her handbag and checked her phone.

“Shit, I’ve missed a call from limp dick,” she noticed. She seized my arm and dragged me out to the street, punching in some numbers.

“Hello sweetheart,” she purred into the phone. “I’m sorry I missed your call. I was in the dressing room trying on a new skirt . . . Yes, I did buy it, how did you guess? It’s beautiful and so are all the other ones I bought too!” She giggled with a charming girliness. “Yes, I have spent a lot of money.” She eyed me. “Yes, Tilly is looking after me. She makes sure I get everything I want. She’s such great company. Thank you so much, darling, for finding her for me . . . Yes, I’ll come home now . . . Love you too.” She pressed the end button.

“Fun’s over,” she said, a surly look on her face. “Take me back to prison.”

## Chapter 13

When I dropped Lily off, her husband informed me that I wouldn’t be required to attend to her until noon the next day as he had decided to take the morning off to go on a harbour cruise with her. Knowing that I wouldn’t need to be up too early the next morning, I went looking for Daniel and Niq when I returned home, planning on hanging out with them for the evening. I found them on the roof-top with the twins and Heller. The twins were playing pool, fairly acrimoniously from the sound of their heated bickering voices, and the other three were relaxing in the hot tub. I avoided the family squabble and went over to the hot tub instead. I leaned over the edge, dangling my hands in the warm bubbling water, giving everyone a

friendly smile.

“Why don’t you join us, Tilly?” suggested Niq.

“Sure, why not,” I agreed. I had changed into some boardies and had a bikini top under my t-shirt, pretty certain I’d find the two boys up on the roof-top. I pulled off my t-shirt and climbed in. The four of us chatted for a while. Well, Daniel, Niq and I chatted and Heller mainly listened, spending most of his time staring at me with languid eyes, which was more than a little unnerving after the first couple of minutes. Fortunately for me his mobile rang and he rose from the water to answer it, giving me a welcome break from his relentless blue eyes.

“*Holy shit!*” I screamed in shock when he stood up. He was completely starkers. Not a stitch on him. Naked. Nude. In his birthday suit. Bare-arsed bare. I think my heart stopped beating for a few seconds. Something like that should come with a health warning for unsuspecting folk. In that second, I learned two important facts about my new boss. First, he was a natural blond, and second, he was a big man *all over*. And because Heller was standing up and I was sitting down, I received a very up-close and personal view of him.

Everyone turned to me in surprise when I screamed.

“Towel please, Sid,” Heller requested calmly and regarded me thoughtfully. “Matilda, you’re not okay with this?” he asked, waving his hand in front of his body.

I kept my eyes fixed on his, not daring to lower them. My eyebrows had shot up so high that they must have disappeared into my hairline. My mouth had formed a round O shape and I’m sure my eyes couldn’t grow any bigger without plopping out of my head into the hot tub. I found my voice and shook my head repeatedly.

“No. No. I’m not okay with that. I’m not in the slightest bit okay with that. Okay?” I squeaked. That was kind of a lie, because I was perfectly okay with *that* all right, just not with *that* being dangled in my face in public without any warning. In private though, it might be a different story. He was very impressive.

“Oh.” He took the towel from Sid and I scrunched my eyes shut while he stepped out of the hot tub, before wrapping the towel securely around his waist. His phone had stopped ringing and he’d missed the call, but he didn’t seem too worried.

“It’s safe to look now,” he said, an amused tone in his voice and an even more amused look on his face. So I opened my eyes and thought that was clearly just his opinion, because in my opinion it was nowhere even close to being safe to look. Now all I could think about was the fact that he was completely naked under the towel. I hoped he had it well-secured. Or did I?

“Thank you,” I said, remembering my manners. I truly hoped I wasn’t blushing, although the telltale burning in my cheeks told me otherwise.

“I suppose I should stop doing that? Now that you’re living here?” he asked, leaning on the side of the hot tub next to me, looking down. I nodded up at him, hyper-aware of his proximity. “Shame. Where I come from we don’t have all these hang-ups about nudity. Not like this country. To us, it’s no big deal. The guys here don’t mind either. You would though?” I nodded again, starting to feel like one of those little novelty dogs you put on the dashboard of your car whose heads bobble around uncontrollably with every small movement.

“And where do you come from, Heller?” I asked, looking up at him, desperately trying to think about anything else other than his nakedness. *It really had been far too long between boyfriends for me*, I thought. I needed some carnal relief urgently.

“Overseas,” he answered, deliberately vague, amusement still curving his lips.

“Yeah, I sort of guessed that. Your accent gives you away,” I retorted sarcastically. “Anywhere in particular overseas?”

“Europe.” Still vague, but we were narrowing it down somewhat, even though I could have also guessed that little nugget of information. I could see he wasn’t much of a one for volunteering details about himself.

“Any particular country in Europe?” I was persistent if nothing else. He smiled, but didn’t respond. “Germany? Denmark? Norway? Sweden? Finland? The Netherlands? Iceland? Greenland?” I speculated, quickly exhausting my knowledge of countries that might produce blond-haired, blue-eyed Viking giants. He kept smiling, but still didn’t answer.

“There’s no point asking him any questions about himself, Tilly,” Daniel warned. “He won’t tell you anything. You’re just wasting your breath.”

Heller’s smile grew even wider at that, but I frowned. Why wouldn’t he tell me what country he was from? What was the big secret? I obviously had Mr Mysterious on my hands, which made me even more determined to find out. But right then I beat a strategic retreat and shrugged in a casual *suit yourself, no skin off my nose, I don’t really care, I was only being polite* kind of way and resolutely changed the subject, enquiring whether anyone had had dinner. Apparently nobody had, and when I suggested that we have a barbeque dinner, there was enthusiastic agreement. I soon realised however that they all expected me to organise the food and do everything, which I thought was very sexist of them. So as I climbed out of the hot tub, I ordered Daniel and Niq out as well to help me. They obeyed without complaining, which made me feel fairly powerful for the rest of the evening. I wasn’t game enough to order the other three men around. Not yet, at least.

I took the towel that Heller handed me and quickly dried myself down, glancing up to find his eyes on me yet again. Why did he keep looking at me all the time? Did I have something hanging out of my nose or some green stuff stuck in my teeth?

Daniel, Niq and I went down to the pantry and I stole a quick look in the mirror while we were there. Nope – no green stuff anywhere. Shrugging to myself, I collected a bunch of goodies, spread it out evenly between the three of us and we hauled it up to the roof-top, our arms full. Then I forced them to chop, mix and stir as I devised some quick sauces for the skinless chicken breasts and salmon fillets we had chosen to barbeque and threw together a couple of salads. I went to the herb garden to snip the flavours I needed for dinner, wishing fervently that Heller would go and change into something, *anything*. My eyes kept sliding over to his towel-clad body as he leant against the wall, arms and ankles crossed casually, watching the twins playing pool. It was affecting my concentration. I determinedly averted my eyes from his heavenly form and turned all of my attention to dinner as we arrived at the pointy end of the preparation, afraid I was going to chop off a finger otherwise.

“Hey,” I yelled out as we finished our prepping. “It’s traditional for a man to do the barbequing. Any volunteers?” Sid and Clive volunteered but I hovered anxiously over their shoulders, not trusting them, and giving them unwelcome advice on cooking the chicken and salmon. But what man likes to be told how to barbeque by a woman? That’s right, none – and they politely told me to shove off. Wanting everything to be perfect, I rushed around setting out the cutlery, placing a couple of bottles of white wine on the table, supplementing it with some fancy foreign mineral water for Heller and juice for Niq. Finally everything was ready and all the food was presented.

I was totally frazzled by the end and took an enormous gulp of chilled white wine as I sat down, breathing a huge sigh of relief. Everything looked delicious – particularly Heller, who had finally changed, but not much for the better as far as I was concerned. He was now wearing faded blue jeans and nothing else, bare-chested and barefoot. God, he was so yummy! I looked down at my dinner, not wanting to torture my poor libido any further. When I glanced up, his eyes were resting on my face again, but I was pretty sure that a mere split-second before, he had been checking out my boobs. He cast me a lazy smile that wasn’t

exactly wholesome in nature and I lowered my eyes to my dinner again quick smart, heart racing.

The dinner was demolished. There was no other word for it. Everything was eaten, down to the last lettuce leaf, and my pride was swimming in their compliments afterwards. Even though I had made them slave for me, Daniel and Niq volunteered to clear up, so I jumped into the hot tub by myself with a very full glass of wine and closed my eyes in bliss, enjoying the gentle pummelling from the jets. What a life! I couldn't believe my luck to have landed this wonderful job.

After everything had been cleaned up, everyone piled back into the hot tub with me, decently dressed this time. But it was a squish with us all in there, Heller, Sid and Clive being such big men. I found myself uncomfortably crushed between Daniel and Niq, barely able to breathe.

"I guess you shouldn't have hired another person," I complained to Heller. "There's not enough room in the hot tub for me."

"You could come and sit on my lap," he suggested, that sly smile on his face again. For sure I was becoming a major source of entertainment for him.

"Thanks anyway," I responded, firmly banishing from my mind the thought of me doing just that, snugly ensconced on his lap, leaning against his chest, my arms around his neck, his arms around my waist, my hands buried in his hair, breathing in his very essence. I'd kiss him slowly while I slid my hand down to his . . . Oops! I'd better save that fantasy for when I was alone I decided hastily, noticing that everyone was looking at me. Heller threw me another lazy knowing smile that made me worry he had some telepathic ability.

We chatted in general for a while before Niq and Daniel climbed out, deciding to spend the rest of the evening playing the Xbox at Daniel's flat, leaving me alone with the three men. I was very unnerved to discover that Sid and Clive's much-loved hobby was collecting pornography. Clive was his normal taciturn self not saying much of a word, but Sid enthused over their collection. Some of their photos dated back to the birth of photography itself, their films dating back to the beginnings of cinematography. As well, their collection included a fine set of naughty Victorian-era postcards, a few anatomically explicit Roman artefacts and their pride and joy – a genuine Palaeolithic carving of a fertility goddess, all huge belly, bum and boobs.

I'd never heard porn being discussed so casually before. I felt really awkward sitting in that hot tub full of big men as Sid explained the different categories of porn they collected. All I could think about was that Niq lived here, in a building with such a collection. Again, as if he could read my mind, Heller calmly assured me that the twins kept their collection, which was in reality quite valuable, well-secured, and that Niq was certainly not exposed to anything unsuitable at any time.

I murmured a vague non-committal response to Sid's invitation to visit them in their flat and view their collection one day. I almost giggled out loud with alarm at the thought of me sitting jammed between Sid and Clive on their lounge, eating popcorn and nonchalantly watching with them naked men and women doing unbelievably rude things to each other. Or women and women, or men and men, or women and equipment, or even women and animals by the sound of what Sid had said. I was dying of embarrassment at even the thought, feeling the telltale burning in my cheeks again. Sid was insistent though and I squirmed, ill-at-ease, not knowing how to deflect him anymore without being straight out rude to his face.

"Sid," Heller stepped in. "I don't think Matilda would be comfortable doing that. She's not into that type of entertainment. Let it go." I threw him an extremely grateful glance. After an initially surprised reaction, Sid was immediately apologetic and repeatedly told me he was sorry if he'd caused me any offence.

“Of course not, Sid,” I lied, and waved away the whole incident. “Don’t mention it. Your collection sounds fascinating, and one day when I’m a bit braver and know you a bit better, I might come and see it.” He was mollified by that.

Remembering that I had to work the next day, I didn’t stay up too late, but retired to my flat to have a quick shower and watch some TV before hitting the sack. During the night I had another erotic dream about Heller. We were in the hot tub, just the two of us, and I was not only sitting on his lap but straddling his lap, both of us naked. We were exchanging steamy deep-thrusting tongue kisses and his hands were on my breasts, gently kneading and teasing, while mine were tightly clamped around his neck my fingers digging into his shoulders. I was about to lower myself onto his enormous erect shaft, groaning with anticipation, when Sid sidled up to the hot tub with a video camera and asked would we mind if he filmed us to add to his collection. I woke up at that point, over-aroused, and tossed and turned for the rest of the night in frustration.

The next morning, I gave myself the luxury of a sleep-in and then hit the gym hard. I was starting to enjoy pushing my body with exercise and was reaping the rewards of looking mighty tight. I’d moved up another kilogram in weights and was being rewarded by some great definition in my arms. I dressed casually and sauntered down to the office. Daniel was helping Niq with his schoolwork. They both looked up as I entered and I smiled, walking over to Niq, ruffling his hair and ruining his sculpted hairdo, much to his annoyance. Then I sat down at my desk and turned on my computer.

“How’s it going with the client?” Daniel asked.

“Not bad. She’s keeping me on my toes.”

He raised his eyebrows, but finished up with Niq before he came over to sit on the edge of my desk. In a subtle voice I gave him a brief, but honest, rundown of my activities with Lily. He gave a low whistle and raised his eyebrows again.

“Have you told Heller all this?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Only a censored version. I’m worried he’ll pull me off the job if he thinks I can’t handle it.”

“She sounds like more than a handful.”

“Oh yeah! Look, you’re going to have to be fairly creative with the accounting for this case. We need to disguise the cost of her second hotel room and the incidentals I’ve had to pay for so far when you send the final bill to her husband.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” he promised and returned to his desk.

I checked my emails. They were mostly spam or from family members – same thing really. My family is notorious for indiscriminately and eagerly forwarding every unfunny joke, fake appeal for money and urban legend that lands in their inbox. Unfortunately, none of them had ever heard of snopes.com. Tediously, I deleted email after email from parents, brothers, sisters-in-law, aunts, uncles and cousins. There were only three gems amongst the trash. Two of them were emails from my twin cousins who were currently living and working in legal careers in London. Typically they had each sent their email to me at the exact same time on the same day. I hadn’t seen them for a few years now and missed them both terribly. We had virtually grown up together, were the same age and they always insisted that they weren’t really twins at all, but triplets with me, even though I didn’t look anything like them and could only dream of being as smart as them.

The other email was from Dixie, providing tremendously lurid details of a date she had on the weekend with a fellow worker at the fast food restaurant. Dixie always liked to take a souvenir of her conquests, and she’d attached a photograph she had taken with her phone of his slumbering naked body. He was well-built, but looked young.

*This one’s no keeper – he’s cheating on his girlfriend with me! Sexy bastard!* she wrote in

her email.

Niq asked me a question then about astronomy for an assignment he was working on. I'll be the first to admit that I know less than nothing about astronomy, but I went over to his desk and was able to guide him to a reputable website that provided him with a detailed overview of the universe and some great images. Settling myself back at my desk, I was distracted by Heller walking into the office and heading straight for me. He stood in front of me, hands on his lithe hips and raised his eyebrows. I presented him with my most dazzling smile.

"Friend of yours?" he enquired, dangerously polite, gesturing towards my monitor. I spun back quickly towards my computer. The photo of Dixie's naked man was still showing on my screen. Horrified, I frantically pressed buttons to delete it, my cheeks blazing with embarrassment.

"One of Dixie's conquests. She likes to share," I spluttered, wishing I could disappear into the ether along with the photograph.

His face was stern, his shapely mouth severe and his voice low. "Do these men know she is taking their photograph?" I shook my head, avoiding his accusing eyes. "I'm disappointed in you, Matilda. I didn't think you would condone such activities. How would Dixie feel if a man did that to her? And then shared it with his friends?"

*She would rip his knob off and shove it down his throat,* I thought to myself.

I looked up at him, beseechingly. "Heller, I would never do that myself. And I promised myself a long time ago that I wouldn't judge other people on their behaviour. But I will ask Dixie not to do it anymore, if that's what you prefer."

He threw his hands up in despair, leaned down towards me and said in a fierce whisper, "I cannot tell your friends how to behave, Matilda. But please, we have a minor in the room, and I would not expect to find you boldly displaying such photographs where Niq might view them. Particularly after your concerns about Sid and Clive's collection last night."

His harsh words cut me deeply, because he was right. I despised myself thoroughly at that moment for being such a hypocrite. "I'm sorry, Heller. You can believe me when I say that it won't happen again," I promised, humbled.

He ignored my contrition and commenced questioning me intensely about my activities with Lily, grim and detached. I decided I had better tell him the entire truth and asked if we could speak in his office, acutely aware of Niq's near presence. We moved into his office, and he shut the door. As I explained what had happened, he expressed increasing concern about my ability to handle the situation.

"She's just blowing off steam. She's okay," I insisted. "She likes me. She won't have anyone else. I can handle it." I was becoming annoyed with his lack of faith in me. I stood up and drew myself up to my full height, my hands on my hips, anger shooting flames from my eyes. "You don't think I can do this job, do you? You're just waiting for me to fail so you can give me the sack, because you think you've made a bad decision by hiring a woman. Especially me."

He seemed bewildered by my sudden fury. *Offence is the best defence,* I thought.

"I don't know what to say to you sometimes, Matilda," he admitted. "You're like a powder keg, ready to explode at any moment with no warning. I'm not questioning your ability, I'm concerned that this assignment may be more difficult than I imagined. I would never give you a difficult client on your first assignment. I didn't hire you to perform dangerous work." He sighed and rubbed his face. "Please continue on with what you are doing, but keep me informed about everything," he requested. I nodded briskly and stormed out of his office back to my desk, aware that he was watching me, his face betraying his confusion at my behaviour.

## Chapter 14

I arrived at the hotel at noon, surprised to find Mr Hayek present. There was a small suitcase near the door to the suite.

“Miss Chalmers,” he came forward, eagerly shaking my hand. I resisted the strong urge to cross my arms, hiding my breasts from his wandering eyes. We made polite small talk and he informed me that his business partners wanted to take him to a future potential development site while he was here in the country. Unfortunately it was in another city, so he would be required to be away from his wife overnight. Would I mind staying with her?

“Oh, please do, Tilly,” begged Lily. “It will be such fun!”

I smiled as convincingly as possible, considering that a leaden ball of dread had just settled in my stomach.

“And darling,” she spun to her husband excitedly, clutching his arm, the epitome of a devoted and loving wife. “You mustn’t mind if I stay out a bit later tonight. I want Tilly to take me to a show, and then we’ll go to dinner, and maybe even a very late movie! I can’t wait! We are going to have such a wonderful time together, aren’t we, Tilly!” There was a dangerously wild sparkle in her eyes. She could smell freedom.

Her husband kissed her indulgently on her cute little nose. “Not *too* late though,” he warned, smiling affectionately at her, patting her arm. There was a knock on the door. “That will be my driver to take me to the airport.” They had a touching farewell and then he was gone.

As soon as the door shut behind him, Lily jumped up and down gleefully, clapping her heavily jewelled hands. With a self-satisfied smile at me, she raced into her bedroom and threw clothes, makeup, shoes and jewellery into her oversized handbag. While she did, I took a moment to let Heller know what I was doing. He wasn’t available and his phone diverted to Daniel, so I let him know instead. He promised to pass on the message about my change of plans.

We left the hotel and went straight to her bolthole where she transformed herself again. I had tried to dress a little less formally in a trouser-suit and a silk blouse, not really sure where we’d end up, but not wanting to look overdressed. Although to be honest, anyone wearing a normal amount of clothes would look overdressed next to Lily. She chose a deep red micro-dress that barely covered her butt, so tight I wasn’t sure how she could breathe in it. It was obvious from its contours that she wasn’t wearing any underwear. She had the dangly diamond earrings on again and a pair of teetering sandals consisting of nothing but skimpy red leather straps that she had bought the day before, costing her a cool \$1500.

“We’ll start with the casino again,” she demanded. So we did. She attracted a lot of attention wherever she went, and it thrilled and aroused her. There was a wildness about her that made me uneasy, and she knocked back a couple of champagnes in a few minutes as soon as we arrived. She again threw thousands of dollars at a time at the gaming tables, laughing joyously whether she won or lost. She flirted outrageously with every man who crossed her path. So it was no surprise when after a saucy thirty-minute conversation with a young croupier on a break, during which she shimmied against him several times in time with the music, he grabbed her hand and led her off to a dark stairwell in a service area of one of the restaurants.

I followed discreetly and managed to position myself far enough away that I didn’t have to witness their activities, but unfortunately close enough to hear every grunt and thump. They were at it for ages. I was stifling another yawn when they finished with a drawn-out and

what I thought was an unnecessarily overdramatic and noisy climax, with much screaming and whooping. They finally walked back up the stairs, both of them smiling. Lily had handed the young man a wad of cash that he was happily pushing into his trouser pocket. I wondered briefly if I should tell him he had forgotten to do up his fly, but couldn't be bothered. With an affectionate smack of his arse, Lily sent him on his way. Then she turned to me.

"I want to dance. Let's go to a nightclub," she insisted. I glanced at my watch and was surprised to see that it was night-time. I couldn't believe that we had been at the casino for so long – they really do distort your sense of time.

I hailed a cab and instructed the driver to deliver us at a swank, urbane nightclub that catered specifically for the idle affluent and young up-comers. I didn't want to visit another dive and Lily nodded in approval when we walked in. We danced for hours to the pulsating techno-beat, sometimes together, mostly with chic, well-spoken young men. She was drinking glass after glass of champagne and I tried valiantly to keep an eye on her, a task made difficult by the flashing, multi-coloured lights and the writhing, drunken crowd.

I lost her momentarily and rushed around panicked, trying to spot her in the happy throng. Eventually I found her in the darkened hallway leading to the bathrooms, pushed up hard against a wall by a man with his tongue down her throat and his hand up her dress. I sighed wearily and leaned on the wall a distance from them, preparing to wait until their inevitable knee-trembler was over, trying to block out their animalistic noises. Suddenly the job seemed much less glamorous than I had imagined, just as Rumbles had warned. My legs were aching from dancing, I was bone-tired and Lily's overactive sex life was increasingly striking me as boringly sordid.

With a final grunt of satisfaction, the man collapsed against Lily, breathing heavily.

"Thanks babe," he panted. "That was good."

"Don't stop now, you fucker!" she screamed at him, pummelling his shoulders. "I'm not finished yet!" He shrugged indifferently, pushed her away and did up his trousers.

"Yeah, but I am babe and that's all that matters to me," he threw over his shoulder as he casually sauntered back to the dance floor.

"You fucking cocksucker!" she shrieked at his retreating back. "You motherfucking arse-licker!" She leant back on the wall, petulant. "Let's go home," she ordered, pushing past me bad-temperedly.

It took me a while to hail a cab, and as one pulled up I noticed Lily putting her phone back into her bag with a satisfied smile. It reminded me that I hadn't checked my phone for a while. Oops! Three missed calls from Heller. I hastily rang him in the taxi on our way back to the hotel.

"What have you been doing all night?" he wanted to know.

"Dancing."

"Who with?"

"Guys."

A brief silence. "What guys?"

"I dunno. Just guys. In a nightclub. I didn't ask them their names."

"Had a good time?"

"Sure," I lied as I yawned.

"What are you going to do next?"

"Go back to the other suite. Have a shower. Hopefully get some sleep soon."

"Okay, I'll check on you later." Another pause. "Take care, Matilda," he said softly, before hanging up. I briefly hugged the phone to my chest before putting it back in my bag.

"Man, I'm tired!" I yawned again and stretched.

"I'm not. I'm very unsatisfied. But not to worry," she smiled wickedly. "I've arranged a

treat for us!”

I silently groaned. What next?

When we returned to her bolthole, she made an instant beeline for the shower. When she finally emerged, she was wrapped in one of the hotel’s luxurious bathrobes. I was about to shower myself, when I realised that I didn’t have any clean clothes with me. I took a quick shower anyway, but it’s never nice to get back into your dirty clothes again afterwards, especially after dancing energetically in them for hours.

While I was in the bathroom, I heard voices and when I came out saw that Lily had ordered two bottles of Dom Perignon from room service.

“More champagne? Don’t you think you’ve had enough already?”

“No, I don’t! You sound like my fucking mother-in-law,” she said, sullen. Defiantly she popped the cork and poured herself a large glass. She was still in her bathrobe, her feet bare and her long dark hair hanging down damply around her shoulders. She had removed her makeup and jewellery and looked fresh and young. Not at all like the old hag that I was feeling at the moment.

There was a gentle knock on the door and Lily jumped up excitedly.

“Oh goodie!” she squealed and rushed to the door to open it. Two tall, attractive, toned and smoothly brown young men walked in. Both wore good quality hip clothes. One had wild curly black hair and startling green eyes and the other had brown hair, sun-kissed with blond streaks, and soft brown eyes. Lily fussed around them, stroking their arms and touching their faces. She turned to me, grinning eagerly.

“I’ve ordered us some party boys!”

Male hookers! I stared at them, not sure what to say. *Pleased to meet you?* The black-haired one licked his lips lasciviously while running his hands down his body.

“You wanna piece of this?” he asked me, grabbing his crotch and thrusting it in my direction. I guess he was trying to be seductive, but it came across as extremely vulgar and off-putting.

“No!” I said, backing away. Then I remembered my manners. “Thank you.”

“Oh come on, Tilly,” begged Lily. “I ordered one for each of us. We could have a foursome. We could do each other. I’d love to do you. I’d love to watch them doing you. Don’t be such so fucking frigid!”

“I’m not frigid, Lily,” I protested, secretly repulsed by her suggestion. “I just know that Heller would be very angry with me if he found me partying on the job. I’m sorry, but you have to remember that I’m working.”

“Suit yourself,” she retorted in a nasty voice. “Leaves more for me.” And with that, she flounced off to the bedroom, seizing both bottles of champagne and dragging the two men along with her.

The rest of the evening passed very slowly for me. I turned on the TV, flicked through the channels and found an old Hitchcock movie to watch. But the laughter, thumping, moaning and orgasmic screaming coming from the bedroom was very distracting, and I didn’t take in much of the complicated plot. After a few hours, the brown-haired man staggered out of the bedroom, completely naked, and flopped down heavily in one of the armchairs.

“She’s sent me out to order more champagne. God, she’s draining me dry! I need a break. She’s completely insatiable.” He slumped back in the chair, closing his eyes. I felt sorry for him. He looked knackered.

“I was about to make a cup of tea. Would you like one?” I offered. He nodded gratefully and I went into the kitchenette to boil the water. My phone rang. Heller again. Who else rang me ten times a day?

“Hey Boss.”

“How’s everything?” he asked.

“I’m making a cup of tea for a naked man,” I said nonchalantly, reaching for the mugs and teabags.

A significant silence. “Why are you with a naked man, Matilda?”

I poured the boiling water into the two mugs. “You don’t want to know. Really.”

“I do want to know. Really.”

“You’ll be shocked.”

“I’m impossible to shock.”

“Lily has ordered up two party boys, and she is, and I quote, ‘draining them dry’.”

“Oh. I don’t want to hear any more.”

“I told you that you’d be shocked.”

“I’m not shocked, I just don’t want to hear any more. You’re not participating in this, er, activity, I hope?”

“Heller! Of course not! Why do you think I’m out here making the tea?”

Another pause. “Good. I’ll see you tomorrow, Matilda.”

We hung up. I added milk and spooned some sugar in the man’s tea, thought about it and added a few more spoonfuls. The poor guy probably needed some glucose. I carefully carried the mugs out.

“Are you going to order more champagne for her?”

“No,” I replied. “She’s had enough.”

“You better be the one to tell her then.”

I nodded and sipped my tea. There was an awkward silence. “So, have you been in this line of work for long?” I asked politely.

“Couple of years,” he said. “The money’s good and it’s not too demanding. I’m only doing it until I can catch my break as an actor.”

*You and me both, honey*, I thought bitterly. I placed my mug on the coffee table and leaned forward. “Look, this is a very personal question and you can just tell me to go jump if you like, but I’ve always wondered. It’s not, um, *easy* for a man to fake sexual arousal. Much easier for a woman I would think. How do you . . .”

“How do I get it up?”

“Yeah. Sorry, that’s too personal, isn’t it? You don’t have to answer. I’m far too nosy for my own good.”

He smiled nicely. “I don’t mind answering. I’m an actor, right, so I’m good at faking emotion. I think of it as a test. I pretend it’s a director telling me to get it up now for a scene, so I get it up.” I nodded. It made sense. “Also, I’m twenty-two so I’m naturally horny most of time anyway.” He cocked his head in the direction of the bedroom. “She’s easy ‘cause she’s young and pretty. It’s the older ones who are the hardest. I once had this client who had never had an orgasm in her life and she was about sixty. It took me all night, but we finally cracked it. She was real grateful. Gave me a huge tip.”

“I can imagine! So you do women exclusively?”

“Yeah, I only do ladies. Neil, the guy in the bedroom, he swings both ways. Probably gives himself more options that way, but I can’t do guys. Just not interested. I’ve tried, but –”

There was a sudden fracas from the bedroom. Lily shrieked in fear, and a man’s voice rose in anger. I jumped to my feet. I turned to Brown Hair and ordered him firmly to stay exactly where he was. He wasn’t inclined to disagree, busy enjoying his tea and enjoying the break.

I approached the bedroom cautiously. Lily shrieked again. When I pushed open the door and walked in, she was cowering naked on the bed. The black-haired man, Neil, was also naked and was leaning over her waving a small sharp knife. *Oh shit!* I thought, realising with

panic that it was completely up to me to get this situation under control. Remembering what Tysen had told me, I tried to appear authoritative. I held out one palm to Lily and one to Neil, like a cop directing traffic.

“Whoa!” I said loudly and decisively. Lily whimpered and curled up further. I stepped closer to the bed and Neil leapt towards me, waving the knife threateningly. I stood still. “Everyone stay where they are. Nice and calm. No sudden moves.”

I pointed at Neil. “You! Back off slowly into that corner.” Surprisingly, he did what I’d ordered. “I’m going to ask Lily to get off the bed and come closer to me. Okay, Neil?”

He nodded, but brandished the knife again, as if afraid I was going to rush him. He had a crazy look in his eyes that I didn’t recognise, but knew it spelt danger.

Neil had all the power at that moment, so I addressed my comments to him. I could see that Lily was superficially unharmed as she scrabbled off the bed and stood behind me.

“Okay Neil, why don’t you tell me in a calm way what’s going on? You seemed as though you were having a pretty good time till now. What’s gone wrong?”

He pointed the knife at Lily. “That crazy bitch is trying to kill me!” he shouted, spittle flying from his mouth.

Lily scoffed, her arms folded under her small breasts, one hip cocked forward aggressively.

“You dumb fuck!” she spat out scornfully. “I told you I didn’t want to kill you. I just wanted to cut you a little.”

I twisted her way, incredulous. “What the hell, Lily? What do you mean you wanted to *cut* him? You can’t go around cutting people.”

She licked her lips. I noticed the crazy look in her eyes too. Damn. They’ve been doing drugs. I quickly searched the room and noticed a baggie of powder on the bedside table.

“I only wanted to taste his blood.” She licked her lips again.

“I told you! I told you!” Neil exploded. “She’s a crazy bitch! Keep her away from me!”

“Oh man, do you know how stupid that is, Lily?” I ranted. “You don’t just suck people’s blood, especially a prostitute’s blood! He screws men, Lily! Probably without protection. Do you want to catch a disease? Do you want HIV? Or hepatitis?”

“Hey!” Neil protested. “I’m an escort, not some cheap street whore! I’m clean. There’s nothing wrong with my blood.”

“I paid for a party boy and he wouldn’t party,” Lily pouted.

“You paid for his body, not for his blood!” I screamed at her. “If you wanted blood, you should have agreed upfront and paid extra! Or found some weirdo vampire hooker.”

I’d had enough of this and turned back to the knife-wielding man. “Neil, here’s the deal. I’ll keep her away from you. You drop the knife on the bed, pick up your clothes and you and your buddy get the hell out of here. Have you been paid?”

He nodded his head. “She paid in advance by credit card. It comes up on her statement as ‘personal grooming services’.”

“Good. Okay then, leave the knife on the bed and scam.”

He paused for a moment, watching me with suspicion, but then slowly placed the knife on the bed and snatched up his clothes, edging out the door. I quickly secured the knife and stood aside to let him leave.

“Hold it,” I demanded, and walked over to the baggie. I picked it up with the edge of the sheet. I wasn’t getting my fingerprints on that. I made sure it was secured and tossed it to Neil. “Here’s your tip.”

“Hey! I paid for that!” Lily screeched. “That’s my shit! You are not giving it to that motherfucker!”

I stared her down. “Either you donate it or I flush it. Understood? You want to go to jail?”

I waved Neil away and could hear him and the other man dressing hurriedly, before slamming the door behind them.

Lily plonked down on the bed, her face sullen. "I was wrong about you. You're nothing but a fucking bore. Get me some more champagne," she ordered.

"No. You've had enough. You're going to bed," I snapped back, reaching my breaking point.

"Fuck off, bitch!" she snarled and lunged at me. We tussled for a brief moment and she spat in my face, her saliva dripping down into my eye, disgusting me and blinding me temporarily. She snatched the knife off me, and before I knew what was happening, sliced me down the soft flesh on the inside of my left forearm. Blood spurted instantly from the wound. She dropped the knife and quickly grabbed my arm, bringing it to her lips and sipping on my blood.

I pushed her away violently in revulsion with my other arm. She fell back heavily against the wall and slid down, sprawling indecently on the floor. She was laughing and laughing, my blood staining her lips and teeth and trickling down her chin. I wrapped my injured arm in the first thing I found, Lily's discarded micro-dress, trying to stem the rapid flow of blood, thinking a little hysterically that it didn't matter if I bled on the dress because it was already blood-coloured. Lily suddenly stopped laughing, rolled over on her stomach, pushed herself up onto all fours and started vomiting onto the carpet. When she had finished, she fell face first onto the floor into her own vomit. I almost cried in despair.

Somehow I managed to rouse her, stand her in the shower to clean her off and get her dried. I ignored my wound, which was still bleeding and throbbing badly. I didn't know what she'd taken, probably coke, but put her into bed in the recovery position so she wouldn't choke if she threw up again. I'd not even bothered trying to get her to drink any water. She was almost unconscious and fell into a heavy sleep the minute I dragged her onto the bed. I cleaned up the vomit as best I could and resigned myself to paying through the nose for the extra cleaning that would be required.

At that moment, I hated that woman sleeping on the bed, but it was my job to look after her. I had no choice but to sit on the bedroom chair, determined to stay awake until she woke safely and I could take her back to her husband. I felt lightheaded, but wasn't sure if it was from the lack of food, loss of blood or complete emotional and physical exhaustion. I slumbered fitfully in the chair. The room smelt awful, an overpowering mix of vomit, alcohol, lubricant and sex, but I couldn't leave her alone. I longed to ring Heller, but was afraid I was too emotional to speak professionally. I was also afraid to admit to him that he had been right and that I hadn't been able to handle the situation properly. I didn't want to be fired for screwing up my first real assignment.

At midday, Lily woke up, groaning and clutching her stomach. I struggled to assist her to the bathroom, where she vomited repeatedly into the toilet bowl. I watched her dispassionately before helping her into the shower again. I could hear my phone ringing, but I was fully occupied at that moment and concentrated on getting Lily cleaned up. We re-dressed her in her modest clothes and she greedily gulped down a bottle of cold spring water. We didn't speak to each other once. I didn't even want to make eye contact with her.

I packed up all of her belongings and shoved them carelessly into her oversized handbag. My arm was still bleeding and I swapped the sodden micro-dress for one of her head scarves as a dressing. I didn't know what to do with the blood-soaked dress, so shoved it in the bottom of the rubbish bin, covering it up with the other detritus. I pulled my shirt-sleeve down and gingerly put my jacket on, needing to look respectable until I could get home. I went into the bathroom and was shocked to see how pale and drained I appeared. Makeup couldn't completely disguise it.

We caught the lift to the foyer and I made her sit down while I checked out. I paid the bill and advised the clerk that my friend had been ill in the bedroom and that extra cleaning would be required. Professionally trained for all situations, she didn't even blink. She ordered a cab for us and it arrived in less than ten minutes. Lily spent the cab ride leaning against the window, green with illness. We finally arrived at her suite at the luxury hotel, where the servant greeted us at the door anxiously. Fortunately I had rung him last night to advise him that Lily wouldn't be home, but was staying with me instead.

"Mr Hayek has advised me that he is on his way back now," he told us, before noticing how sick Lily looked.

"Mrs Hayek is not feeling well," I said, stating the obvious. "Stupidly, we bought a kebab to eat from a sidewalk vendor after we went to the movies. She's been sick all night. She was too sick to bring home, so that's why I took her to my place which was closer."

"Tilly warned me not to get the chicken kebab, saying it didn't look cooked enough. But I didn't listen to her. It smelled so delicious," Lily piped up weakly, clutching her stomach again. I had to admire her. Even feeling like death, she rose to the occasion.

"Oh, you poor thing," fussed the servant.

"I'll put her to bed," I said to him, "and you should call the hotel doctor to come and examine her. Just to make sure she's going to be okay." He rushed off to the phone while I took off Lily's shoes and scarf and settled her in her enormous king-sized bed. I brought her a cold bottle of Perrier and sat on the regency winged-back chair to wait for the doctor. She bustled in, gave Lily a cursory examination and pronounced her dehydrated, but otherwise on the mend. She left a prescription for a painkiller and advised Lily to rest and drink water regularly.

While the servant set out to have the prescription filled, I waited in the bedroom with Lily in silence. She sat up, wincing, and looked at me remorsefully.

"I'm sorry Tilly," she apologised. "Things got a bit crazy last night. I can't really remember much. Thank you for getting me home safely."

I glanced at her and then looked away. I wasn't in the mood for chatting. My arm was throbbing painfully and I badly wanted to go home. The servant and Mr Hayek returned at the same time. We went through the dodgy kebab ruse again for Mr Hayek's sake and I returned Lily to his care. I made a hasty farewell and headed down to the foyer.

## Chapter 15

I was about to give Rumbles a call when a cab pulled up at the front of the hotel to deposit a passenger. I jumped inside and asked to be dropped off a block from the Warehouse as Heller instructed I must always do. He didn't like to draw any kind of attention to his premises. After paying the fare, I walked the remaining distance, quietly letting myself into the building. Dragging myself wearily up to the fourth floor, I prayed that I wouldn't meet anyone on the way. I was on an emotional tightrope and didn't think I could hold it together for much longer. I didn't want to answer any questions or speak to anyone. Not now. Later, when I felt better. Maybe.

My flat was cool, fresh and welcoming after the sordidness of the evening's activities. I fell onto my lounge, too exhausted to move, cradling my wounded arm against my chest. Blood was tricking down my arm, dripping onto my lap, smearing across the front of my shirt. My beautiful new clothes were ruined. I needed food, I needed a shower, I needed sleep and probably I needed some medical attention, but I could only sit there staring down at the carpet, my mind blank. I'd never been through an experience like that before and my

emotions were see-sawing between anger, pain and shock.

There was a loud knock on my door. Someone had noticed me arrive home on the security cameras.

“Go away!” I yelled tiredly. Another knock. I ignored it. And the next one, and the next one. I heard fumbling at the door and Heller walked in uninvited.

“Matilda,” he admonished. “Where have you been? I’ve been trying to contact you for hours. It’s simply not an acceptable way to –”

He stopped abruptly when he saw me. I hung my head, not wanting him to see the fat tears that were trickling down my cheeks, dropping onto my lap to mix with my blood.

“You’re injured,” he exclaimed softly and crouched down on the floor in front of me. I couldn’t look at him. He gently took my arm and pulled it away from my chest, carefully unwinding the saturated scarf dressing. He said something under his breath in another language when he saw the knife wound, wadded the scarf and placed it on top of the cut.

“Hold that there for a moment,” he ordered and reached for the phone, punching in numbers. “Daniel? Get the doctor over here urgently. Matilda has a knife wound. We’re at her place.”

He went into my bathroom and came back with a clean towel. He threw the scarf on the floor, uncaring of the mess and replaced it with the towel, pressing down firmly on the wound. It hurt like hell.

“Please don’t be angry with me,” I begged. I knew I’d totally stuffed up my first assignment and didn’t want him to berate me about it.

His expression was tormented. “I’m not angry with you, Matilda. I’m angry at myself for sending you into a dangerous situation without proper training or equipment. But I’ll save my questions for when the doctor is here,” he said and I nodded gratefully. I didn’t want to explain everything once, let alone twice.

It seemed like forever until Daniel arrived accompanied by a trim, florid, elderly man with an enormous gray walrus moustache and narcissistically bouffant gray hair. He introduced himself as Dr Kincaid, no first name offered. Daniel told me later that he was Heller’s on-call private doctor. He was a no-nonsense, unchatty man who examined me in a gruff, business-like manner. As he did, I briefly noticed Daniel hovering on the edge, a nervous expression on his face, his body tense.

“When did this happen?” the doctor asked, checking my vitals.

“About eight hours ago,” I replied weakly.

Heller was exasperated. “Matilda, why didn’t you ring me for help?”

“I couldn’t leave Lily. She was unconscious. I had to get her back to her husband safely. And then I just wanted to get home.”

“I could have helped you with her. Or at the least I could have called Dr Kincaid to see to her. And to you.”

I looked up him, tears welling in my eyes again at his fractious tone. “I didn’t know that. I didn’t know you have a doctor. You didn’t tell me.” I couldn’t confess that the reason I dealt with it myself was because of my huge fear of being fired again for failing at a job.

“Has it been bleeding the whole time?” Dr Kincaid asked, butting in impatiently and cutting off our conversation. I nodded. “What was the weapon?”

“A small knife, like a paring knife, but sharper.”

“It’s going to require stitches,” he told Heller and then to me, “You need to keep very still while I do this, Miss. I presume you’re all right with medical procedures? Or will you faint?”

My head shot up in indignation. “No, I bloody well won’t faint!” It did the trick in drying up my tears instantly.

Smothering a smile, Heller sat next to me and slid his arm around my shoulders,

steadying my injured arm with his other hand. Daniel sat on the other side of me with his arm around my waist. The doctor sat on the coffee table leaning forward over my arm. With almost detached interest, I watched as he cleaned the wound, injected a local anaesthetic and stitched up the cut. He was professional and deft. He was neat too, which reduced the chance of any bad scarring. Heller watched on also, but Daniel looked away, finding something fascinating in my kitchen to stare at instead.

When he had finished, Dr Kincaid gave me a tetanus booster injection and handed over some powerful painkillers, warning me repeatedly that they must be taken with food and definitely no alcohol. After he left I tried to stand up but found myself shaking badly, my legs unable to support me and I collapsed back onto the lounge. Heller put both arms around me and drew me in close, not seeming to care that I was smearing blood over his clothes.

“Daniel, go and make Matilda some plain buttered toast and a cup of very sweet tea, please.” Daniel jumped up, eager to be of assistance. I closed my eyes and gratefully relaxed against Heller’s hard chest.

“Who did this? Was it one of the party boys?” he whispered in my ear, stroking my hair.

“Lily.”

“Why?”

I sighed shakily. “I wouldn’t order her any more champagne. I told her to go to bed. I gave away her drugs. I don’t know. Probably all of the above.”

“I’m sorry, Matilda,” he said, and softly kissed my forehead. It was comforting. “I didn’t know that she would turn out to be so wild.”

“After she cut me, she drank my blood. And she spat on me. It was disgusting! Nobody’s ever treated me like that in my whole life.” He tightened his hold around me.

Daniel came back with the toast, only slightly burnt, and the tea. I wolfed the toast down, famished, but could not hold the teacup without it shaking uncontrollably. Daniel held it for me while I took tiny sips. After I finished, I yawned hugely and tried to stand up again. I had a bit more success this time. Heller handed me two painkillers to take with a glass of water.

“I really need a shower,” I said and staggered towards the bathroom. Heller clutched my arm, stabilising me.

“Which one of us do you want to help you bathe?” he looked down at me with a hint of a smile.

“Neither!” I protested. “I’ll have to manage by myself somehow.” He helped me gather some clean clothes and escorted me to the bathroom door.

“I’ll be waiting out here for you. Leave the door unlocked,” he ordered, then flashed me a sexy half-smile. “Just in case.”

I paused on my way into the bathroom and turned to face him again, leaning against the doorway for support. “Don’t you be coming in unless I am definitely and indisputably calling out for help. No ‘just in case’, okay?” I insisted. We eyed each other for a long moment and his smile broadened.

It was extremely difficult to shower with one arm out of action. Washing my hair was a particular challenge, but I did the best I could and felt much better afterwards, squeaky clean, with well-brushed teeth and dressed in my familiar singlet top and boxer shorts pyjama set. While I had been in the shower, Heller and Daniel had made an attempt to clean up the bloodstains. I wanted to thank them, but could barely keep my eyes open, waving at them in a half-hearted way instead. I fell into my welcoming bed and asleep almost immediately.

I slept for ten hours straight, groggy when I woke up, early dawn light streaming across my bed. My arm was aching. It took me a while to focus properly, and trying to read the time on my bedside clock I knocked over a glass of water that someone had thoughtfully provided. Heller walked into the bedroom. He mopped up the spilt water, then sat at the end of the bed

and told me he had slept on my lounge in case I had a bad reaction to the painkillers.

“They’re making me feel drowsy,” I complained weakly and leant back on my pillows. He was wearing different clothes to yesterday, so I knew he’d gone home briefly to shower and change at least.

“You’ll only need them for a short while,” he promised. “Niq is very keen to make you some breakfast, so come out when you’re ready.”

I lay in bed for another few moments after he left before I felt strong enough to make it to the bathroom. After that, I staggered out in my pyjamas and flopped down on the lounge. Niq was busy in my kitchen and judging by the mess, had used every utensil and pot as he went.

“Hey sweetie,” I greeted.

He glanced up from his intense preparations. “You look terrible.”

I laughed. “Thanks, kid. Tell it like it is, why don’t you?”

He served me up a very hard-boiled egg with toast, a glass of orange juice and a fresh fruit salad. I was impressed and told him so, even if I could have played handball with the egg, it was so tough and rubbery. He beamed with pride and sat down to make sure that I ate every last bite.

“That was delicious, sweetie. I feel almost human again.”

Niq fidgeted in his seat. “Tilly?”

“Mmm?”

“When you’re better, could you take me shopping?”

I was surprised. “Don’t you normally buy everything online?”

“Yes, but I want to go out for once. Like, out there,” he said, pointing to the window.

“Out into the real world?” I teased. He nodded shyly. “No worries, kiddo. I’ll let you know when I get a free day.”

“Not till you’re better though.” We smiled at each other. I let him stack my dishwasher for me, but then chased him off to do his schoolwork. I slowly dressed, choosing loose clothes with no buttons. My arm was hurting, but I didn’t want to take any more of those strong painkillers the doctor had given me. Instead I rummaged around in my bathroom cabinet and popped a couple of over-the-counter painkillers.

Daniel was on the phone but turned and smiled at me as I walked to my desk. I had barely sat down when my mobile rang. It was Lily, advising me that she would be spending the day with her husband and wouldn’t require me at all until the next day. *Thank you, God!* I thought gratefully. Politely, I asked after her health. She assured me that she was feeling much better and looking forward to spending some relaxing time with her husband. I assumed that meant he was listening in on the conversation.

*Whatever.* We hung up. I went into Heller’s office and told him I was not needed by my client. He agreed it was probably for the best.

“I’m due for my monthly styling. I like to attend to that today now that I’m free, if that’s okay with you?” He nodded agreement. “But would you mind if I brought Dixie along with me? She’d really love being indulged like that. It would be a real treat for her. I haven’t seen her since I started here and I’d love to catch up. And I’ll pay for her myself.” To my surprise, he agreed readily, stating it would be good for me to do something ‘normal’ for a day, not that five-star luxury pampering was usually considered normal in my neck of the woods. And he insisted that I add Dixie’s treatment to his bill. I protested, but he was adamant.

I was going to ask to borrow a car, but he offered to drop me at the hotel as he had an appointment in the city. I had thirty minutes before he was due to leave, so I rushed back to my desk and rang the spa to make sure they were able to see us today. *Yes Miss, certainly, it will be a pleasure to see you again.* Then I rang Dixie on her mobile.

“Whatever you are doing today, drop it,” I insisted. She squealed in my ear when I

revealed what my plans were for us today. She squealed even louder when I said that if she was ready and waiting outside in fifteen minutes, we would swing by and give her a lift. I'm not sure if it was the offer of a free ride that got her so excited, or the prospect of laying eyes on Heller again.

I flew upstairs to change into something more elegant, deciding that I'd shout Dixie a sumptuous seafood lunch at the hotel's restaurant afterwards. I wasn't able to use my left hand much as any movement in it referred strong pain back to my injury and was struggling to do up the buttons on my pants and shirt when there was a knock on my door.

"It's open," I yelled out. God, it was humiliating, but I was going to have to ask for help. I walked into the lounge room, half-dressed. Heller raised his eyebrows.

"Could you please do me up? I'm having some trouble," I asked, mortified. He walked towards me and stood in front of me, his unblinking eyes cemented to mine. He slowly did up each button on my shirt starting at the bottom. His hands brushed against my breasts as he moved his way up and I gasped involuntarily at the sensation. Still maintaining intense eye contact, he reached into the band of my trousers and slid his fingers along, grazing the skin of my belly until he located the top button and fastened it unhurriedly for me. My heart was pounding, my breathing rapid and shallow and my skin tingling where he had touched me. I couldn't look away from him. It was like being seduced in reverse.

His mouth curved in that deliberate half-smile as if he could read my thoughts. "Let's go," he said finally and turned and headed off down the stairs. He didn't argue when I asked if he could make a detour to pick up Dixie. She was waiting patiently outside the unit block and eagerly jumped in the back of his Mercedes.

"Hello Heller," she trilled in her sweetest voice as she fastened her seatbelt.

He glanced at her in the rearview mirror. "Hello Dixie." She gave a schoolgirl giggle. I glanced at her over my shoulder and pulled a vomiting face. She kicked the back of my seat. Heller wisely ignored us.

He dropped us at the hotel, giving me strict instructions to ring when I wanted to be picked up and not to overdo it. He drove off and Dixie and I walked into the hotel spa. Of course she noticed my bandaged arm and fussed over me for a few minutes before forgetting about me in the excitement of the rest of the day. We had a lovely time together, laughing until we almost made ourselves sick, drinking too much champagne and revelling in the luxurious surroundings and indulgent treatments. When I confided to her about my surprise close encounter with a naked Heller, she grilled me relentlessly on every little detail about his body and its various appendages.

"You have got the best job in the world!" she declared, her eyes rolling back in her head with pleasure as her feet were professionally massaged. I held up my bandaged arm with a rueful smile. "Oh right, on the other hand, perhaps not."

At the end as we preened in front of the mirror, Dixie marvelled that I was ordered to do this every month. Her hair, maroon this week, had been dyed a soft black and with a new pixie haircut, I thought she looked cute and stylish and told her so. In return, barely able to tear her eyes away from her own reflection, she told me that I looked 'fine'. *Hmm, thanks Dix.*

We lunched lavishly at the hotel's signature restaurant, but I declined any more alcohol, heedful of Dr Kincaid's warnings. My arm was starting to ache again and I was fairly sure I would need to take more of the strong painkillers that night. I'd settled the bill and we were chatting over a second coffee when I glanced idly out of the restaurant window that fronted a busy city thoroughfare.

My mouth dropped open. "Holy shit!" I said and took off at a trot out of the restaurant door and out through the back entrance of the hotel onto the same street I'd just been viewing.

Dixie followed me bewildered.

“What’s the matter?”

“That lying little bitch.”

“Who?”

“Ahead of us, do you see? That little woman with the long black hair and tiny skirt? With the ridiculously high shoes and gigantic bag?”

“Yeah, I see her. So?”

I pushed through the crowd, anxious not to lose sight, Dixie on my heels. “That is Mrs Lily Hayek, my client, who told me she was spending the day with her loving husband. Bitch! She probably told him that she was going to be with me. Instead she’s ditched us both and gone off on her own!”

“That skanky chick is a billionaire’s wife? She looks like a ten-dollar whore,” Dixie scorned.

Without thinking twice, I grabbed my phone and punched in Heller’s number.

“Matilda? Ready to go home?” I could hear other people talking in the background and belatedly remembered that he was in a meeting. I tried to be speedy.

“Heller, we have a situation. My client is not with her husband as she told me this morning but is out on the loose, dressed for action. I’m following her now.” I gave him our location.

“She seems to be headed for the red-light district,” he noted. *Where else*, I thought with weary resentment. “Keep track of her. My meeting will be finishing up soon and I’ll drive over as quickly as I can. But I have to go now. Keep in touch, please.”

“Okay. Sorry to disrupt your meeting,” I apologised, hoping he hadn’t been with an important client.

A soft, patient laugh in response. “You must always ring me when you need me, no matter what I’m doing. I don’t mind if it’s you, Matilda.”

What to say to that? “Um . . . okay. Bye.” I rang off hastily, taking the coward’s way out and turning my attention back to my pressing problem.

Fortunately there was enough foot traffic in the late lunch crowd to provide Dixie and me with cover, but not enough for Lily to be swallowed up. She strode determinedly, as if with a definite goal in mind. We covered a few blocks until we reached the outskirts of the city’s red-light area. She took a left turn and walked a block further, then turned left again down into a small lane. She slowed down, as if looking for a building name or number. Even from this distance, we could see the wicked smile on her face as she stopped in front of one building, opened the door, releasing a burst of pounding rock music, and disappeared inside.

## Chapter 16

My heart sank as we casually strolled past the building. It was a squat and shabby dump, built from grimy scuffed blockwork in desperate need of a fresh coat of paint. There was a barred window either side of a blood-red door, the sign above it depicting a badly-drawn and faded cartoon devil with enormous horns and evil eyes. It was The Red Devil, a bikie bar, notorious for regular stabbings, shootings and drug dealing. Raided by the police frequently, it had also been bombed twice in the last year by rival gangs. We crossed the road and stood opposite. It was definitely not a nice place for a married woman to hang out, or any woman for that matter. I would never have let her anywhere near the joint, which is obviously why she had ditched me. Dixie and I looked at each other in horror.

“You gotta be shitting me!” she said. “I’m *not* going in there.”

“Me neither,” I agreed. I rang Heller again and told him where Lily had gone.

He sighed heavily. “I’ll be there as soon as I can. I’ve just picked up a couple of my men who were finishing a job nearby. Stay where you are. Do not go inside, Matilda.”

I had no intention of doing otherwise.

We waited about five minutes. I was on edge, feeling sick, pacing up and down the footpath, wondering what was happening inside. I hoped that Lily was all right. She was a pain in the butt but she was not much more than a kid, after all.

The door to the bar flew open suddenly and Lily appeared in the doorway. She was crying, her makeup smeared and her clothes in disarray. Her face was full of desperation and sheer terror. She screamed, her eyes searching around wildly for help. A burst of crude laughter escaped from inside and a hand grabbed her savagely by her hair, dragging her backwards. She screamed again in fear. The door slammed behind her.

During those long periods without any meaningful employment, Dixie and I had loved to read crime books featuring tough female cops and investigators. When we were very bored on nights with no prospect of a date, we would practice our tough chick characters in case we ever got the opportunity to audition for one of those coveted rare roles. We would take turns rushing into our bedroom, kicking open the door, sometimes rolling on the bed and jumping back up, gun (hairbrush) at the ready, screaming some apposite *bon mot* like, “Don’t move, motherfucker!” The more cask wine we consumed, the more elaborate the entrances and the more foul-mouthed the *bon mot*. I remember one evening, after quite a bit of cardboard chardy and trying to do a cool roll into the room, I bounced off my bed and landed awkwardly on the floor, painfully spraining my wrist. Dixie had laughed so much at my lack of coordination that she had almost wet herself, but my hand had been out of action for weeks afterwards.

Without thinking, I looked at Dixie and yelled, “Tough chick!”

I ran across the road, fumbling in my bag. Dixie, game as ever, followed right behind, loudly cursing me. I violently burst through the door of the bar, my unexpected entrance not startling the few patrons in its main bar area who were apathetically playing pool or propping up the bar. They didn’t even bother looking up.

“Police!” I yelled out, briefly flashing my library card. I kept one hand in my bag, firmly on my capsicum spray.

“Police! Stay where you are! Nobody move!” Dixie bellowed behind me. Despite her small stature, she had an impressively loud voice that forced the patrons in the bar to pay attention to us. Nobody moved. They were used to being raided and knew the drill. Running only earned you extra attention from the cops.

AC/DC’s ‘High-voltage Rock ‘n’ Roll’ blared from the speakers. The bar was dimly lit, its windows begrimed with dirt. What we could see of the decor was uninspiring. The carpet was an indeterminate swirling maroon pattern, probably useful for hiding bloodstains, and the walls were painted a depressing dog-shit brown colour. The furniture was old, mismatched and battered, some of the chairs so fragile in appearance that I wondered if they were occasionally used as weapons or projectiles. It was that kind of place.

“Where’s the woman?” I yelled in the direction of the barman. They are often the most detached and sober person in any drinking environment. Or so said Tysen, I recalled from my brief training.

“What woman?” he asked insolently, resuming his wiping of a grubby rag over a glass. He was a big slovenly man with long hair slicked back in an oily ponytail, moving with the slow indifference of someone who loathes their job.

“Don’t mess with me, sunshine!” I shouted contemptuously, puffing myself up as aggressively as possible. “You want to be tasered? Just give me a reason. Where’s the woman

we just saw being assaulted?”

He shrugged, unconcerned by my threat.

Dixie walked towards him menacingly. “Maybe you need a little persuasion to help you remember, fuck-knuckle? I’ve got bad PMS today and I’ve been looking for a fucking cockroach like you to take it out on. Get your taser out, Chalmers.”

We both made moves into our handbags as if we were retrieving something.

“Back off,” he said nervously, palms up. “I don’t want no trouble. They took her out the back for a bit of fun.” He wiped his nose on the same cloth he’d been using to polish the glasses. *Yuck!* I made a mental note not to stay for a drink. Then he gestured indifferently to a hallway leading away from the main bar area, as if women got kidnapped and raped in the place every day of the week. For all I knew, maybe they did. “She was askin’ for it, flauntin’ herself in a place like this. She went right up to ‘em and told ‘em she wanted to party. Stupid slut!”

“Who took her and how many of them?” I snarled in his face. My arm was starting to pound with a deep aching pain and I was desperately hoping that Heller would turn up soon. I wasn’t sure how much longer we could keep up our charade without any real weapons or skills (or acting talent, if I’m going to be brutally honest).

He stood back and crossed his arms. “Just some blokes who come in. I don’t ask ‘em no questions and we all get on fine. You don’t wanna mess with ‘em. Trust me.”

Oh, I trusted him all right, on that at least, but didn’t think we had a lot of options. “How many?” I repeated.

“Four, maybe five. I didn’t count ‘em,” he said sullenly. Great. How were Dixie and I going to take down five men?

The two of us had a brief huddled conference and I came up with kind of a plan. We cautiously headed down the poorly lit, grungy hallway which was carpeted in the same swirling maroon, painted in the same dog-shit brown. There were four doors leading off the hallway and a fire exit at its end, all shut. Two of doors led to male and female toilets. We briefly listened at the door of each, but couldn’t hear anything so moved to the doors on the opposite side of the hallway.

We listened at the third door and it also sounded deserted inside. With a prudent degree of chariness, I twisted the knob, opened the door and peered around it. The room was a combined storeroom/office space, the desk and computer almost crowded out by the boxes and boxes of alcohol and other bar necessities stacked up around the walls. There was nobody inside.

We crept to the fourth door and listened carefully. Through the door came the sound of loud voices, harsh laughter and a woman’s quiet sobbing. We looked at each other. It was time to put our plan into action.

I hid out of sight behind Dixie as she fumbled the door open, doing her best drunk impersonation.

“Oh, I’m shorry,” I heard her slur, “I thought thish was the dunny. Shorry.”

She closed the door quickly, almost all the way without actually shutting it, before they could react. Hopefully she hadn’t alarmed them. I couldn’t see inside the room, but Dixie later told me that it was some kind of private reception room, full of shabby old lounges and armchairs. Lily had been huddled in a corner, her clothes ripped badly, while four men (not five, thank God!) appeared to be arguing over who would have her first.

Dixie gave me the thumbs-up to signal that Lily was inside the room. We waited a nerve-racking half-minute to see if anyone would come out after Dixie, but they didn’t. Stage one of our plan had been a success. We quietly high-fived each other before swapping places, ready for stage two. I took a deep breath and burst through the door, kicking it back against

the wall. I then proceeded to shower capsicum spray fervently and indiscriminately over everybody in the room, including Lily.

There were two things I hadn't thought about when I formulated my plan though. The first was the understandable anger that people whose eyes were stinging in hellish agony feel towards the person who has caused that agony. Most of the room's occupants, including Dixie who grabbed Lily in accordance with our plan, rushed towards a source, any source, of fresh air, coughing and wheezing, eyes streaming. But one of the men, a big ugly brute who didn't look smart enough to spell his own name, noticed I was still holding the empty canister of spray in my hand. He took exception to that with a well-aimed punch to my midriff that winded me and knocked me flying to the ground in the hallway. While I was lying prostrate, clutching my abdomen and groaning in pain, he gave me several vicious kicks to my legs and my back with his enormous work boots for good measure, before his streaming eyes and choking coughs forced him to desert me as well, heading for some relief.

The second thing I hadn't considered is that capsicum spray is just that – a spray. And sprays tend to drift in the air with any current. So I really should not have been surprised, but I was unpleasantly so, when my eyes also started burning with a disabling stinging sensation. The tears began to pour down my cheeks, blinding me as I lay on the ground moaning. I struggled to get to my feet and out of this hellhole before those animals recovered and came back for me. But I wasn't capable and collapsed back to the floor again. My lungs felt cloudy with spray and I couldn't breathe properly. I managed to haul myself to my hands and knees and crawled back slowly down the hallway to the main bar area, each movement of my arms and legs creating stabbing pains of agony in my poor battered body.

I was almost at the end of the hallway, nearly back at the main bar, still virtually blind, when someone behind me seized me by my hair and brutally dragged me to my feet. I crumpled in agony, but he pulled me back up again by my hair, which frigging hurts, believe me. I could smell tobacco and bourbon on his breath. He must have been in the men's bathroom while Dixie and I were busy activating our plan. The barman was right – there were five of them, after all. Stupid, stupid us for not checking every room.

“Looks like you spoiled my party, my little whore,” he growled in my ear. He threw his arm around my neck, pulling it tightly until it restricted my breathing. There was nobody around to help me – everybody had made a run for it. I started to panic and kicked behind at him, hitting his shin. But that only made him tighten his grip on my throat further, cutting off my oxygen. I stopped kicking. He used his other hand to feel my boobs, roughly squeezing and pinching them. “Oh yeah! These are some great tits you've got here, bitch. You can be my new playmate instead,” he declared, his hot, bad breath making me flinch. Nausea rose in my throat and my vision began to darken.

Bourbon-Breath pushed me up against the hallway wall, one hand around my throat pinning me to the wall. My arms were incapacitated, jammed uncomfortably behind me. His body pressed up hard against mine and his free hand groped, squeezed and touched me everywhere – on my boobs, my butt, between my legs. Despite thrashing around to avoid him, he tightened his grip on my neck and immobilised my head. He forced my mouth open and thrust his tongue disgustingly deep inside. He slid his hand up my shirt, roughly pulling my bra aside, squeezing my nipple hard and savaging my breast painfully with his fingernails. I could feel his erection through his jeans as he rubbed up against me. He moved his hand away from my poor boob down into the waistband of my trousers, burrowing into my panties, his digits on my pubic hair, about to ram his fingers up inside me. There was absolutely no doubt in my mind what his intentions were towards me and they did not include a lovely bunch of flowers followed by dinner at a fancy restaurant.

I managed to free my good arm from behind my back and drove my fist into the side of

his neck. He released his hold on me briefly and I pushed against him, mustering up every bit of strength I had in my new muscles. It almost worked, but my arm was injured and he'd been looking forward to attacking Lily, a pent-up store of misogynistic rage fuelling his strength. He punched me across my jaw, knocking me sideways. I would have fallen to the ground if he hadn't grabbed my arm. Once he had hold of me, he started to drag me into the room that everyone had just vacated. Despite my pain and almost blindness, I fought wildly against him. There was no way I was going in there with him. He cracked me across the jaw again and my head lolled backwards. I tried to regroup my thoughts but they weren't cooperating.

A horrible crunching noise sounded nearby and Bourbon-Breath grunted loudly in pain. Unexpectedly, he released his grip on me and I fell heavily to the floor, trembling too much to remain standing. I lay on the disgusting carpet, breathing heavily, seemingly somehow caught up in the middle of a brawl between two men. I didn't know who the other man was or where he had come from, but I wanted to marry him and have a million babies with him. He had just saved me from an unimaginable experience. There were feet flailing everywhere and a choking, gurgling noise coming from someone as I scrabbled quickly in the direction of the bar.

"Fuck off, shithead," Bourbon-Breath spluttered, between groans. "This is none of your fucking business. My bitch and I were only trying to have some fun together."

"That was my woman you had there," said the other voice, quiet and controlled, and I almost cried with joy when I recognised those accented tones. Heller! And boy, I could tell he was really angry from the strength of his accent. "You're going to regret messing with her, my friend. And with me."

Bourbon-Breath laughed with blustering derision through his grunts of pain. "Fuck off back to your own country and leave our sluts alone. Don't need no help from no soft dick pretty-boy foreigner like you to deal with them." And as if to express his furious hatred against all the women he'd ever met in his wretched life, he twisted in Heller's arms to kick out at me violently with an on-target blow to my hip as I blindly crawled to safety. I moaned softly as I fell to the carpet again, pain cascading through my body.

"Matilda, get out of here!" Heller shouted, and I didn't need to be told twice. I dragged my poor, bruised body out of the way to the safety of the main bar, gasping for air, wiping my eyes and nose on my shirt, and rubbing my bruised throat and jaw. I tried to ignore the horrible screeching sounds coming from one of the fighting men. I suspected they weren't coming from Heller. Something or someone crashed into the wall and I could hear the repeated dull sickening thud of someone getting a vicious beating.

I turned back anxiously to check on Heller, but I didn't see what happened next because I was forcefully hauled into the air by a pair of burly arms. I screamed in terror, kicking out wildly, until I recognised the gold logo on his black shirt. It was one of Heller's men!

He half-carried, half-dragged me out of the murky bar into the sunlight. I gasped and choked, my eyes and nose streaming, drawing in huge grateful gulps of fresh air. He pulled me over to Heller's Mercedes parked across the road. There was another black 4WD parked directly behind it and inside that I glimpsed Dixie and Lily, a pitiful couple of refugees, blubbering and clinging to each other. Another of Heller's man-mountains stood protectively next to the second vehicle, arms crossed aggressively, reeking of *just-let-me-at-'em* attitude.

I leaned over Man-Mountain One's supportive arm and indiscreetly vomited on the road. I couldn't stand up, in ten kinds of pain and Man-Mountain One propped me on the back seat of the Mercedes, pouring bottled water in my eyes and down my throat. I snatched the bottle from him and drank it greedily, only to have to hurriedly lean out of the vehicle to throw up again. I fell back on the seat in agony. My stitches had split open and my injured arm was bleeding again, my back and legs were aching where I had been kicked, my stomach was

painfully tender and my throat and jaw were killing me. Dixie tried to come over to me, but Man-Mountain Two wouldn't let her exit the second vehicle.

After about five minutes, Heller emerged from the bar, slipping something back into one of his cargo pants pockets. With my limited vision it looked like a switchblade. He stretched his arms above his head and rubbed his jaw. He seemed fine. Later, when I could see properly again, I noticed that he had cuts on both sets of knuckles, a gash on his bottom lip and some faint bruising to his jaw. I wondered how badly Heller had hurt the other man, because I had no doubt that he had won the fight. Much, much later, after I knew more about him, I wondered if Heller had even left that man alive.

As he walked away from the bar towards the vehicles, the thug who had first attacked me launched himself out of an adjacent dingy alley into the middle of Heller's back, knocking him flying to the ground. Faster than any of us thought possible, Heller was upright, dragging the man to his feet, brutally twisting his left arm behind his back and slamming his head viciously and repeatedly against the front blockwork wall of the bar. The man's face was crushed up against the grimy stucco and a trail of blood poured from his nose that I was pretty sure had now been broken. Heller spoke aggressively in the man's ear, an absolutely terrifying expression on his face. We couldn't hear what he said. The man shouted back something defiant over his shoulder, something which Heller obviously didn't agree with, because he snarled before jerking the man's arm upwards so violently that, even across the road, we could hear the crack of his bone breaking. The man screamed in pain as Heller slammed him into the wall a final time, then dropped him in revulsion and walked back towards us, wiping his hands on his cargo pants. The man slumped to the ground and lay there moaning noisily, his arm at an abnormal angle, blood on his face, tears pouring down his cheeks, a dark urine stain spreading across the front of his jeans.

The two man-mountains stood by impassively through the whole ordeal, arms crossed, their features settled in approving expressions. They didn't budge a muscle to help Heller, apparently well aware that their boss could take care of himself. Man-Mountain One slapped him admiringly on the back as he walked over to us while Man-Mountain Two said, "Good work, Boss." Heller told him to bring Dixie and Lily to his vehicle and leaned in the door where I had collapsed on the back seat, somewhere between sitting and lying. I blinked my stinging eyes, hardly daring to breathe in his presence.

"Matilda," he reproached, his voice serious. "You disobeyed me. I told you specifically not to go inside."

"Lily was trying to escape out the door. She was crying and looked so scared. I was afraid of what they'd do to her. I didn't know how long you'd be," I told him in a subdued voice, not able to meet his eyes, almost hyperventilating in terror. Heller's ruthless, efficient violence had frightened me deeply. I hadn't been exposed to much aggression in my life and today had been a real eye-opener. I began trembling again.

"We have to get out of here now," he said unemotionally, although I knew he could sense my fear. "Let me check if you're okay." He leaned in further and quickly but gently examined my neck and jaw and prodded my abdomen. "Nothing feels broken, but you're going to hurt for a while and have a lot of bruising," he pronounced, handing me a handkerchief to press down on my bleeding arm.

He took a moment to softly cup my chin with his hand and lift my head so that I was forced to look at him. "I wish you hadn't seen that, Matilda, but this business is rough sometimes. You need to know that because it's important. I'm not sorry about what I did. They would have done worse to me, and to you, if they'd had the chance."

## Chapter 17

Heller let me go and climbed into the driver's seat. He ordered the two man-mountains to follow him in the second vehicle for a while in case there was any further trouble. Dixie was told to sit in the back with me to make sure I was okay; Lily forced to sit in front. She had been initially terrified by her experience, during which she'd been roughed up but ultimately unharmed. However I suspected that she had already begun to reminisce about it as if it had been nothing but a good laugh.

She confirmed that suspicion immediately. "You people spoiled my adventure," she pouted petulantly as we drove.

"Mrs Hayek, have you ever been gang-raped?" Heller asked bluntly. It was said in that dangerously quiet voice that I was beginning to recognise as signalling his immense fury, his accent more pronounced again.

"No unfortunately, but it sounds like a lot of fun," replied Lily defiantly, throwing back her hair. She was wearing a spare *Heller's* work shirt that fell to her knees, her own clothes almost shredded by those animals in the bar.

Heller thumped the dashboard ferociously, making us all jump in fear. Dixie clutched my hand tightly. "Well, I do know someone who's been gang-raped, and they didn't find it the least bit *fun!*" he shouted. Lily shrank back in her seat, cringing at his anger. "It is a degrading and terrifying experience, from which some victims never recover. It robs them of their feelings of safety and trust in the world. Does that sound like *fun* to you?"

Lily shook her head, and mumbled sulkily, "I s'pose not."

"You risked your own life and, more importantly for me, you risked Matilda's life with your incredibly stupid and reckless behaviour."

"So what? That's what she's being paid for," she retorted with sullen insolence.

Abruptly, Heller twisted the steering wheel and screeched the Mercedes to a sudden stop by the side of the road, waving on the other vehicle when it slowed down. It drove off obediently. He opened his door angrily and slammed it shut, stalking around to the passenger side. Flinging Lily's door open, he roughly pulled her out of the car, dragging her by her arm to an alcove on the deserted footpath created by a couple of large industrial skips.

Dixie and I watched anxiously from the vehicle, clasping hands. "That man scares the shit out of me," she whispered fearfully. I nodded fervently in agreement.

We couldn't hear what Heller was saying, but he seemed to be aggressively pointing out a few home truths, towering over tiny Lily in an extremely threatening manner. She looked rebellious though, and flung some retort back at him, one hip thrust forward, hands on her waist, that self-satisfied smile on her face. He sneered at her and suddenly raised his hand, slapping her hard across the face, unbalancing her and causing her to stumble. Dixie and I flinched in unison.

She righted herself and launching forward, tried to spit in his face. He slapped her again, harder. She looked up at him, her hand cupping her stinging skin, tears flooding her eyes. He stepped closer to her and leaned down to yell right in her face, poking her in the chest repeatedly with his index finger. She was genuinely sobbing by then, big heaves lifting her shoulders, until she sank to the ground holding her arms above her head protectively. He pulled her up roughly by the arm and dragged her back to the Mercedes where he threw her onto the front seat. He slammed his door hard when he returned to his own seat.

Heller didn't drive away. We all sat in silence, except for Lily's heavy sobs that slowly subsided to watery sniffs. Dixie and I hardly dared to breathe and had almost permanently melded our hands together, we were clutching each other so tightly. Lily wiped her nose on

her shirt-sleeve and sat quietly, her breathing ragged. Heller clenched the steering wheel with his hands. His voice was quiet, but firm.

“Mrs Hayek has indicated to me that she would now like to return to her hotel. I have suggested that she needs to provide her husband with a version of today’s events that explains her appearance, and she has agreed to do this. Matilda, I need you to be there for that explanation. Do you think you are capable?”

I swallowed nervously and replied, “Yes Heller,” even though I wasn’t sure I was capable. It just didn’t seem like a good time to say no to him.

“Dixie, I am taking you home immediately.”

“Yes Heller,” Dixie whispered, uncharacteristically cowed.

He drove off with a squeal of tyres and we travelled in complete silence, punctuated only by an occasional sniff from Lily. Heller pulled up outside of Dixie’s unit block and she leaned over to kiss me on the cheek, squeezing my hand, then scrambled out of the vehicle as fast as humanly possible. I half-reclined on the back seat as we drove off, clutching my injured arm, trying to stem the blood flow.

We pulled up outside Lily’s luxury hotel. I sat up and tried to look as though I wasn’t in extreme pain. Heller gestured impatiently for the valet to come forward. He spoke in a muted voice, slipping the man some money. The valet looked over at Lily, then at me, eyes wide. But it was a six-star hotel and he’d been hired in part for his ability to be discreet. He murmured some instructions and Heller drove off slowly around to the back of the hotel where there was a staff entrance. The valet met us at the door and bundled us to the staff elevator where we were able to arrive at Lily’s suite without attracting unwanted attention.

Unfortunately for Lily though, her husband had returned to the suite from his meetings prior to our arrival. He regarded us with horror, his eyes flicking from his distressed wife, dressed only in a long unfamiliar t-shirt, a grim-faced Heller and me, trying gamely to hide my injuries. Lily burst into tears and threw herself on him, clinging to him pitifully. He patted her back consolingly, but his eyes moved to Heller for an explanation.

“I’m afraid that your wife has been exceedingly foolish today, Mr Hayek,” he said, glancing at the weeping woman coldly. “She has deceived both you and Ms Chalmers about her activities. She rang Ms Chalmers this morning to advise that she would be spending all day with you and that Ms Chalmers would not be needed today. I presume that you thought she was with Ms Chalmers?”

Hayek nodded, pushing Lily away so that he could see her face. She hung her head. “I was in meetings all day. What have you been doing, Lily?”

Heller refused to cover for her. “We don’t know. I’m sure she can explain that to you herself later. Fortunately for her though, Ms Chalmers happened to spot her walking around the city by herself. She rang me for advice and we agreed that I would join her and we would bring Mrs Hayek back to her hotel room. Ms Chalmers continued to follow your wife discreetly.”

Mr Hayek now pushed Lily right away and went to sit down on the sofa. I joined him by sitting on a nearby armchair without being invited, unsure that I could keep standing on my wobbly legs. I leaned against the back of the chair, faint with pain.

“Unfortunately, Mrs Hayek wandered into a very disreputable part of town and was attacked by a group of men. They roughed her up, tearing her clothes and robbing her of her valuables. Ms Chalmers ran to her rescue and was quite injured during the ensuing scuffle. I’m not sure what would have happened then, but happily my men and I turned up and were able to scare away the attackers.”

Mr Hayek’s eyes flew to me and he took in my paler-than-normal, pinched appearance, emerging bruising, red-rimmed eyes and the blood on my arm. He then silently absorbed

Heller's cuts and bruises as well. I noticed that he avoided looking at Lily.

"Your wife is very lucky that she was only mugged and that nothing worse happened to her today. The outcome could have been much more serious, I'm sure you'd agree," Heller finished reprovingly. My Hayek stood up and shook Heller's hand, thanking him gratefully, and then did the same to me, apologising for his wife's deceit. He wasn't the type of man who appreciated being told how to manage his own wife, but accepted Heller's brutal honesty and directness without complaint.

"Now that your wife has been delivered back safely to you, I must see that Ms Chalmers gets some medical attention. So if you will excuse us?" We took our leave, Mr Hayek's voice raised in anger before we even closed the door. I tried to find some scrap of pity for Lily inside myself, but there was nothing.

Back in his vehicle, I slumped against the door in the front seat as we drove back to the Warehouse. Heller rang Daniel to have Dr Kincaid on hand for our arrival. He glanced over at me a few times during the ride, but I didn't engage with him. I wasn't ready to talk about what had happened today. There was a lot to think about, and I wasn't sure how I felt about anything at that moment. And in any case, the pain was overwhelming all my thought processes.

In my flat I had to have my wound restitched, the doctor tutting at me for my carelessness in letting the stitches split, warning me about scarring. I bore his rebuke silently. Daniel sat with me, averting his eyes again. Heller stood at a distance, arms folded across his chest, watching, his face expressionless. The doctor made me undress down to my underwear so he could examine my other wounds and I didn't even care that the other two men were in the room.

He told me that I had strong bruising developing already on my back and legs where that thug had kicked me and on my jaw where Bourbon-Breath had punched me. After much poking and prodding he finally pronounced that I would live, but with my current level of pain that seemed a highly unfavourable prognosis to me. He ensured I had enough painkillers to get through the next few days and left.

I chased everyone else from my flat, made some toast and warmed up some frozen leftover soup. I took a long, hot shower, struggling with only one operational arm again, but managed to cope and felt much better afterwards. I ruefully viewed another ruined outfit lying crushed on the bathroom floor. *I'll deal with that tomorrow*, I thought wearily, kicking it into the corner. I brushed my teeth, popped another two painkillers, grabbed my phone and hopped into bed. I rang Dixie and we talked for an hour. She had almost recovered her equanimity with the assistance of a couple of glasses of cheap red wine.

"I nearly peed myself when Heller broke that dude's arm!" she confided. "You've got to get out of there, Tilly. It's not safe to be around him. He's terrifying!"

"I'm not scared of him," I said, and then backtracked. "No, I mean that I am scared of him in general, but I'm not afraid he's going to hurt me. I don't personally feel threatened by him. In some ways it's kind of nice to know that there's someone who is willing to come along and kick butt for me."

"Tilly!" she protested. "He didn't kick someone's butt! He smashed that guy's head into a wall until his nose broke and then broke his arm. It's not the same thing. And God only knows what he did to that man in the bar."

"Hey, are you feeling sorry for those thugs? They were going to rape Lily! That jerk punched me and kicked me *four times*! That other guy punched me in the jaw twice and he groped me everywhere. I'm in agony here because of him. Heller saved my life. God only knows what that man was going to do to me."

"But your life was only in danger because you work for him. He owes it to you to save

your life,” Dixie argued.

“Dixie, what do you think either of those men would have done to him? They would have killed him. What was he supposed to do?”

“I guess,” she admitted, reluctantly. “But you’re starting to go hard, Tilly. You better be careful. Men don’t like hard babes.”

I sighed. “I’m not going hard. I’m just really glad that Heller was there today, that’s all.”

“Yeah, me too, I guess. After you sprayed us all we weren’t much use to anybody.”

“I *said* I’m sorry.”

“We made a pretty good team though, didn’t we?”

I smiled, in painkiller nirvana. “We sure did.”

“Do you think Heller has another vacancy coming up? I think I might be good at that kind of work.”

I laughed. “I thought you just told me I should get away from him?”

“Well, you don’t want to look like a pussy either.”

I laughed again wearily. “Okay Dixie. These painkillers are starting to knock me out. You enjoy dreaming about Heller tonight.”

She laughed. “You too.”

I hung up the phone and fell asleep immediately.

## Chapter 18

It was night, or more accurately, early morning when I woke up. My bedside clock’s red digits read 2:23 AM. I rolled over, my body screaming in pain. Unbearably stiff, I knew I wouldn’t be able to get back to sleep for a while. *Hot tub*, I thought. That might relax my stiff muscles and make me sleepy. I fumbled around for some swimwear, discarding my bikini as impossible to put on with one arm and settled instead for a pair of boardies and a t-shirt. I contorted myself into them, grabbed a towel and, after some rough calculations regarding my painkillers, also grabbed half a bottle of pinot grigio from the fridge.

I climbed the stairs to the roof-top slowly and carefully, not wanting to wake anyone, but also because it was incredibly painful to move. There was bright moonlight that night and I padded over to the kitchenette to find a wine glass, bringing the bottle with me to perch on the edge. Once I was in, I didn’t want to get out to pour myself another glass. But as I approached the hot tub, I noticed a shadow already sitting in it. I recognised the silhouette. *Oh shit!* It was the very last person on earth I wanted to talk to right then. I froze, wanting to turn around and go back to bed, unsure if I’d been seen. I hadn’t exactly been silent. I half-turned.

“Don’t go, Matilda,” Heller said quietly. “We need to talk.”

“Are you decent?” I demanded, hoping that he would say no so I would have an excuse to leave.

He laughed softly. “Is that a philosophical question? If so, the answer is definitely no. If however, you’re asking me if I am clothed, then the answer is yes. I’m practicing for you being around now.”

I debated in my mind the advisability of getting into the hot tub with him, but in the end my screaming muscles won out. I carefully placed the wine bottle and my glass on its wide edge, and gingerly lifted my legs over the rim. I eased down into the warm, steaming water, being careful to keep my injured arm out, and gave an enormous groan of mixed pain and pleasure. I poured a large glass of wine and drank half of it in one gulp.

“You shouldn’t be drinking while you’re taking those painkillers,” he scolded gently.

“I know, but it’s been long enough since I took them to be okay.” I think.

“Would you like the jets on?”

“Yes, please.” He pushed the button and my body was assailed by powerful bursts of water. It was agonisingly blissful. I rested my head back on the edge and closed my eyes. The wine was already starting to take effect and I could feel my muscles relaxing.

“You have to go back to Mrs Hayek tomorrow,” he ordered casually, completely ruining my mellow.

“No way!”

“Mr Hayek rang me late this afternoon and said he was still occupied with business, and that his wife refused to have any other chaperone except you.”

“I don’t care.”

“It will be pure babysitting. I will ask Daniel to book you both into a show and restaurant and you will take her to the gallery and maybe some more shopping. Mr Hayek advised that he would like his servant to accompany you both at all times.”

I opened one eye and smiled. “Really? How interesting. Lily won’t like that.”

“There won’t be any more problems with Mrs Hayek. He told me how much they were both looking forward to returning to Jordan to start their family.”

“Poor Lily.”

“There are worse fates for a woman than being a wife and mother.”

“That’s your opinion. As a man.”

“She lives a privileged life.”

“She’s under his control.”

I relaxed my head back again and enjoyed the pummelling from the jets.

“Both of my men with me today have fallen in love with you,” he said, his smile shadowed in his voice.

I kept my eyes closed, refusing to rise to his bait. “Stop teasing. I didn’t even speak to one of them and I threw up all over the other one.”

“Clive told me that they couldn’t stop talking about you this afternoon. They were telling all the other men about what you’d done. You made a real impression.”

“A woman usually does when she’s covered in vomit, blood and snot,” I said dryly.

“They’re calling you The Capsicum Kid.” I tried to kick him under the water. He captured my foot, rested it on his lap and started to massage it. I made a feeble attempt to pull it away but he kept a tight hold. I gave up and let him rub it. In fact, it felt so nice that I plonked my other foot in his lap too, as a huge hint.

“Thank you for turning up when you did today, Heller. That man in the bar, he was strangling me. I couldn’t breathe. I’ve never been so afraid in my life. He said I had ruined his party, but that I could be his next playmate. He would have raped me if you hadn’t turned up. He touched me . . .” I took a deep, shuddery breath. “Oh God! He touched me everywhere. It was just awful.” I fought my emotions for a minute on remembering, blinking away the tears.

In the moonlight, his face turned stony with anger. “He got what he deserved, but I should have been there earlier. Then you and Dixie wouldn’t have been involved.”

“Lily was in my charge. I felt responsible for her.”

“You’re in my charge. I feel responsible for you.”

“I’m not in your charge, I’m your employee. There’s a big difference. Oh, and by the way, I am *not* your woman.”

“Those types of animals only understand women as possessions. Just as the only language they understand is violence. I hoped he would respect ownership and not escalate matters more. But no, he had no respect at all for the fact that you’re my woman.”

“I’m *not* your woman!”

“I know, but he didn’t.” He swapped feet. I was beginning to feel so relaxed that I was in

danger of drowning. The jets stopped and he leaned over to push the button again.

“What did Lily say to you that made you slap her face?” I asked, yawning.

“Something disgusting about you. She has a filthy mouth.”

“I know. I haven’t heard so much swearing since my last family gathering,” I joked tiredly.

He stopped rubbing my feet. “Are you afraid of me, Matilda?”

My eyes sprang open and I sat up, taking my feet off his lap. “Well, you’re physically powerful and authoritative,” I said hesitantly, “and I saw today that you’re pretty ruthless and willing to be violent too. So yes, I’m afraid of you in that respect. But as I told Dixie earlier, I’m not afraid of my own personal safety with you. I’m not afraid to be alone with you. Like now.”

His voice was quiet. “Thank you for saying that.” A brief silence. “I’m going to move over and sit next to you. Okay?”

“I guess.” He moved around to my side and sat close to me, slipping his arm around my shoulders, drawing me into his chest. I didn’t bother resisting because I didn’t want to and I leaned against him, listening to the steady strong beat of his heart, my uninjured arm resting across his bare chest. He slid his other arm around me as well and I felt him kissing the top of my head gently.

“There’s something about you that’s very soothing, Matilda. I feel calmer when you’re around. I can’t work out why, but maybe it’s because you’re the only person in this place without demons.”

“You have demons?” I murmured into his chest, half-asleep.

“We all do in this place. I can usually control mine, but late at night when I’m by myself, they haunt me.”

“Demons about what?”

“What I’ve done, what I should have done, what people have done to me.”

“This job might give me demons, though. Dixie said I’m becoming hard already.”

“Dixie’s wrong. And we’ll have to be vigilant to make sure you stay away from the side of this business that does give you demons. I wouldn’t want that for you.”

We didn’t talk for a while, enjoying the warm water until I couldn’t hold my eyes open any longer. Heller, sensing my tiredness, helped me from the hot tub and dried me off carefully.

“I’m afraid I’m going to have nightmares tonight,” I confessed sleepily.

“I’ll stay with you then.”

But instead of taking me back to my flat, he took me to his. He rummaged up some dry clothes for me, one of his t-shirts and a pair of cotton boxers that were far too big, but which had a drawstring I could tighten enough to stop them falling off me. I changed in his bathroom, which was reached by walking through his large walk-in robe. I glanced quickly at its contents while I passed through, noting its neat military orderliness. His bathroom was also spotless and luxuriously fitted out in black and white marble tiles. I left my wet clothes in a messy pile on his bathroom floor and climbed into his bed, too tired to argue when he climbed into the other side. He slid his arms around me and pulled me to him. I relaxed in his arms, drinking in the faint remnants of the cologne he had applied that morning, a heady masculine scent. He moved against me, settling himself, and I was struck by a disturbing thought.

“Heller?”

“Mmm?”

“Are you wearing anything?”

Without another word he released me and slipped out of bed, padding into his walk-in

robe. I heard a drawer opening and closing and a slight rustling of cloth before he rejoined me.

“Yes,” he finally answered. I reached out hesitantly to touch his hip, now safely encased in a silky material. He laughed softly. “I haven’t worn anything to bed since I moved out of home.”

“And when was that?” I was always eager for any details about his life.

He laughed again and kissed me on my forehead. He wasn’t going to tell me. Neither of us said anything for a while. I thought about the day’s events again and shifted uncomfortably.

“I hurt everywhere,” I mumbled.

“I know, my sweet. The pain will pass eventually.” He gently stroked my hair and kissed me on the forehead again.

*It would be nice to be his woman,* I thought drowsily. *Maybe I should think about it.* I tried to stay awake as long as I could to savour the experience of being so close to him, but the warm jets and the glass of wine had done their job and I quickly fell asleep.

I woke once during the night, sitting up, heart pounding, panting with fear. I’d been dreaming about Bourbon-Breath and the sickening feel of his hand down my pants. Panicked, I didn’t know where I was, but then felt strong safe arms around me pulling me back down to the bed, holding me close. I heard the reassuring murmur of Heller’s voice in a language I didn’t understand, felt a shower of soft kisses on my face and fell back again into deep slumber.

When I finally awoke, I was alone. There was a note on the pillow next to me.

*Don’t forget about Mrs Hayek. H.*

I groaned to myself and gingerly got out of bed. Everything still hurt, even more than yesterday. I limped out to Heller’s living area, taking in the tasteful muted decor dominated by his black European designer furniture. I went back to my flat, showered and ate. I dressed carefully from my depleted stock of clothes and applied my makeup, leaving my hair loose. I found an old shopping bag from some boutique and gathered up the scarf and earrings that Lily had bought me, the tags still intact. I was returning them to her, not wanting to keep any memento of our relationship. I figured that my nightmares and scars would be enough.

I rang Rumbles and he knocked respectfully on my door after ten minutes. He enthused about my role in what had happened yesterday, and I was surprised to find out that Heller had been only partially teasing me last night. His team really did give me credit for my capsicum spray stunt, and that gave me a warm glow that lasted the rest of the day.

Mr Hayek had not left for his meetings when I was admitted into the suite. His eyes grew large with interest when he noticed that I had my hair long and loose. I forced myself to be polite and professional. Once again he thanked me warmly for my role in Lily’s rescue and assured me that such an incident would not occur again, because he was sending along his faithful servant who would be in attendance at every moment. The servant stepped out and nodded briefly, a smug smile on his face. I nodded back, without smiling.

Lily came out of her room, dressed very modestly, no jewellery and wearing flat, sensible shoes. She stared at the floor for most of the time. Mr Hayek questioned me in great detail about our proposed itinerary for the day and I told him of the shopping we would do and the dinner and show that Daniel had booked for us. He nodded in approval. On our departure, Lily timidly leant up to kiss her husband goodbye.

He grabbed her by her upper arms and spoke sternly to her. “I want to hear that you have behaved yourself today, Lily.” She nodded submissively and I almost felt sorry for her.

Almost.

The day passed at a tedious pace for both of us. Lily found it slow because she was completely restrained by the eagle eyes of the faithful retainer who no doubt had orders to report on any transgression. And I found it slow because I was in considerable pain and found walking around, standing or sitting for long periods very tiresome. At the restaurant where we ate, she made the servant eat at a table by himself. He glowered at us throughout the meal.

"I hate that man!" she whispered fiercely to me, careful not to look in his direction. "He will tell my husband everything that I do. I'm suffocating."

"That's for you and your husband to sort out, Lily. I can't help you with that," I said coldly. "I want to return the things you bought me. I haven't worn any of them. I will take them back for a refund for you, if you like."

"Do you hate me that much?" she asked, a plaintive tone in her voice, eyes sad.

I shrugged, bored. "You're definitely not my favourite person at the moment."

"Please don't be annoyed with me, Tilly. I really like you. And besides, I got enough grief from Heller yesterday. Was I ever wrong about him," she said sullenly. "He's nothing but a fucking asshole."

The servant glanced over sharply at her heated tone. She glared at him.

"You mean when he slapped you? He told me you had said something disgusting about me and that you had a foul mouth. What did you say?"

She fidgeted in her seat. "You'll be angry with me."

"To be frank with you, Lily, I couldn't possibly be any angrier with you."

She peered up at me, looking like a naughty child. "He was raging at me, telling me I must be insane to slash your arm and drink your blood and that I should get some help. It made me so angry that he thought he could talk to me like that! I'm his client!" I didn't bother to interrupt to remind her that it was actually her husband who was Heller's client. "He's so arrogant. I wanted to shock him." She paused and took a deep breath, staring at me with an uneasy mix of defiance and guilt, then lifted her chin with renewed boldness. "I told him that I loved drinking your blood, that it tasted as sweet as honey, and that I couldn't wait to taste your pussy too, because I thought that it would be even sweeter."

I gaped at her, my mouth open in revulsion, then stood up, threw my napkin on the table and stalked to the ladies' bathroom. There, I looked at myself in the mirror, willing my anger to subside. *Come on, Tilly, be professional*, I coached myself. I splashed some water on my face, patted it dry, adjusted my hair and picked a bit of spinach off my tooth. When I felt calmer, I went and sat back down at the table. I plastered on a game-show host, fakest-of-fake smiles for the sake of the servant. He was watching us intently, ready to pounce on any commotion.

"Ready to go, Lily? I hear that the costumes in this show we're seeing tonight are spectacular. We won't want to miss a moment," and I hooked my arm through hers and walked her outside to await a cab, leaving the servant to pay for dinner. The show was very impressive, but I was relieved when Rumbles picked us all up afterwards, dropping Lily and her watchdog at her hotel and driving me home. I popped some painkillers and went straight to bed.

The rest of the week with Lily passed in a similar fashion. She was completely restricted in her movements and had to tone her behaviour down considerably. Finally, I delivered her back to her husband for the last time, the couple due to fly out the next morning. I tolerated Lily's clingy and over-emotional farewell, shook Mr Hayek's hand, nodded briefly to the servant and went home. It was late Saturday afternoon and I was in the mood for relaxing.

I knocked on Daniel's door and found him with Niq, playing a blood-splattered shooting game on the Xbox. I cringed as I watched Niq blasting away someone's head into a bloody

pulp of sinew and bone, Daniel cheering him on.

“Yuck! That’s disgusting,” I complained. “I don’t think you’re old enough to be playing games like that, Niq.”

“Geez Tilly, lighten up,” he moaned, eyes fixed on the TV screen as Daniel threw a cushion at my head. I caught it and chucked it back at him.

I plonked onto the lounge between them. “I’ve finally ditched the crazy woman. How about a movie night at my place?”

They readily agreed, but only if I promised to cook them dinner. I protested, pointing out that I had been working all day and they should make me dinner, but it was two against one so I gave in graciously. Daniel and Niq finished their game and went to choose some DVDs while I went to the pantry for food. I decided on lamb cutlets with sweet potato mash and sauteed vegetables. Some fresh mango with vanilla bean ice-cream for dessert and I grabbed some microwave popcorn for the movie. Some juice for Niq and a couple of bottles of shiraz for Daniel and me. *Perfecto!*

I cooked dinner and they entertained me with all of the office news. It felt like years since I had met Lily, but it had only been a week. She had drained the life out of me.

“I forgot to say,” Daniel said later, his mouth full of ice-cream. “We ran into Heller when we were going up to the library and he said we could watch the DVDs at his place. He’s got the biggest TV you’ve ever seen. He said to come up after dinner.”

“Excellent!” I smiled and yes, I would be lying if I said that the thought of cuddling up with Heller on the lounge watching a movie didn’t cross my mind. Niq and Daniel washed up for me while I drank more shiraz and amused them with heavily censored tales about Lily. I would tell Daniel the whole truth later.

My place pristine, we trooped up the stairs to Heller’s place. Niq set the DVD up ready for watching while I cooked the popcorn. Daniel turned off the lights and the movie started.

“Shouldn’t we wait for Heller?” I asked, having anxiously watched for him.

“Heller’s not here tonight,” said Daniel, reaching for a handful of popcorn. He glanced at Niq. “He’s, er, gone out.”

“He’s what?”

“He’s gone out,” repeated Niq loudly, as if I was hard of hearing.

I relaxed back on the lounge. “So he’s gone to meet a client?”

“No!” said Niq scornfully. “He’s gone *out!*” And boring of my inability to understand the simple concept of ‘out’, he headed to the kitchen to pour himself another juice.

Daniel sighed and paused the movie, before lowering his voice so that Niq couldn’t hear, “Heller’s out on the prowl.”

“Out on the prowl?” I felt particularly stupid tonight because I was struggling to understand anything they said.

“He’s gone out looking for female company. Heller’s a man. He has a man’s needs. You know what I’m saying.” He blushed and went to restart the movie. I stopped him with a restraining hand on his arm.

“How do you know this? He might have gone to see a client?”

He looked at me with pity. “Because he *told* us that’s what he was doing tonight. He does it all the time. Every couple of weeks or so, Heller goes into the city. It’s no secret. He lets us know what he’s doing. He goes to one of the top hotels and picks up a woman. Someone in town for a conference or business or just a lonely wife. He doesn’t care. It’s all very casual. He doesn’t want a relationship. It’s just a night of sex.” And he blushed again.

“And he brings her *here?*” I cried in disbelief.

“God no! He uses her room. That’s why he goes to the hotel bars. Heller would never bring a stranger here. I thought you knew him by now?”

“Apparently not,” I whispered to myself and poured myself yet another glass of wine.

Niq returned and the movie commenced, but I couldn’t tell you anything about the plot, the actors or the special effects, of which there were many. I was dumbstruck, my head spinning from the shiraz and from what Daniel had told me. Heller was out getting laid with a complete stranger. His life consisted of a steady stream of one-night stands. He didn’t care about me. I thought that he did but I was wrong. God, I was mortified. I had completely misread him.

After the second movie, I was so drunk that I could barely move. I could hear Daniel and Niq discussing what to do with me as I lay flopped out on the lounge on my stomach, one arm and leg trailing on the floor. They fetched me a pillow and a blanket and rolled me into a better position, Niq deciding to sleep in Heller’s unit that night to keep an ear out for me. Daniel went home.

I was woken up by the sound of the front door opening. I sat up, no idea where I was, feeling a bit panicky. Along with my sore arm, jaw, back and legs, my head was also pounding and my mouth felt furry and tasted like a wino’s underpants. *Oh shit, how much did I drink last night*, I asked myself. Unfortunately, I wasn’t capable of doing any maths at that point.

“Matilda? What are you doing here?”

“What time is it?” I croaked, as my befuddled brain cells tried to regroup.

“It’s after four in the morning,” Heller said wearily, running his fingers through his hair. He looked damned good. Dark blue shirt, black leather jacket, tight black jeans, pointed boots. His ‘out on the prowl’ clothes, I suppose. I stood up, or rather I staggered to my feet, and went to face him. I stared up at him intensely. His face was softer, his lips redder and swollen, his icy eyes mellowed. He had a satiated look of contentment on his face that made me want to weep. He stank of expensive perfume and sex. I looked up at him reproachfully, unshed tears shining in my eyes.

He sighed and stroked my cheek gently with his fingers. I flinched from his touch. “Go to bed, Matilda. I’m tired. I don’t wish to talk to you now.”

I’m not a person who needs to be told things twice. I walked away from him and went back to my flat, flinging myself on my bed. For the rest of the night I was tortured by the image of Heller hungrily thrusting into a big-breasted woman with a fake tan, who was moaning ecstatically, her bleached blonde hair streaming on the pillow, her arms and legs, nails long and red, clinging around his torso, his hands massaging her breasts, his mouth smearing her red lipstick with deep fervent kisses. The tears trickled down my cheeks as I eventually fell asleep.

## Chapter 19

I woke with a thumping hangover. I lay in bed for a while, wishing that death would visit me quickly. Unfortunately, it didn’t. I eventually dragged my sorry butt out of bed and into the shower, leaning against the tiles, letting the hot water cascade over my aching head. I popped some paracetamol and drank glass after glass of water.

I spent the day in my pyjamas, eating leftover ice-cream and watching trashy daytime TV. I ignored every knock on my door and after the third time, jammed one of my dining chairs under the doorknob to stop any unannounced visitors. I had enough provisions to get me through a siege for a few days if necessary.

I rang Dixie, Mum, both my grandmothers, my two sisters-in-law, a couple of my favourite female cousins and my other girlfriends, determinedly cheerful. I didn’t want to tell

anyone how I felt, but I needed women and their sensible advice, their laughter and honesty. I was completely over men. After my last call, I hung up the phone. It rang immediately.

“Matilda, have you had the phone off the hook?”

“No.”

“I’ve been trying to ring you for hours. You can’t have been on the phone for so long.”

“I have.”

“I’ve been worried about you. You’re not answering your door. Are you all right?”

“Yes.” I hung up. The phone rang again. I lifted the handset, pressed the end-call button and took out the batteries.

*The English Patient* was on TV that night and I watched it, tears streaming down my face. I went to bed early, clutching a spare pillow to my chest.

The next day I felt like a human being again, but harder, much harder. I wouldn’t be fooled by a night-time foot rub from a sexy man in a hot tub again. I dressed casually and went to the office to check my emails. More spam, more crap from my family, more porn from Dixie, even though I’d specifically told her not to send me any. I sighed heavily. My life was the pits at the moment.

Niq walked in, ready to settle at his desk and start his school work.

“Hey cutie-pie,” I said to him.

“Hey Tilly. You haven’t forgotten that you promised to take me shopping, have you?”

“No,” I lied. “If you work hard this morning, I’ll ask Heller if we can go this afternoon. How does that sound?”

“Cool! Thanks!” He set to work with renewed enthusiasm.

There was an envelope in my in-tray. It was a letter, no postmark and no return address. It must have been hand-delivered. I opened it, noting the thick quality paper, emblazoned with the logo of the hotel that Lily had been staying at. The writing was large and extravagant.

*Dearest Tilly*

*I know that you’re very angry with me and will probably be glad not to ever see me again, but I wanted to thank you for everything that you did for me during my visit. I had a blast and wouldn’t have missed it for the world! My husband has forgiven me already (after I fucked his brains out last night!) and has now promised me my own sports car!!! Men are such suckers!*

*Please find enclosed a little token of my love and friendship.*

*Love Lily xxxx*

*Poor deluded fool*, I thought pityingly of Mr Hayek. A cheque fell out of the envelope, made out to me personally, and I nearly fell off my chair when I saw the five-figured amount written on it. I’d lived off less for an entire year! I shoved the letter and cheque in my drawer, before working industriously to finalise my report on the Hayek assignment so that Daniel could close the account.

Heller strolled into the office, dressed in the black *Heller’s* polo shirt, black cargo pants and chunky black boots. His eyes flicked to me, but he went over to Niq and pulled up a chair, listening intently for fifteen minutes while Niq explained his current schoolwork and what he was doing. He asked a few questions in a muted voice and then stood up, patting Niq affectionately on his back.

As he walked past my desk he said, “We need to talk,” and continued walking into his office. I stopped typing, saved my file, retrieved the envelope from my drawer and went in, taking a deep, calming breath beforehand. I sat down at his desk opposite him, my face a serene mask.

“Why the communication barricade yesterday?” he asked with deceptive casualness, swinging on his chair.

I shrugged coolly, my eyes on my hands. “I needed some down-time.”

“Was it because of anything I did?” I met his glance, directed at me from under his lashes in an uncharacteristically self-conscious gesture.

I shook my head, deliberately shifting my gaze to the window.

“So everything’s okay between us?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t it be?” I glanced out at the expanse of blue sky visible from his large windows, filled with a sudden strong desire to get out of this building. I wanted to feel warm rays of sunshine on my skin and breathe in some fresh air.

He drummed his fingers on the table. “I don’t think you’re being honest with me, Matilda. I think you’re upset with me and I’m not sure why. Is it something to do with the other night?”

I sat in silence, wistfully regarding that beautiful azure sky. He sighed in frustration. I returned my eyes to him and pushed the envelope across the desk in his direction. “Here you go. This should cover my upkeep for a while.”

He opened the envelope and read the short note, his eyebrows rising when he saw the cheque. He pushed the envelope back to me. I pushed it back to him. Frowning, he pushed it back over to my side of the desk.

“Matilda, it’s your bonus. It’s not for me. You earned it. I’ve already received my fee for that assignment and I can assure you that it will cover all of our upkeep for a considerable time.”

“I can’t keep it. They were your clients. It’s your money.”

He growled in exasperation. “I always let my men keep any tips they receive from clients. It’s only fair. A tip is for their particular service.”

“I don’t want the money. It’s an outrageous amount to tip someone.”

“You deserve every cent of it. Put it away for a rainy day.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No. It’s wrong.”

“What’s wrong about it?”

“I didn’t do anything to deserve it.”

“You saved Mrs Hayek from a dangerous situation and that’s important to her. She’s a very wealthy woman who likes to show her gratitude with gifts of money. Be graceful, Matilda.”

I exchanged an intense glance with him, losing the eyeball-battle as usual. Surrendering, I shrugged and took back the envelope. I wouldn’t like anyone to think I wasn’t graceful. Or grateful.

I changed the subject. “Niq wants me to take him to the shopping centre. I told him that if he worked hard this morning, I’d take him after lunch. Is that all right with you?”

He hesitated. “I’m not keen on the idea, but yes, I suppose so. If that’s what he wants.”

“That’s what he wants. It will be good for him to get out into the real world. He’s cooped up in here far too much.”

“It’s better that way.”

“Who for? You or him?”

“Both of us. Are we finished here? I have an appointment,” he asked bluntly. I took the hint and stood up.

“Can I borrow a car this afternoon?”

“I’ll ask Rumbles to drive you.”

That made my blood boil. “You never let me drive. Don’t you trust women drivers?”

“It makes me feel better to know he’s there.”

“I want to drive this afternoon. Like a normal person.”

“If I say no, will you lock yourself away again and not speak to me?”

“Possibly. Depends what mood I’m in.”

He gave a long-suffering sigh. “I don’t want you to do that again, Matilda. I was concerned.”

I didn’t want to hear about it. “Well?” I asked belligerently.

“Okay, but I’ve only got 4WDs. Do you know how to drive one?” I rolled my eyes in disbelief and muttered under my breath, but loud enough for him to hear, about him being a sexist neanderthal whose views of women must have been formed sometime during the Stone Age, although in all truth I’d never driven one before. His lips compressed with irritation. “The keys are in a locked metal cabinet on the wall as you go down the stairs to the second basement. You can take one of the fleet vehicles. Whichever one is free. You’ll need your staff card to open the cabinet to get the keys and then you need to swipe your staff card and the barcode of the keys in the reader to record that you’ve taken it. Do the same when you get back to record your return. You’ll also need your card to go in and out of the building.”

I stood up to leave. He added one last instruction, “And please be careful.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be careful of your precious 4WD,” I snapped.

“No, Matilda,” he reproved gently. “I meant be careful of you and Niq.” I walked out of the room without another word.

Heller left the office not much later, barely missing Daniel who was arriving. I showed him the cheque Lily had sent me.

“You deserve it,” he insisted.

“That’s what Heller said.”

“Don’t feel guilty about it. Just deposit it in your bank account.”

“I s’pose. Hey, Niq and I are going shopping this afternoon. Do you want to come? You never get away from here.”

He hesitated, hand subconsciously creeping up to his scar.

“You might meet somebody cute,” I teased.

“It’d be better than looking at you all day!” he retorted rudely. I laughed and ruffled his hair, messing up his fashionable do. He squirmed and pushed me away.

“Come on, it’ll be fun. The three musketeers go shopping,” I pleaded.

“I don’t like to go out in public,” he admitted. “People stare at me.”

“So what? Everyone stares at everyone. It’s human nature.”

“I should talk to Heller first before I decide.”

“Heller’s gone for the day. You’ll have to make a decision by yourself for once,” I teased again. He slapped my arm. “When was the last time you left this building?”

“I don’t know. It’s been a long time.”

He was reluctant and I should have just let it go, but I didn’t. The devil was inside me this morning and I pestered poor Daniel until he snapped and agreed to come with us. I knew it would annoy Heller and that’s all I cared about right then.

The morning passed. After a curt phone call from Clive, I went down to the security section to take delivery of a fresh canister of capsicum spray that he handed over in his usual dour manner. I received a few slaps on the back from some of the men I hadn’t even met, and that made me feel good.

I made the boys some lunch, checking Niq’s schoolwork while we ate. He had worked very hard, so none of us felt guilty in ditching the office for the afternoon. I asked Daniel if he was going to change, thinking he’d be overly hot in his long-sleeved shirt, but he didn’t want

to. That made me realise that I never had seen him in short-sleeves, not even on the hottest day. I briefly wondered why and determined to ask him the next time we were alone.

I found the car keys and picked up the last 4WD left in the garage, as instructed. I regarded it with dismay, because it must have been one of the oldest of the *Heller's* fleet, an ugly workhorse of a utility vehicle. It had surely been designed for some bone-rattling charity endurance race across all the deserts of the world, not urban living.

I almost needed a ladder to climb into the driver's seat. After three minutes fumbling around adjusting the seat that some giant of a man had pushed back to its maximum capacity so I couldn't even reach the pedals, and another two trying to work out how to turn the vehicle on, we finally drove cautiously out of the Warehouse. It was like a tank to drive and I wasn't comfortable perched so high above the traffic manoeuvring the blasted thing around. And I felt guilty about the environment the whole time I was driving, worried that all the other drivers were judging me as a greedy petrol-guzzler.

The shopping centre was surprisingly busy for a week day afternoon and we had to negotiate our way to the far end of the carpark to find a free spot. It took me five attempts to get the tank into the narrow car space, terrified of damaging either it or the neighbouring cars. Daniel and Niq laughed at me the whole time.

"Get stuffed, the both of you," I suggested testily, as I finally was ready to turn off the ignition.

Niq jumped out of the car excitedly. Daniel seemed tense. I gripped his hand and squeezed it, giving him an encouraging smile. He took a deep breath and opened the door. As we walked to the centre, I noticed that he didn't make any eye contact with other people, staring resolutely at the ground. I was shocked at how rudely some people gawked at him. Not just him either. Niq, in full Goth regalia, was also the object of curious looks, but boldly stared down anyone who dared to look at him. I admired the kid's spirit.

They were immediately drawn to a large electrical store. I left them at the store briefly while I went to deposit Lily's cheque in my rainy day savings account that had less than five dollars in it. The cheque boosted it considerably and I felt almost rich as I walked back to meet up with the boys. Niq had his arms full of CDs and Xbox games. Daniel was overdosing on DVDs.

"Who's paying for all of that?" I asked, laughing.

"Heller," they responded simultaneously.

For myself, I picked out a purple iPod to help motivate me while I exercised as I had promised myself, and a new digital camera to replace the one I had to hock to pay the rent all those months ago when I was destitute. We paid for our purchases. Daniel insisted I put my goods in his basket, but I firmly declined, determined to pay for them myself. I didn't want to be in Heller's debt anymore than I had to.

We visited a giant bookstore next. Niq loaded up on anime books and I browsed the cooking section with Daniel. He picked out four cookbooks for me, demanding that I make something from one of them tonight for him and Niq. I told him I'd think about it. Next we hit a jeweller's where Niq pored over the Gothic earrings and rings, buying a couple more of each. Then Daniel wanted to browse a high-end shoe shop, finally emerging with two new pairs, after much discussion and light-hearted arguments from the three of us.

We'd been in the centre for over two hours by then and to be frank, I'd had enough. I never was much of a one for shopping, never having had much money to spend before. I suggested we stop for refreshments and we found a quiet coffee shop where I ordered Daniel and myself lattes and Niq a chocolate milkshake and a plate-sized jam doughnut that I promised not to tell Heller about.

"This is fun," Niq said, slurping happily, in sugar heaven. "We should do this more

often.” I agreed with him. Even Daniel nodded his head cautiously.

“Seen any cute girls?” I teased Niq. He poked out his tongue. “What about you, Daniel? You see any?”

“Who said I’m interested in girls?” he replied. Niq and I exchanged a surprised glance. I leant my chin on my hands and stared at him intently.

“Daniel, how *fascinating*! Please tell me more.”

“Mind your own business, Tilly.” He swatted my arm. “You see any cute boys?”

“For me or for you?” I teased. Another swat. “Nah, not me. I’m not even looking. I’ve given up on men forever.”

“Don’t let the security men hear you say that. They’re all pretty keen on you,” Daniel said slyly. “I hear they’re even currently running a poll on your best feature.”

“Are you kidding me? That’s so demeaning!” I stared at him, outraged. Then I was overcome with reluctant curiosity. “What’s the front-runner so far?”

“Your boobs are ahead by miles, followed by your legs, your butt, your eyes, your lips and your hair.”

“Unbelievable! What a bunch of unevolved knuckle-draggers! What does Heller have to say about all of this?”

“I think he voted for your boobs,” Daniel grinned. Niq sniggered quietly into his hand.

“You’re just making all of this up,” I accused.

He laughed. “No, I’m not. Why else do you think he hired you? We all know it wasn’t for your work skills.”

And for that comment he received a well-deserved thumping.

“Ow!” he complained. “You’re mean.”

“Come on, I’m sick of you. Let’s go home.”

I paid the bill and we gathered up all our new possessions and headed back to the tank. As we approached it I noticed a group of young men, late teens and early twenties, lounging on the backstairs to an adjacent office block. They were smoking and drinking, uncouth and idle. You know the type – losers with no jobs and no prospects, who hang around in public spaces all day, harassing innocent passers-by. They started heckling us as we walked past. Niq and I stared back at them, Daniel kept his eyes on the ground.

As we passed them, a rough voice yelled obscenities at us, calling out “Frankenstein” and “Goth shit”. I gave them the finger as we walked past, which only made them jeer even harder. My blood started to boil immediately. How dare these scumbags even think to pass judgemental comment on my two beautiful boys? I stopped briefly, before deliberately continuing to walk the ten metres to the tank. I unlocked the back of the 4WD and we threw our purchases inside. I turned around and walked slowly back to the men.

Have I mentioned that I have a temper?

Daniel pulled on my arm. “Don’t bother with them, Tilly. They’re not worth it. It’s better for us to leave now while everything’s still calm. Think about Niq.” I shook his hand off. My experience at the bikie bar had given me unwarranted confidence in my ability to sort things out, especially as I had a fresh canister of capsicum spray in my handbag.

“Got something you want to say to my friends and me, boys?” I asked aggressively, hands planted on my hips.

“Yeah, we do,” drawled the dominant one standing up and approaching me, his unattractive thickset face spotted with erupted pimples, his fair hair shaved down to his flaky scalp. “We hate freaks. And your friend’s a freak, aren’t you, Frankenstein? A fucking freak. Look at you! They didn’t even stitch you up properly. You’d make grown men cry with that fucking ugly face.”

Geez, I was angry. “Don’t you call him that again.”

“Or what, bitch? What’s a choice piece of pussy like you hanging around with Frankenstein and Goth shit anyway?”

“I said don’t call him that again.” My hand closed over the capsicum spray in my bag. Flaky-Scalp sneered at me. “Why don’t you let your boyfriend talk for himself?”

“Why don’t you let *your* boyfriend talk for himself?” I snapped back, nodding towards the ugly, chunky man standing next to him. There was a brief ripple of sniggering among his crew. He turned around angrily, staring them down.

“The pussy’s got a pussy for a boyfriend,” he scorned.

“*That* pussy’s got pussy for a boyfriend,” I scorned back, pointing at my tormentor. More sniggers. I was starting to enjoy myself. This was too easy. Growing up with two older brothers you learn quickly that the mindless and irritating parroting of another person’s comments is the best way to really annoy someone fast.

“Fuck you, bitch!”

“Fuck *you*, bitch.”

Flaky-Scalp screwed his face up with hatred and advanced menacingly towards me. I had momentary regrets for my impetuous behaviour, not realising before that he was quite so large or had such a low threshold for teasing – my brothers had always lasted much longer than him before they started chasing me around the house. But I stood unmoving, until he was exhaling his horrible breath down into my face.

I had absolutely no idea what I was going to do next.

“That’s not a polite way to talk to my friend,” said Daniel quietly, stepping up beside me.

“Oh, Frankenstein does have some balls, after all,” Flaky-Scalp said in the snidest tone.

Daniel turned to me, a puzzled look on his face. “I don’t understand, Tilly. Why does he keep calling me that? Is he such a dumb arse that he doesn’t know that Frankenstein was the *doctor* not the *monster*?”

I nodded gravely in scholarly agreement. “Oh, definitely a dumb arse, Daniel. Definitely.”

Without any warning, Daniel lashed forward, grabbing the man by his arm, twisting it up over his head and behind his back. He then kicked the back of the man’s knees, buckling them, and forcing him to kneel on the ground. His gang was real angry about that and crowded in on us. I held up the capsicum spray, pointing it in their direction.

“Want some instant pain, bitches?” I asked nastily. Not being good law-abiding citizens, they recognised what it was straight away and held their ground.

“I think this man would like to apologise to you for his dirty mouth, Tilly,” Daniel said.

“Fuck off, freak!” Then a scream of pain as Daniel twisted his arm back further.

“What do you say?”

Another twist. Another scream.

“Sorry!” Flaky-Scalp spluttered, tears springing to his eyes. Daniel twisted harder. “I’m very sorry for my dirty mouth, miss!” the man cried again.

The other gang members weren’t happy with this humiliation of their leader, one of them becoming particularly agitated. He was tall and thin with curly black hair, wearing a muscle shirt with no muscles to show in it. He was either braver or dumber than his comrades and it was hard to distinguish which, because he rushed me without any warning, knocking me to the ground. My breath flew out of my lungs as the capsicum spray canister flew out of my hands. It rolled inconveniently under a nearby car.

I spun myself over immediately and scabbled over to the car on my hands and knees to retrieve it. My attacker grabbed hold of my feet and roughly pulled me backwards to keep me away from the car as a couple of other members of the gang quickly ran past me to dive down towards it, in hopes of capturing the prized weapon. *This wasn’t going very well at all*, I

thought desperately. I dug my fingers into the rough, tarred surface of the carpark to prevent him pulling me any further, completely ruining my manicure in the process. I kicked out wildly and blindly with my right foot, collecting him with a mean crack to the jaw. He let go of me straight away, moaning in pain, his turn to fall backwards on his butt.

One of the gang members gave a triumphant cry as his hand closed around the canister, scrambling off his knees and to his feet, brandishing the canister at me as I stood up.

“Want some instant pain, bitch?” he asked spitefully, throwing my own words back in my face. I guess I deserved that.

I decided to ram him, planning to knock him off balance and bring the canister back into fair play again. I put my head down and bent my arm at the elbow to give me a bit of extra force and ran towards him. Panicked, he held up the canister and sprayed enthusiastically.

God smiled down on me at that moment because the idiot had the canister pointing in the wrong direction and ended up liberally spraying himself in the face. He dropped the capsicum spray as he dropped to the ground, whimpering in pain. The other guy and I lunged for it simultaneously, cracking heads in the most painful way before I elbowed him in the face to gain the advantage and the precious canister. I jumped up, ignoring my instant headache, held out the spray at arm’s length and sprayed everyone in the vicinity, including the guy who had already sprayed himself, just to be on the safe side.

“Scram!” I shouted at Daniel and Niq, and we bolted for the tank. Without even waiting for anyone to fasten their seatbelts, I threw it in reverse and screeched out of the carpark, driving dangerously up and over a garden bed in my haste, flattening a beautiful azalea shrub in full bloom. At the entrance to the shopping centre I didn’t slow down to turn right. Tyres squealing, I cut off a ute-driving tradie who let me know with a creative display of angry finger gestures just how little he appreciated my bad driving. Our last vision was of the men writhing on the ground in the carpark, rubbing their eyes.

I drove fast and recklessly and Niq babbled excitedly all the way home, still on his sugar-high. I was taking deep breaths trying to calm down, adrenaline pumping through my body, but Daniel was strangely quiet. I threw him a sideways glance. I had severely underestimated him.

“Daniel, that was amazing! I had no idea that you knew moves like that,” I gushed with admiration.

His voice was flat. “Do you really think I could live with Heller for so long and not be able to look after myself? It was the first thing he taught me. I don’t like violence though. I’d prefer not to use it in any circumstances. I’ve seen enough of it in my life. But I couldn’t let that man get away with being so rude to you.”

“Forget about me! He was unbelievably obnoxious to you. I’m sorry, Daniel. I badgered you to join us and you were hassled, just as you’d feared.”

His face was a mask and his body was still, except for his hands twisting compulsively in his lap for the rest of the drive home. He didn’t say another word, despite my agonised glances over at him. We unpacked the car and walked up the stairs from the basement, Niq rabbiting on the entire time. I asked Daniel in a low voice if he still wanted to come over for a dinner chosen from one of my new cookbooks.

“Maybe another time,” he mumbled, not meeting my eyes.

*Damn, I thought. What have I done to him?*

As we climbed to the ground floor, the door to the security section flung open and Heller and Clive emerged. Heller’s eyes immediately narrowed as he took in Daniel’s empty expression, Niq’s uncontained over-excitement and my scuffed appearance. Well, you can’t roll around in a carpark having a tussle with a few men without suffering some sartorial inelegance. Not to mention receiving some new injuries and having all your old injuries begin

complaining again.

“What happened?” he demanded.

I heaved a huge sigh, my shoulders slumping. In my vain stupidity I had honestly believed that I’d take on those guys and win hands down and that everyone would think it was a bit of a lark, and congratulate me on being such a tough chick. I was The Capsicum Kid, after all! I’d been an irresponsible idiot and I knew I had no choice but to confess to my further capsicum spray shenanigans. I waved Daniel and Niq upstairs and followed Heller and Clive into the security section where, being as light-hearted and humorous as I could and in my most charming manner, I told them what had happened. When I finished, I smiled at them sweetly and sheepishly asked for yet another canister of the spray. But far from laughing good-naturedly at my high jinks, they both remained stony-faced and distinctly unamused with my actions. Heller grew increasingly angry with me as he listened.

“Matilda, you cannot go around spraying people whenever you feel like it. Capsicum spray is a weapon and has to be treated seriously. It’s also very expensive. It’s not to be wasted on pranks,” Heller reprimanded in a loud and livid voice, his accent prominent in his fury. Every man in the section was holding his breath, listening intently though pretending not to be. I squirmed under his accusatory blue glare and the very public bollocking. He could at least have taken me into Clive’s office to tear strips off me, not do it in front of everyone.

“I didn’t spray them for fun, you know,” I protested. “They were insulting us and threatening us.”

His jaw tightened as he spoke. “You should have done what Daniel suggested and driven away without engaging with them. You escalated matters when you should have left the scene.”

“But they were . . .”

“*Don’t you talk back to me!*” he yelled, shooting ice daggers at me with his eyes and looming over me intimidatingly with his body. “*I don’t care what they were doing!*” I flinched backwards, quavering in my shoes, tears pricking my eyes, afraid he was going to slap me around like he’d done to Lily. I’d never been shouted at like that before in my entire life. “This is about *you* and *your* judgement and how you handle situations such as this. And it’s also a matter of your safety, which is important to me. What in God’s name were you thinking?”

He paced up and down the room angrily, kicking a chair that was in his way, sending it flying across the room. Several men had to jump aside to avoid a painful collision with it. When he returned to me, he stopped and glared down at me again. “Did you think that you could take on the whole bunch of them yourself? You’re not a superhero, you know. And did you stop to think that you had Niq with you? He’s only a child. In *my* trust! I’m going to seriously reconsider letting you take him anywhere if you’re going to drag him into such unnecessarily dangerous situations.”

“I’m so sorry, Heller. I won’t do it again, I promise,” I said, my voice trembling with genuine contrition, beseeching him with my eyes not to follow through with that warning. He had threatened me with the one thing I didn’t want to happen – that I couldn’t take Niq out anymore. I would hate it if my over-inflated confidence meant that Niq was shut off from the real world.

He stared down at me fiercely and almost unwillingly, his face softened and his anger dissipated.

“Okay then. As long as it doesn’t happen again,” he said, much more mildly.

I knew the men present thought I’d been let off the hook lightly, barely a smack on the wrist. Their faces gave them away. Heller even went to the cabinet to give me a replacement canister himself, handing it to me with a wry comment about saving it for emergencies next

time.

“Heller’s little pet,” I heard one of the men say scornfully to another in a carelessly loud voice.

“His little fuck-buddy is what I’ve heard, half his luck,” replied the other in a disparaging tone. They shared a dirty little snicker as they walked out.

Well, that was a harsh slap on the face for me. I hadn’t realised that was what the men thought about me and I could see I had an uphill struggle to gain any respect around this place.

## Chapter 20

Later that night I couldn’t stop thinking about the stricken expression on Daniel’s face and how quiet he had been on the ride back to the Warehouse. I decided that I had to apologise to him and left my flat to knock on his door. Niq opened.

“Hey sweetie,” I said. “Is Daniel around?”

“Nah, I think he’s gone up to the roof-top. He said he needed some fresh air. I wanted to go with him ‘cause I thought he looked a bit sad or something. But he got angry and told me to stay here.”

“Oh,” I replied, noticing the hurt in his eyes. “I think I’ll go and find him. Maybe I’ll have more luck. You okay by yourself, Niq?”

“Course I am!” he said scornfully and closed the door on me.

It was dark and cool on the roof-top, lit only by moonlight. It took a while for my eyes to adjust. I could make out the shape of Daniel sitting on one of the sun lounges. As I approached I noticed the quarter-empty bottle of whiskey and shot glass on the small table next to him. He was staring ahead at nothing, all his thoughts turned in on himself. His face was bleak and desolate in the half-light, his shoulders hunched protectively, hugging himself.

I took the seat next to him and poured myself a shot into the glass. He turned his head to look at me.

“Be careful,” he said bitterly. “You might get some freak germs drinking out of my glass.”

I slowly and deliberately raised the glass to my lips and swallowed the burning liquid, grimacing in the darkness. I hate the brown spirits.

“You might get some from me,” I said offhandedly and poured a double, placing it carefully between us. We shared the drink and sat in silence for a while, punctuated only by the occasional sniff from him, hinting at his current emotional turmoil. I waited patiently until he was ready to speak.

“They were right,” he finally said, his tone brimming with self-hatred. “I am a freak! An ugly, repulsive freak. I should hide away forever.” His head slumped down, his arms dangling between his legs.

I stood up, stepped over and kneeled in front of him, taking hold of his hands, trying to look into his eyes. They were full of tears, the moonlight glistening off his wet cheeks.

“Daniel, listen carefully to me. You are *not* a freak. You are a beautiful person in every way. I think you’re beautiful. I think every part of you is beautiful,” I said urgently, trying to get him to look at me.

He angrily wrenched his hands from mine and turned them over, savagely pushing up his sleeves. He thrust his wrists in my face.

“Are these *beautiful* to you? Is this something someone *beautiful* would do?” he spat out angrily, revealing the jagged scar tissue that ran across each wrist.

I took his wrists in my hands and tenderly rubbed my thumbs across the scars.

“Oh, Daniel. Yes, these are beautiful to me,” I replied softly. “They tell a story about a sensitive and wonderful person who was nearly destroyed by whatever terrible things happened to him, but who was strong enough to pick himself up afterwards and keep going.”

I gently pressed my lips to each scar in turn. We stayed like that for a moment, his breathing ragged and uneven. He took his hands away, stood up suddenly and pulled off his shirt. I stood up as well.

“How about these? Are these beautiful to you?”

“Oh my God,” I gasped involuntarily, clamping my hand to my mouth to silence myself as he exposed his torso. It was covered in hundreds and hundreds of thin scars, spread over his pale skin, so many that they criss-crossed each other. I lightly ran my hands across his chest, feeling the raised humps of his ruined skin.

“Yes,” I breathed, “these are so beautiful to me, because they’re part of you.” I leaned in to kiss each collarbone.

He shuddered and gave a small groan. I gently turned him around and ran my hands over the equally disfigured skin on his back.

*He didn’t do this to himself*, I thought. What in God’s name had he been through? I couldn’t even begin to imagine. I softly kissed each shoulder blade.

He slowly turned around again, leaning forward towards me so that his forehead touched mine.

“And,” he whispered, “what about this?” His fingers grazed his facial scar.

“Yes, that is beautiful to me too,” I whispered in response and with a trail of small kisses, travelled down the scar from the corner of his eye to the corner of his mouth. When I reached his mouth, he turned his head and our lips met hesitantly. I could taste the alcohol on his breath. We slid our arms around each other and drew together as closely as possible, kissing each other tenderly.

That infinitely sad and sweet kiss ended and we hugged each other.

He started to cry, huge heaving sobs racking his body. I held him tightly, murmuring what I hoped were soothing remarks, stroking him, until I felt his body relaxing and his breathing becoming even. My heart was aching with tenderness for him. At that moment, I experienced a depth of feeling for him that surprised and frightened me. I realised that I loved this vulnerable and fragile man in a way I had never loved anybody before. I wanted to protect him from his demons. I would deal with anyone who hurt him and then understood how that feeling had been responsible for my stupid actions earlier that day. And for the first time in my life, I knew what unconditional love meant. I loved Daniel.

Reluctantly, I pulled away and looked at him. He was exhausted and emotionally drained. I led him back to a sun chair and sat next to him, holding his hand. I ran my other hand gently over his chest, over his hundreds of scars.

“Who did this to you, sweetie?”

He took a deep breath. “My mother’s sadistic fuck of a boyfriend. It took a long time. Day after day. Every night, when my mother had passed out in her own vomit, which was every night, he would cut me. With a Stanley knife. After he had done other things.”

“Other things?”

“Yes. Other things. Sex things. These slices were his way of counting how many sex things he did to me. I usually got two or three fresh ones each night.”

“How old were you?”

He shrugged. “Eight, maybe nine. He wasn’t the first to do those things though. There were others, for as long as I could remember. But he was the first to mark me.”

“Your mother?”

He breathed in deeply. “She was a drunken junkie who should never have been allowed to have any children! She let men rape me in exchange for drug money. What kind of a mother would do that to her only child? I hope she rots in hell!” His hatred was vehement and so unlike his normal placid personality.

“What did you do?” I asked, blinking away my hot sympathetic tears.

“I ran away from home when I was eleven. After that sick monster did this,” touching his face. “I refused to . . . participate . . . in a group activity he had arranged with six other monsters. He became angry. The others held me down while he used one of those old-fashioned bottle-openers to teach me a lesson. They cheered him on until I was . . . subdued . . . and then they took turns with me. Over and over again, so roughly, until I couldn’t stand. I ran away that night.” He gave a sharp bark of laughter that held no amusement at all. “Well, I guess I should say more accurately that I crawled away that night. I wasn’t able to run for a while.”

I slipped my arms around him, and wondered whether Daniel was the gang-rape victim that Heller had spoken about in the car with Lily. He laid his head on my shoulder and I stroked his hair. “No wonder you had to look away when I had my stitches. Where did you go? Eleven is so young. Too young.”

“The street. Where else? I scrounged, stole, sold myself. Whatever it took to survive. When I fourteen, I picked up a very rough man. He left me badly injured, crying and bleeding in a dirty alley and I decided that there was no point in continuing my life. So I bought some rum, drank half of it, smashed the bottle, slashed my wrists with the broken glass and lay down to die. I wanted to die, was looking forward to the peace of death. No more beatings, no more rapes, no more disappointments. No hunger, no pain, no shame. No more loneliness. No more life without any love or friends. No more predators. No more wishing I’d never been born.” He was silent for a long moment, rubbing his eyes. “Blissful nothing. I knew nobody would care. Just one less street kid to worry about, right?”

I wanted to cry but instead stroked his hair tenderly and kissed his forehead. When I was sure that my voice wasn’t going to wobble, I asked, “And?”

“Heller stumbled on me. Literally.” His laugh was dry. “He tripped over me chasing someone down the alley.”

“He took you to the hospital?”

“No. He took me back to his home, the one he had before this place, and nursed me back to health. Sounds corny, but that’s what he did. Sid and Clive were already living with him by then. Niq wasn’t. I was very suspicious of them all at first. I kept waiting for some request for payback, a certain look or touch that let me know what was expected of me – some kind of ‘party’ with them. Never happened. Then I started waiting for him to turf me out. It’s not easy to raise a teenager who hasn’t had a good life and I admit I wasn’t an angel. I was wild with anger at the world and I took it all out on Heller. I made his life very difficult at times. But he didn’t turf me out either.”

He laughed, but only with his normal gentle, affectionate humour this time. “I remember so many times struggling in his arms because I was threatening to leave and he wouldn’t let me. I bit him, I kicked him, I punched him, I spat on him, I cursed him. I stole money from him and used it to buy booze and pot. I’d stagger home drunk and stoned and yell at him and swear at him and tell him that I hated him. I even kept trying to bring men back to his place, so I could earn some money for more booze and pot. And when he wouldn’t let me, I sneaked out and picked up men anyway. He and Clive spent half their lives out on the streets looking for me. God, I was horrible to him. But he never gave up on me, even at my worst. Not once. He persevered with me, showed me patience, helped me realise who I really was and could be, not just what life had made me. He forced me to study, helped me get a qualification in

business management, taught me life skills and then even gave me a job. So here I am still. And I will probably never leave him, he means that much to me. I love him more than I ever thought I'd be capable of loving someone."

He was silent again, before saying quietly, "I was a nobody and he made me a somebody."

I was so touched by his story that I couldn't speak for a while, overcome by emotion. I hugged him tightly. When I could muster my voice again, I asked, "And does Niq have a similar history?"

"Kind of. And so do Sid and Clive. But I'll let them tell you their stories themselves someday when they're ready."

"What happened to the boyfriend? The one who cut you?"

He didn't answer straight away. "I'm not sure. Heller tracked him down and later told me he'd dealt with him. He wouldn't tell me anymore, but just said that I didn't need to worry about him ever again. I don't know what happened, and to be honest, I don't really care."

I absorbed what he'd said. "Do you think that Heller . . ."

"I believe that he took care of that man permanently. But we've never discussed it. And if he did, then I'm glad that he did. I hope he did him slowly and I hope he hurt him badly." The vicious hatred in Daniel's voice settled uneasily into the balmy night air.

"What about your mother?"

He was evasive. "I'm not sure. But I don't care if she's dead either. I hope she's dead."

We sat in silence for a while. My head was spinning. Could Heller really be a cold-blooded killer? And did it matter if he was, if he killed such monsters?

Daniel yawned hugely.

"You should head off to bed, sweetie," I suggested. "You look whacked."

He protested weakly.

"Go on," I insisted. "Go to bed and get some sleep. I'll clean up here. Or do you want me to sit with you for a while tonight? I could stay with you if you like. I'll sleep on your lounge."

He gave a small, crooked, heartbreaking smile and shook his head. We walked to the stairs together holding hands. At the door, he turned and came back, kissing me on the cheek and saying simply, "Thank you for listening, Tilly. I've never really spoken to anyone besides Heller about it all before. It's made me feel – I don't know – sort of relieved to tell you. You're so easy to talk to."

I hugged him tightly. "I'm so glad we had this chat, Daniel. I think I understand you much better now." He gave his half-smile, kissed me on the cheek again, and slipped downstairs to his flat.

I watched him disappear before turning back to the chairs to clear up. A dark shape stepped out of the shadows in front of me, blocking my path.

"*Shit!*" I shrieked in fright.

"It's only me," the shape said.

"*Jesus, Heller!*" I said, my hand pressing against my pounding heart. "You scared me half to death. What are you doing up here?"

"I might ask you the same question," he shot back. An appalling realisation dawned on me.

"You've been here all along, haven't you? Can't I have any privacy in this place?" I demanded wearily, sinking down onto one of the sun chairs. The breeze picked up and I shivered. He stood over me.

"I witnessed what happened, yes. Very touching, Matilda," he answered, his face unreadable in the dark, his tone wooden. I bristled immediately. I sensed some kind of strong

suppressed emotion radiating from him, unsure what it was, but pressed on regardless.

“You shouldn’t spy on me.”

“I was up here on the roof-top before you even arrived,” Heller explained with deceptive patience. “I followed Daniel. Niq told me he was coming up here. It had nothing to do with you.”

“So you were spying on Daniel?”

“No,” he said through gritted teeth. “I was not *spying*, I was keeping a watch on him. That’s what I do when he gets in this kind of mood. I need to make sure he is protected.”

“Protected from himself,” I stated bluntly.

“Yes.” He gave a mirthless laugh. “Maybe this is a surprise to you, Matilda, but I care very much for Daniel. I don’t want anything to happen to him. In fact, I care very much for everyone who lives with me.” He shot me a pointed glance. I turned away, hugging myself tightly.

But I was still miffed about his prying, remembering what Daniel and I had done and said. “How dare you listen in on what we were saying? That was a private conversation between Daniel and me. You had no right to listen. It was *private*! Do you even know what that means? It had nothing to do with you. Nothing! You should have left,” I spat out angrily.

It had been a long and trying day. I was emotionally drained and my arm was aching again. I’d rarely felt so angry so quickly. I admit it, I completely lost my temper. I did not want to speak to Heller right then, so jumped up and moved to pass him, my good hand pushing hard against his chest to no effect.

“Get out of my way!” I snapped.

Before I knew what had happened, my arms were pinned behind my back and I was arched backwards, his body pressing down on me. He leaned over me until his face was only a few centimetres away from mine and I could feel his breath on my face.

“Don’t ever raise your hand to me again, Matilda,” he hissed menacingly between clenched teeth. “Do you understand?”

I nodded quickly in fear, my eyes glued to his. He let go of me, then wrapped his arms around me pulling me in tightly against his body, pushing my face against him. I struggled furiously and he wrapped his arms even tighter, impeding my breathing and restricting my movement. With no choice, eventually I calmed down, and as I stood there imprisoned in his arms, my head against his neck, listening to his pulse, breathing him in, my anger melted away. This was a man who had rescued and nurtured at least four damaged people, maybe five if you included the mythical Victor. It was no wonder that he was so protective of them. When I was calm for a while, he kissed me gently on the forehead and released me from his grip. Silently, without a second glance, I walked away and left him alone on the roof-top.

## Chapter 21

The next day I was in trouble again, twice-over. As soon as I arrived at work, Heller called me into his office where he ticked me off for letting Niq have sugary foods the day before, complaining that the little teenager had been bouncing off the walls all night long, chattering non-stop and refusing to go to sleep.

I apologised and promised not to buy him anything like that again. And I almost meant it.

Later that afternoon, he yelled at me to come into his office again where he berated me about the azalea bush caught in the grill of the 4WD that I’d driven to the shopping centre. It was only discovered when the next men to drive the vehicle investigated why it was overheating and making a funny noise.

I tried to explain my extreme hurry to depart the carpark and how driving over the garden bed had actually been a clever and strategic shortcut, but he wasn't buying my story. And it all only served to remind him of my altercation with those men and my misuse of the capsicum spray and he grew even angrier. To Daniel and Niq's great amusement, I was sent back to my desk in disgrace, the vague threat of never driving a *Heller's* vehicle again hanging over my head.

The day after that, even though I wasn't sure whether he had calmed down or not, I stood at his office door trying to rally my courage to go in and talk to him. Before I could knock though, he looked up and noticing me hovering, gestured for me to come in. I sat down opposite him, leaned on his desk with my elbows and looked at him beseechingly. I knew he wasn't going to like what I had to say.

"What is it, Matilda?" he asked, growing impatient, leaning back in his chair.

"My mother would like you to come to lunch on Sunday," I started, hesitantly. I had no idea how he was going to react.

He stared at me as though I had just told him that I liked to eat spiders. "Why?"

"Because she wants to meet you."

He shrugged indifferently. "You may tell your mother that I don't care to socialise."

"She's not really asking to meet you, Heller, she's demanding to meet you." He sat forward in his chair and looked at me with some interest. I nervously continued. "She's only just become aware that I'm living with four men and a teenage boy."

"Just become aware?"

"Well, I may have inadvertently forgotten to tell her that part of our arrangement," I confessed.

He raised his eyebrows. "How did she find out then?"

"I don't know but when I find out who blabbed, I'm going to kill them. She hit the roof! Ranted at me for fifteen minutes straight on the phone last night. The only way I could get her to stop was to promise to let her meet you." I paused. "She means well, she's just worried about my safety. And my morals."

"And she now insists on meeting the potential despoiler of her darling daughter?"

I smiled. "Something like that."

He leaned back in his chair, his arms behind his head and regarded me coldly. "Sorry Matilda, but as I said, I don't care to socialise. Particularly with people's mothers."

"And that's that?"

"Yes." I knew there was no point trying to persuade him otherwise.

That night I rang Mum and told her that Heller was too busy, but that I would love to come for lunch. She was not happy, to say the least. She took it as a personal affront. I had to hold the phone away from my ear during her tirade. I became cranky.

"Mum, he's a business owner. He works all hours of the day and night. He doesn't have a normal life like other people, so you can't expect him to behave like other people! He's busy!"

"Why are you defending him against me, Tilly? Are you involved with him? Are you sleeping with him?" she demanded angrily.

"Mum! Not that's it's any of your business, but no! For heaven's sake, he's my boss." Hmm, today probably wasn't the time to tell her that I thought about it constantly though.

We hung up, the atmosphere tense between us. My mother is not a prude and is not clingy; she is normally a well-adjusted, loving homemaker. But I am her youngest child by some years (my two older brothers are in their mid-thirties), and I'm her only daughter, so she is very protective of me, as is my father. She worried constantly about my virtue, without accepting that my virtue was long gone. I felt bad that we had argued, but my sex life wasn't

any of her business. Not that I even had one at the moment for her to worry about.

The next day Heller and I drove out to meet a potential new client.

“You got me in trouble with my mother,” I told him sulkily.

He was surprised. “What did I do?”

“You refused to come over for lunch. Now she thinks I’m sleeping with you.”

“Because I refused to go for lunch? That doesn’t seem logical to me, Matilda.”

“There’s *nothing* logical about it. I’m going to have to face a third-degree when I go for lunch. You don’t know what she’s like. She’s very persistent. And she always knows when I’m lying.”

“But you’ve got nothing to lie about. You aren’t sleeping with me, so what are you worried about?”

“Oh, you just don’t understand. There’s going to be a scene.”

“And so what if we were sleeping together? It’s not illegal for two adults to do that, you know. I hear that some people even enjoy it.” He glanced sideways at me, that sexy, sly half-smile arching his beautiful mouth.

“Hmm, really? I must try it again sometime before I die,” I said dryly.

He looked at me again, grinning. “Been a while, has it?”

I nodded and gave a frustrated laugh. “Seems like forever.”

“There are plenty of men out there, Matilda. No reason for going without,” he advised.

“I know, but I suppose I just want . . .” And once again, I wasn’t able to finish that sentence.

He waited for a moment. “What is it that you want?”

I was honest. “I don’t know.”

“I think that’s your real problem, Matilda. You don’t know what you want in life.”

I groaned to myself – was he going to give me his version of The Lecture? I readied myself for it, but we continued to drive in silence. Because he didn’t preach at me, I thought about what he’d said. It had the unmistakable glimmer of truth about it. I *didn’t* know what I wanted in life. But I knew that I was a little closer to fulfilment now that I’d started working for him and had a purpose and a sense of belonging.

He spoke again. “Your mother should realise that you are a grown woman and can make your own decisions about your life. Whether they are good or bad.”

“Tell me about it!”

“Look, I’ll make you a deal. I’ll pick you up after your family lunch and meet your mother then.”

I was taken aback. “Thank you, Heller. That should shut her up for a while.”

“I’m only doing it because it will be enormously entertaining to me. I don’t imagine for a second that actually meeting me will allay your mother’s fears at all.” I hadn’t thought of that, but he was right. Meeting Heller would only make Mum worry about me even more. I sighed deeply and slouched down in my seat. “But if it will help, I promise I will swear on a stack of Bibles in front of your mother that her lovely daughter remains as virginal as the day I met her,” he teased.

I laughed. “That’s not saying much!”

“With those big angelic eyes and that sweet face, I think you look very virginal. Especially in that outfit.” I was wearing a white skirt-suit and pale pink shirt buttoned chastely to the neck.

I laughed again. “You’re very flirty today, Heller. That’s not like you.”

He raised his eyebrows in astonishment. “No one’s ever accused me of being flirty before.”

“Probably because you’ve never had a female staff member before.”

“True. Not sure if my men would be very keen on flirty.”

“Probably not,” I smiled. “But I don’t mind it, now and then.”

He smiled back as he pulled into the carpark of our next appointment location. I was about to alight from the vehicle when he stopped me, pinning me with his intense eyes. He suddenly leaned across the vehicle towards me and slowly unbuttoned the top two fastenings of my shirt. The touch of his fingers on my skin made my pulse race. He hesitated on the third button, but pulled his hand away instead.

“It’s a male client,” he explained softly, holding my gaze. “I don’t want you looking too virginal.”

And of course he was right. It’s amazing what a flash of cleavage can do to a man because we won that job without even trying. On the way back to the vehicle, Heller slid his arm around my shoulders and squeezed. I grinned up at him happily, glad that he was pleased with me for once.

Sunday rolled around quickly and Rumbles dropped me at my parents’ house for lunch, screeching off hastily almost before I’d even shut the door. He must have heard of my mother’s reputation.

Mum and Dad have lived in the same modest but comfortable one-story brick house for the past forty years, since they were newlyweds. It was located in a solidly middle-class suburb and they’d brought up their three children there. I was the youngest at twenty-five; my brother Brian, the oldest, was thirty-eight; and my other brother, Sean, was thirty-six. I had been an unexpected surprise, a later-age baby, much loved but a bit of an inconvenience to everyone. Because of the gap between my brothers and me, I wasn’t particularly close to either of them. However, my parents were ten times as protective of me as they had been of my brothers, and I had grown up sheltered and cosseted, and probably a little spoilt.

My arrival was loudly announced by my mother’s little silky terrier, Puddles, who yipped with overexcited enthusiasm before I’d even reached the screen door. I had to rub and pet and fondle him for a good few minutes before I was allowed to progress any further.

Both my brothers were already at the house with their wives – Sean and his lovely wife, Elise, and Brian and his wife, Gayle, and their two daughters, aged six and four. I hugged and air-kissed the adults and tickled the rugrats. My mother fussed around me as if I’d been away for three years instead of the actual couple of months.

“You’ve changed so much,” she exclaimed in surprise. “Your hair’s so glossy. Look at your clothes! And you’ve lost so much weight!”

“Not *that* much,” I protested immediately.

Sean, a tall, good-looking personal trainer, squeezed my bicep. “The girl’s got some muscles now.”

“You better believe it, buddy.” I fisted my hands and got in a few hard jabs at his own well-muscled arms.

“And loads more attitude too, by the sound of it,” Gayle drawled unpleasantly. She was my least favourite family member, and in my mind compared unfavourably with the good-natured and soft-hearted Elise.

“I think you look absolutely radiant,” said Elise, smiling fondly. “Working at that place really agrees with you, Tilly. Tell us everything that you’ve been doing since you started. Security and surveillance sounds so exciting!”

I gave them a brief edited version and caught up on everyone else’s news. Then I helped Mum serve the lunch. It was the traditional roast lamb with full trimmings and a baked pudding with custard for dessert. It had been a while since I had eaten such food and I enjoyed every bite. And yes, I probably did have one or two glasses of wine too many. Some things never change.

Afterwards, I helped Dad with the washing up and we chatted about inconsequential things. He was retired now and his conversation was completely centred on golf, his garden, his club and the house. When that was done and dinner had settled a little, I played for a while with my nieces, giving them wild piggyback rides up and down the hallway, Puddles yipping excitedly at my heels the whole time. They were squealing with delight and Puddles was making a row when I heard the doorbell ring. I jogged over to the door and flung it open, a small child firmly attached to my back, her little arms virtually strangling me, Puddles trying to climb up my jeans for a cuddle. It was Heller. I'd forgotten he'd promised to pick me up. Puddles took one look at him and ran off to cower near Mum's feet.

He stepped inside warily, taking in my flushed face, bare feet and wild hair. My little niece was screaming in my ear with joy, in that excruciating high-pitched squeal possessed only by little children that instantly ruptures all eardrums in a fifty-metre radius. He grimaced in pain while I was positive my hearing would never recover.

"More Auntie Tilly, more!" she insisted, kicking my sides brutally with her feet.

"Cara, you're strangling me! Not so strong, sweetie!" I choked out as she tightened her grip around my neck. Heller gently plucked her off my back and placed her on the ground. She immediately ran off to her mother, poking her head out at him from behind Gayle's knees, eyes huge.

He turned to me with a mocking half-smile. He looked immensely lickable today in a tight black, short-sleeved button-up shirt that accentuated his muscular arms and chest, his customary black jeans but with casual black sneakers.

"Hello, Auntie Tilly," he said.

I scrunched my nose at him and led him into the living area. The effect he had on the room was electric. Everyone stopped what they were doing instantly and turned to stare at him. Either he didn't notice, probably used to it after a lifetime of being gawked at, or he did notice but didn't care, because he didn't react at all with any discomfort at being the centre of attention.

I made the introductions casually. "Everyone, this is my boss, Heller. Heller, this is Mum, Dad, my brother Brian, his wife Gayle, my brother Sean and his wife Elise. You just met my niece Cara, and that little cutie over there is Libby. They both belong to Brian and Gayle." I noticed the other family member. "And that is Puddles, Mum's eternal puppy. And I'm sure you can imagine how he came by his name."

Heller nodded briefly at everyone as I introduced them, even deigning to stoop for a moment to scratch Puddles on the head, the poor animal trembling at his touch before fleeing to parts unknown. I'd forgotten for a moment that he already knew everything about my family, remembering the very comprehensive dossier he'd compiled about me.

Mum jumped up from the lounge and rushed forward. "Welcome, Mr Heller. I've been looking forward to meeting you. Oh my!" she exclaimed, eyes drinking him in. "You're so tall! And my goodness, look at those muscles! You must work out a lot, Mr Heller."

I had a terrible feeling she was about to reach up and stroke his arm, captivated by his well-built body.

"Mum!" I reproved hastily. "Why don't we make some coffee for us all? I'm sure Heller would love some coffee." He gave me a look that I didn't care to interpret, but I did not want to witness my mother hitting on my boss, especially in front of her family. It would be severely traumatising for all of us. I rushed Mum into the kitchen. "I'll help you get everything ready." And I abandoned Heller to the rest of my family like the coward I am, figuring he was big enough to look after himself.

In the kitchen, clattering cups, saucers, coffee pot, spoons, sugar, milk and biscuits together at warp speed as if she didn't want to miss a second of Heller's company, Mum

commented repeatedly on how tall he was, how handsome he was, didn't he have the bluest eyes and had I noticed his muscles? We carried everything into the living room and set it up.

Heller was on the lounge, wedged between Dad, who was regaling him with an exceptionally tedious story about having security screens fitted to the windows, and Gayle, who was sitting closer than was normally considered polite between complete strangers, staring at him reverently. Elise was more circumspect, sitting on a nearby armchair, but I noticed that she couldn't tear her eyes away from him either, her face flushed with excitement. Sean gave him polite, respectful attention, while Brian stared at Heller, sizing him up with an unfriendly look on his face, his arms crossed aggressively as he leaned against a wall.

Mum shooed Dad off the lounge and took his spot, pouring Heller coffee, disappointed that he took it black and unsugared, so she couldn't serve him further. She tried to press a biscuit on him. He refused. She tried again. He refused again. She asked him if he was sure. He replied that he was.

And then she fired off a volley of questions at him, barely giving him a chance to sip his coffee. *How long had he lived in the city, in the country, on the planet? What did his parents do, where did they live, how many siblings did he have, what did they do? What was his work history, did his business make money, was he financially secure? What was his first name, what did he mean he didn't use a first name, was it David, Michael, Paul? Did he own his home, what was his star sign, his shoe size, did he have any tattoos or scars? Was he married, had he ever been married, had he ever considered getting married? Did he date, was he currently dating anybody, what kind of woman did he prefer to date? What did he think about children, did he hope to have children one day, how many children would he have, what would he call his children?* Gayle sat sulkily by his side, unable to attract his attention.

He suffered through the bombardment with reasonable patience and good grace, eyes sliding in my direction on occasion. I admired the skilful and subtle way he managed to avoid answering most of the questions, easily diverting my mother with the few answers he did provide. But he was in a mischievous mood, choosing to only answer the questions that would get Mum buzzing the most.

He admitted that he'd never been married nor had any children and wasn't even remotely interested in changing the status of either. Mum's face fell immediately. He admitted that he only dated casually (which was a nice, polite way of him saying that he screwed around extensively) and her face fell even further. But then he offhandedly added that his ideal kind of woman to date seriously would be tall and slender, with long wavy dark hair, big brown eyes and good old-fashioned values. Mum's eyes lit up with expectation and future wedding plans, and I shot him a look of pure poison. He winked at me. I didn't wink back. He was going to cause me no end of trouble.

Mum asked him some more questions, but I think he was mesmerising her with his icy blues and finally she petered out, exhausted, flopping back on the lounge. I thought she was going to ask for a cigarette afterwards as it had been such an intensely enjoyable experience for her. Eventually though, maybe even later that night, she would realise that she didn't know much more about him than she had when he'd arrived. None of us would.

Gayle perked up, hoping for her turn to ensnare Heller in her conversational web, when Sean butted in, quizzing him about his fitness regime. Sean prides himself on his muscularity, and was impressed enough with Heller's magnificence to seek his comment and advice. Heller muttered his excuses to the ladies on the lounge and moved over to lean against the wall to talk to Sean for a very detailed ten minutes on repetitions, cut abs, Lorna Jane sportswear and Zumba classes. Nah, I'm just making up that last bit. I don't know what they

were talking about because I was dragged into the kitchen by the female members of the family who were all, “oh my God, he is *so* gorgeous”, “you must bring him around more often”, “that accent is so intriguing, where’s he from?” and “when can I come and visit you and would Mr Heller be there?” I rapidly reached a point where I’d had enough of everyone drooling over him, and marched into the lounge room in an antsy mood.

“Heller, we have to go now, remember? We’ve got that . . . thingy . . . to attend to. You know, on the other side of the city. That’s why you came to pick me up.” I glared at him in a meaningful manner.

“Oh yes, the thingy. How could I have forgotten about that?” he drawled. And ignoring complaints that he’d only just arrived, Heller and I made our farewells and escaped gratefully into the late afternoon sunshine. Mum came out into the front yard to wave us off and I could see Gayle and Elise staring longingly from the front window. We jumped into his Mercedes and drove off hurriedly.

“That was fun, wasn’t it?” I said, desperately cheerful. He turned to stare at me in pointed silence. “Thank you for doing that for me, Heller,” I continued, in my sweetest voice and with my most winsome smile. He rolled his eyes. “But you shouldn’t have teased my mother like you did. She believed you and I’ll never hear the end of it now. She’s probably writing out wedding invitations as we speak.”

“Maybe I did mean it,” he smiled.

It was my turn to roll my eyes. “Sure you did.”

“Your brother – not Sean, the other one?”

“Brian.”

“Yes, him. I could sense a lot of hostility towards me from him. Why?”

“I dunno. Maybe because his wife was making goo-goo eyes at you the whole time? Or maybe because he’s a cop? Which you already know, remember?” He smirked. “Maybe he could smell you. Are you on a most wanted list somewhere?”

“Perhaps.”

I scoured his face with my eyes. “You know, you really are very secretive about yourself. I’m going to google you when we get home.”

“You won’t find anything that you don’t already know,” he said with confidence.

I continued to regard him steadily and decided to subject him to my own third-degree. “I noticed that you didn’t answer many of Mum’s questions.” He smiled enigmatically. “What is your first name anyway?”

“My driver’s licence and passport say it’s Peter.”

“That’s a strange way to answer a very basic question. Isn’t it Peter?”

“No, not really.”

“Is that why you don’t use it?”

“Partly.”

I had a disturbing thought. “Is Heller your real name?”

“No.”

“Why do you use a fake name?”

Silence.

I sighed. “How old are you?”

“Thirty-four.”

“Is that true?”

“Possibly. That’s what my passport tells me.” He was making fun of me, but I can be very stubborn for the truth sometimes.

“What’s your star sign?”

“Depends what I’m claiming my date of birth to be.”

“You have more than one date of birth?”

“I like to be flexible.”

“Currently?”

“Currently I believe I’m a Scorpio.”

“You don’t strike me as a Scorpio.”

“I don’t know – mysterious, deeply running dark passions, vengeful. I think it suits me quite well actually.”

“I suppose. Do you have any tattoos?”

“Why don’t you look for yourself later this evening?”

“Heller!”

He sighed patiently. “You come from a very nosy family, Matilda. No, I don’t have any tattoos. I decided long ago it was better not to have any identifying features.”

*Apart from being a tall, stacked, gorgeous Viking warrior that is,* I thought in silent amusement.

He threw me that half-smile again as he glanced at me. “But I know exactly what tattoo I’m going to get when I retire from this business.”

“What?” I asked curiously.

“I’m going to get ‘Matilda’ inked right across my heart.” And he patted his left pec twice, completely deadpan.

I burst into laughter and smacked him lightly on his forearm. “You’re such a flirt!” He chuckled quietly to himself. “I have a tattoo.”

“I know. Inner right ankle. A thistle. Symbol of the Chalmers’ Scottish heritage, I presume.”

I stared at him surprised. “You’re very observant! Most people don’t notice. It’s only small.”

“I notice everything about you, Matilda.” That unfathomable smile again.

“Does that mean I’m tougher than you, because I’ve got a tattoo and you haven’t?”

In response, he merely laughed in that low growly sexy way that made my stomach flip over. I had to look out of the window after that to hide my expression from him. We turned into our street and I was thinking about whether I should offer Daniel another cooking lesson that evening when the windscreen on the Mercedes suddenly shattered and I felt something flying past my face.

“Get down!” shouted Heller, pulling me down forcefully towards the seat, his hand around the back of my neck. I cracked the side of my head painfully hard on the gearstick, but stayed crouched obediently in enormous discomfit, eyes popping out of my head in fear, heart thumping. He bunched his fist and smashed the shattered glass of the windscreen so that he could see through it, showering both of us in glass fragments, blood trickling down his fingers and wrist. He sped recklessly down the street, skidding noisily into the driveway of the Warehouse and scraping the top of the vehicle, not waiting for the automatic garage door to open fully. He screeched down to the first basement garage, slammed on the brakes, pulled up the handbrake and jumped out of the Mercedes, running over to press on an alarm button mounted on the garage wall.

I sat up cautiously. Within minutes, every security man in the building was pounding down the stairs from the floor above, followed a few moments later by Clive, who was carrying a gun. They listened grim-faced while Heller explained what had just happened, Clive holstering his weapon. One of the men assisted me out of the vehicle and helped me brush off the pieces of glass in my hair and on my clothes. I was in shock, not sure what had just happened, silently watching everyone with frightened eyes. My temple was throbbing where I had hit the gearstick and I rubbed it gently, a mammoth headache coming on. It made

me feel a bit nauseous.

Heller came over to me, as Clive and another man crawled into the vehicle trying to find the projectile.

“You okay, Matilda?”

“I don’t know. I hit my head on the gearstick.” He examined the side of my head with considerate tenderness and if I hadn’t been afraid that I was about to throw up all over him, I would have enjoyed the soft touch of his fingers. He brushed a few more glass fragments out of my hair.

“You need to lie down with an icepack. You’ve got a lump developing.”

“It was a just rock flicking up from the road, wasn’t it? I felt it fly past my face.”

He didn’t answer, but I could see that he was immensely furious at that, his fists clenched tightly, his nostrils flaring.

“*Fucking bastards!*” bellowed Clive angrily, from inside the vehicle. “They’re going to kill one of us one day.” He climbed out and called Heller over, showing him something he held in his hand. Heller took it and held it up to get a better view of it, twisting it around. I briefly saw it before they turned their backs on me, blocking everything from my view. It didn’t look like a rock to me.

I was feeling quite sick by then and walked over to the wall, sliding down to the floor. My head was now pounding relentlessly. I lay down on the concrete floor, not caring about how dirty it was, its coldness giving my poor head some relief. I shut my eyes and held my stomach, willing it to settle down. I could hear the men talking in loud voices about who could be responsible for what had happened, and it seemed as though general consensus leaned towards it being Select Security, one of Heller’s larger and more aggressive rival security firms.

My shoulder was gently shaken and I opened one eye to see Rumbles’ kind face peering down at me with concern.

“You don’t look so good, Miss. Let’s get you upstairs to bed. Need a rest after a knock on the head like that. And an icepack.” He helped me to my feet. A wave of nausea rolled over me and I put my hand to my mouth, trying to keep the contents of my stomach in their rightful place. Every step I took made my head thump and increased my nausea.

“I don’t think I’m going to be able to make it upstairs, Rumbles,” I said on the verge of tears, feverish with nausea.

“Sure you can, Miss. You’re a tough little thing.” We took it very slowly, his arm around me not just supporting me but virtually carrying me, and I can tell you that four flights of stairs is an agonisingly long climb when you’re feeling as sick as I was. We reached my flat and I went straight to the bathroom and threw up repeatedly into the toilet, until there was nothing left in my stomach. Even then I dry-retched some more. Rumbles, who had waited discreetly outside the bathroom, assisted me into my bed and fetched me some cold water and an icepack that he gingerly placed on my temple. But the pressure of the icepack was excruciating and I started crying with the pain.

I closed my eyes briefly. When I opened them again, Heller and Daniel were standing next to my bed, watching me with apprehension.

“I don’t feel well. My head is killing me,” I told them, tears trickling from my eyes. Heller took off the icepack and gently felt around my temple. I felt my stomach heaving again at the contact. He frowned.

“You’ve taken a harder hit to the head than I realised. I’ve called the doctor. He’ll be here soon.”

I couldn’t wait that long and had to make another agonising path to the bathroom to dry-retch. I collapsed onto the floor afterwards, face leaning against the tiles, crying quietly. I’d

never felt so sick in my life. Heller and Daniel helped me back to bed and we all waited anxiously for the doctor. It seemed like eternity, but was probably only ten minutes before he arrived. He shot me a *not you again* look and then an injection of a strong painkiller, prodded painfully around my temple and left me some more painkillers in tablet form. He had a muttered conversation with Heller and Daniel that I couldn't hear, before departing. Heller brought a dining chair into my bedroom and sat on it.

"You don't have to stay," I said drowsily, the painkiller kicking in quickly. Thank the Lord for drugs. "I'll be okay now. I feel better already."

"Doctor's orders, I'm afraid. You have to be monitored constantly for the next twelve hours." He crossed over to the bed, kicked off his shoes and lay down next to me, drawing me close against him.

"Someone shot at us, didn't they?" I murmured into his chest, not able to keep my eyes open.

He hesitated before answering. "Yes."

"Has that happened before?"

"Yes."

"Was it Select Security?"

"Probably."

"Why? They might have killed us." Tears formed again under my eyelids and I could hear the wobble in my voice. "Why would someone want to kill us?"

He didn't answer for a few minutes, busy stroking my back. I snuggled up closer to him in response. He tightened his arms, trapping me against him.

"I'm good at making enemies, my sweet," he finally said, softly.

"What will you do about it?" I slurred, not minding the close contact. I struggled to stay awake to hear his answer, but it was no use. I felt safe nestled in his arms. My eyes shut and I fell into an uneasy sleep. I woke up a few times during the night, thirsty and disoriented. He was always there to help me find the water, and to pull up the bedcovers for me when I fell back on my pillow. When I woke up I was very groggy. It took me a good five minutes to focus and be able to get out of bed. Daniel jumped up from the chair, ready to grab me as I staggered around, trying to get to the bathroom.

"I'm okay," I assured him and shut the door on him. I splashed some cold water over my face. Thankfully I wasn't nauseous anymore and my headache was only now a dull throb. The swelling on my temple had gone down, but some bruising was already developing. Forget a street brawler, I was starting to look like a professional fighter.

I spent the rest of the day recovering in my pyjamas, with a stream of visitors. Even Clive popped his head in for a second. He stood over me menacingly, viewed me with no expression at all on his flinty face and shook his head with disapproval.

"I knew you were a trouble-magnet," he judged dismissively and then left as quickly as he had arrived. And his visit really cheered me up, as you can imagine.

When I finally felt human again, I did as I had threatened and googled Heller's name. No surprise, but he was right. There was nothing about him on the internet except his current business activities.

## Chapter 22

Heller and I had an appointment with some new clients a few days later. I concealed my recent bruising as effectively as possible and we drove to the same hotel where Lily and her husband had stayed. There we met Mr and Mrs Sharif, and their sixteen-year-old daughter,

Salimah. Mr Sharif explained that he and his wife were in the city to attend to a deceased estate and wished for their daughter to be chaperoned and entertained for the next four days, commencing the next morning. I covertly assessed Salimah, hoping I didn't have another Lily on my hands. She was a tall, thin girl, wearing glasses, quite plain, modestly but modernly dressed and shy. She didn't look like trouble, but I'd seen all of that before.

Mrs Sharif advised that Mr Hayek had indeed recommended *Heller's* to them, and that his 'lovely little wife' had in particular enthused over my discretion, commonsense and good company.

"And how is dear Lily?" I asked amiably. "We had such a delightful time together."

"Oh, she's fine! She's the sweetest girl. And so devoted to her husband."

Somehow I managed to hold in my gales of laughter until we reached the vehicle. Heller congratulated me on my self-control.

I went to bed early and made sure I was at the Sharif's by nine precisely. I spent a pleasant day with Salimah, who could not have been more different to Lily if she had deliberately tried. She was bright, well-educated, serious, modest, culturally aware, but painfully shy. I gently cajoled, teased and joked until I eventually received a bashful grin from her in reward. She had the most enchanting smile and I made sure I told her, otherwise she might never know. And after that, she blessed me with her beautiful smile more often.

By the end of the four days, she was initiating conversations with me and with much self-conscious giggling, she'd even confided the name of the cute studious boy she had a crush on back home. We visited all the main attractions and while she enjoyed the cultural elements, her favourite day was spent at the city's sprawling hillside zoo. She marvelled over the native animals, having photo after photo taken of her with some of the more cuddly ones, and shrinking in delighted terror, clutching my arm, at some of the less cuddly, more poisonous ones.

When I delivered her safely home on the last day, she hugged me affectionately and kissed me on each cheek. Her parents expressed their gratitude for my services, pleased at how happy and relaxed their high-achieving daughter was, and promised to recommend *Heller's* to any other Jordanian families travelling to the city in the future. Unexpectedly, I received a very generous personal gratuity from that assignment as well that Heller also insisted that I keep for myself.

*A job well done*, I thought with satisfaction. It was a Friday night and I was in the mood to celebrate. On my return home I checked with Heller if he needed me that night.

"Why?" he asked.

"I want to go out with Dixie. I haven't been out since I started here and I want to go and have some fun."

He frowned. "Fun doing what?"

I shrugged. "Dancing, drinking, laughing, flirting. Whatever."

"You can do all of that here."

"I hope you're joking," I scorned.

He was offended. "I can't stop you, Matilda," although he sounded as though he was seriously considering it. "I'll drive you and Dixie there and pick you up."

"You can drive us there, but I'll make my own way home. When I feel like coming home. Okay?" He didn't have much choice, but I felt as though I was back at my parents' again, arguing with my father.

I rang Dixie and we made arrangements. I spent a while getting ready that evening, squeezing into my tightest jeans and a taut glittery black singlet top that emphasised two of my best assets. I pulled on some black stilettos and some dangly gold earrings. My makeup was definitely not discreet that night, and I piled on the makeup until my eyes were incredibly

sultry. I straightened my hair, and it fell over my shoulders down to my shoulder blades in a glossy dark silk sheet. I sprayed myself liberally with a very expensive and feminine perfume. I was so transformed from my everyday appearance that I barely recognised myself. It really had been far too long since I had gone out to party.

I knew Heller was eating with Daniel and Niq that evening, so I closed my door and teetered on my heels over to Daniel's place to catch a lift into the city. I knocked on the door and Daniel answered, his jaw dropping in surprise at my appearance. He gaped like a fish out of water for a moment before letting out a loud wolf-whistle.

"Tilly, you look incredible!"

I smiled at him and walked in. Heller and Niq both stopped eating, forkfuls of food halfway to their mouths, and stared at me, eyes wide.

"You look *hot*, Tilly! Total babe!" Niq enthused, jumping up for a closer look, his teenage hormones kicking into overdrive. Heller didn't speak, his face unsmiling as he looked me over. I could feel that he desperately wanted to tell me to go change into something more modest or order me to stay home, but he didn't. He couldn't. As he said himself, I am an adult and have to make my own decisions, good or bad.

I kissed the boys goodnight and traipsed down the stairs behind Heller. At the same time, a troupe of security men was returning from a job, heading upstairs. We passed them mid-stair and received a stream of impassive "Boss" and "Miss" acknowledgements from each one as they filed past us. And although none said another word, each man eyed me up and down behind Heller's back with a lingering glance of admiration as he passed and I knew I'd be a hot topic for gossip in the security section once again.

We drove in silence.

"Thanks for dropping me in the city, Heller. I really appreciate it," I said sweetly.

He remained grim. "I wish you would let me pick you up. I wouldn't worry so much then."

I smiled easily. "No need to worry. I'll be fine. I've done this before, you know." He didn't smile in response.

"Have you got enough money to get home?"

"Plenty."

"Not too much though? I don't want you to get mugged."

I was patient. "Not too much. Enough for the cover charge, some drinks and the taxi ride home."

"Got your phone?"

"Yes. But I won't be checking it, so don't bother ringing me." His mouth set in an even grimmer line.

"What time will you be home?"

"I honestly don't know. Probably not before two or three."

"What if you meet someone? If you go home with him? Will you let me know that, at least, so I know where you are?"

"I will," I snapped. Geez, it was even worse than the third-degree I used to get from Dad every time I went out.

We pulled up outside Dixie's unit block and she was waiting on the curb for us. She looked gorgeous and had kept the gamine black hairdo that the stylist had given her. Her heavy makeup emphasised her black eyes. She was wearing a green micro-mini, a matching lighter green singlet top with a black bolero and knee-high black boots.

"Hey babe!" I greeted breezily. "Ready for some fun?"

"Shit yeah! Bring it on baby, bring it on! I'm feeling real lucky tonight. Watch out every man in the city – Dixie's on the loose and looking for action!"

I giggled, but Heller grew even more censorious. He silently deposited us in front of The Emporium, a newish nightclub that I hadn't yet visited. As I was stepping out, he grasped my hand tightly. "Please be careful, Matilda."

I squeezed his hand gently, finding something touching in the genuine concern on his face. "I will, I promise." He watched while Dixie and I were swallowed up by the crowd surging towards the entrance.

Dixie and I had a great time together, danced with some cute guys, drank a lot of vodka and laughed until our stomachs hurt. I was propositioned a few times, but turned them all down without any regrets.

At the bar, both of us waiting to order a drink, I met Will, a charming and attractive high school science teacher. He was out for the night with his sister who was visiting from her high-pressure finance job in New York. We ended up having a lovely chat in a quiet corner that morphed into a very promising snogging session. He reluctantly had to leave when his sister hunted him down and demanded that he take her home insisting that she had business calls to make, but gave me his phone number and begged me to call him soon.

Dixie had hooked up with a mechanic named Mike and was busy devouring his face, her hand indecently high on his thigh, his hand up her top. I knew where they'd end up tonight. I looked around and decided that without Will there anymore and with Dixie occupied, I'd had enough of drinking and dancing for the night. I was pretty drunk and I figured that it was probably time for me to head home anyway.

I offered Dixie a lift home in my taxi, but she wanted to stay on longer with Mike. I hugged her and waved goodbye to Mike and joined the very long taxi queue. By the time it was my turn at the front of the queue, the line was stretching around the block and getting rowdy with impatience. Some pushing and bursts of aggression occurred sporadically throughout the queue and I was willing a taxi to turn up immediately so I could be on my way home sooner. Suddenly I was jostled forcefully by some drunken jerk trying to push in at the front of the queue.

"Piss off!" I said angrily, pushing him back out of the queue. "Get to the back!"

"Fuck off, you dyke!" he slurred, squaring up to me belligerently. "I need to go home now. I gotta go to work tomorrow."

"So does everyone, moron! Go to the end of the queue like a good boy."

He pushed me hard on my chest. I wasn't particularly stable on my feet in my high heels to start with and consequently went flying onto my butt in a very inelegant manner, twisting my left ankle. Other people in the queue stepped in then, helping me to my feet and taking off my shoes for me. A bouncer sauntered over and strong-armed the jerk to the end of the queue with much jeering from the other patient queue-waiters. He gave everyone the finger as he loped away.

Finally a taxi turned up and the kind people nearby helped me in. I offered a lift to anyone who was going in my direction, but nobody lived in that suburb except me, which didn't surprise me.

I gave my address to the driver, the full block away from the Warehouse that Heller insisted on and leaned back on the seat, hoping that the throbbing in my ankle would go away. The taxi pulled up and I paid and stepped out. It felt like a long block at that time of the morning as I trudged along, tired, inebriated and limping. At last I reached the Warehouse and hobbled up the stairs. I couldn't wait to flop into bed and maybe dream about Will and not Heller for once.

I managed to climb the four flights, although it was a wonder I didn't wake up the entire household with my drunken staggering. I opened my door and lurched inside. In the moonlight, I thought I could see a shape on my lounge and scrunched my eyes shut before

opening them again. Nope, it was still there. I walked over as cautiously as a drunkard is capable, and was surprised to see Heller sprawled on my lounge, asleep. I tried to focus on my watch. It was almost three-thirty in the morning.

I gazed down at him. His hair was tousled and his beautiful face was relaxed. He was slumped in the corner of the lounge, one arm flung out the side, the other across his chest. He had a vulnerable look while asleep that was very appealing. I leaned down and shook his shoulder gently. He woke up suddenly, fully alert with his eyes wide open. He sat up and lashed out, grabbing my arm by the wrist, twisting it and violently pulling me down next to him, ready for action. I cried out in pain and he took in his surroundings and my panicked face and inhaled deeply, releasing his grip.

“Matilda,” he said, breathing heavily. “You startled me.”

“You were asleep.”

“You shouldn’t sneak up on me when I sleep.”

“Heller, I wasn’t sneaking up on you! I was coming home. You’re in *my* flat, you know. You weren’t waiting up for me?”

“I was.”

I sighed and slouched next to him. “You shouldn’t. I can look after myself.”

“I know, but I still worry anyway.” His smile was self-deprecating.

“You big softie,” I teased. He put one arm around me and pulled me to him. I leaned sleepily on his chest, one arm thrown over his taut stomach.

“Did you have fun?” he murmured into my hair.

“Uh-huh.”

“Did you dance, drink and flirt?”

I yawned. “Uh-huh. All of the above.”

“But you came home?”

“Yep. I got a few offers that didn’t interest me. I did meet a nice guy though who I really liked. He gave me his phone number.”

“Give it to me. I want to rip it up.”

“No! He was so sweet. His name’s Will. He’s a science teacher.”

“Will what?”

“You don’t need to know. You’ll just run a check on him.”

“You make that sound like a bad thing. Are you going to ring him?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” I yawned again. “We kissed for a while. It was lovely.”

“I’m jealous.”

“Sure you are.” I yawned once more. It was time for bed, but I was reluctant to move. “I had to wait forever for a taxi.”

“You should have called me. I would have picked you up.”

“I couldn’t call you at two in the morning and ask you to pick me up. That’s just plain inconsiderate!”

“Next time ring me and I’ll pick you up. Whatever time. I don’t mind.”

I looked up at him. “You’re so sweet.”

“I thought Will was the sweet one.”

“You are too.” Silence for a moment. I enjoyed listening to his heart beating. “I got into a fight in the taxi queue.”

His sigh was long-suffering. “You didn’t capsicum spray anyone, did you? Please say you didn’t.”

“Of course I didn’t! It wouldn’t fit into my handbag. Anyway, it wasn’t my fault. This jerk tried to push in. I told him to get to the back of the queue and he pushed me over. I landed on my butt. It was very undignified and I hurt my ankle.”

He grabbed my legs, pulling them onto his lap. “Which one?”

“Left.” He prodded and twisted it gently.

“It’ll be okay if you rest it for the day.” He grasped my chin in his hand. “I would feel better if I knew you could protect yourself. Clive’s right – you’re a real trouble-magnet. I’ve never met anyone like you. When everything’s healed, I want you to do the security and self-defence courses. Get your licence as a security officer.”

I sat up with excitement. “Really? I would love to do that.”

“Yes.”

“I’ll really be able to kick people’s butts then.”

He shook his head with exasperation. I’m not sure what happened after that. I leaned up to kiss him on the cheek in thanks, but he turned his head at the last second, and instead I found my lips touching his.

Dangerous.

The kiss started tentatively, a quick brush of his lips against mine, becoming harder and more insistent each time his lips returned. His eyes were staring down into mine with an intensity I’d never experienced. I parted my lips and our tongues met, hesitantly at first, then more urgently. He moved one of his hands languorously up my back and buried it in my hair. He bowed his head and kissed the base of my neck, my skin tingling as he traced a trail of soft kisses up my neck, over my chin and back to my lips, his tongue flicking out again. Every nerve in my body was on full alert, my nipples hard, a throbbing heat building inside. He brushed one of my nipples with his fingers and I couldn’t suppress a low moan of pleasure. God! It had been such a long time for me. And what an amazing drought-breaker he would be.

He pressed me back onto the lounge. I wrapped my arms around him, revelling in the hardness of his shoulder muscles through his shirt as he pushed my legs apart with his knee. We kissed again, more deeply, and he slid his hand under my top to cup my breast, rubbing his thumb gently against my nipple. His other arm reached around behind me and pressed my hips closer to his. I could feel the rigidity of his erection through our jeans, and was very interested in exploring it with greater attention in the immediate future. I wrapped my legs around him so he could press it up even closer to me. He moved it against me in a very suggestive way that made my eyes roll back in my head with pleasure. Oh boy, if only he was doing that while we were naked!

He leaned towards my ear and pleaded, his hot breath tickling me. “Sleep with me tonight, Matilda. Please. I’m desperate for you.”

Just then though, the image of Heller fucking the tanned blonde woman with the red nails flashed unbidden into my head again. I struggled against him, pushing him backwards. He let me go and sat up, utter bewilderment across his face. He probably wasn’t used to being rejected.

I sat next to him and took a deep and shaky breath. “I don’t think that would be a good idea.”

“I think it’s the best idea I’ve had in years.” He ran his hand up my arm and leaned over to kiss me on the lips again. Once more, I pushed him away.

“Well, I don’t. For one thing I’m quite pissed at the moment and I don’t want to make that kind of important decision when I’m not sober. Secondly, you’re my boss. Sleeping with you would affect our professional relationship. It would be too intense – it would get emotional. No, scrub that. I mean that *I* would get emotional. I hate one-night stands. I always feel cheap and dirty the next day. I just can’t be as detached as you. I can’t be so casual about sex.”

“Who said it would be casual or a one-night stand?”

“Do you ever have any other kind of sex?”

He hesitated. “No.”

“Heller, please. I don’t want to be another notch on your bedhead. I love my job and I want to keep working for you. Sleeping with you would make that difficult.”

He sighed in regret, running his fingers through his spiky hair, then cupped his hands around my face and kissed me slowly and sweetly. “Okay Matilda, the big bad wolf will let you go this time. But next time you might not be so lucky.”

*God, I better not let there be a next time*, I thought frantically. My will power was fading fast.

Later in bed, after he had left, I wondered if Heller was as frustrated as me or whether he had already carelessly shrugged off his disappointment.

## Chapter 23

I slept until noon and roused slowly and groggily to find Niq looking down at me. I blinked and groaned. “Niq, what are you doing here? You’re not supposed to just come into my flat.”

“I wanted to make sure you got home safely.” He stared at me. “You look scary,” he remarked rudely. I swatted him away and rolled out of bed, cautiously testing my sore ankle. It wasn’t too bad. Heller was probably right – with a bit of rest it would be fine by tomorrow. I went into the bathroom and peered at myself in the mirror.

Niq hadn’t been joking! I was an absolute fright. My eye makeup had smeared everywhere, giving me the appearance of an evil panda. My hair was completely flat on one side and tangled and sticking out creatively on the other. I had pillow creases on my face. I was still wearing the clothes I had on last night and everything stank like cigarettes and booze. I spent the day righting the wrongs of the night by showering, shampooing, washing, drinking litres of water and popping some paracetamol and vitamins.

I forced Niq to run errands for me while I rested my ankle and we spent the afternoon watching DVDs. Daniel popped in for a while, but I didn’t see or speak to Heller all day. That was fine by me, as I was feeling a bit awkward after the night before. I didn’t ring Will, but I thought about it during the day. I didn’t want to seem too keen, but wasn’t completely sure I wanted to ring either. I went to bed very early that night.

Next morning I woke at dawn and decided to hit the gym. I hadn’t visited for a while due to my injuries, but my bruises were virtually gone, my ankle was fine and I thought I could handle the treadmill at least. I grabbed my new iPod that Niq had thoughtfully loaded up with all of his favourite emo, Goth and punk bands, even though I’d asked him to put my favourite music on it. It was sure to be an interesting selection.

I was walking down the stairs when I met Heller walking up. He was dressed in his usual ‘out on the prowl’ gear – black jeans, a beautiful midnight blue shirt, pointed black shoes. He was carrying his leather jacket. I stopped when I saw him. He looked tired, struggling to walk up the stairs, but had that unmistakable look of fulfilment on his face, his eyes soft. He paused for a second when he noticed me, then continued to climb the stairs, drawing parallel with me. I caught a whiff of perfume and alcohol from his skin.

“Don’t look at me like that, Matilda,” he warned, and continued slowly trudging up the stairs. I turned to watch him in silence until he disappeared from view. He didn’t glance back.

I pushed myself on the treadmill, hoping to banish the mental images that were now crowding my mind, trying to convince myself that it was not my business what Heller was up to in his time off. I managed to get up to running speed listening to Green Day for forty

minutes, despite my protesting muscles. Exhausted, I went back upstairs, showered and made myself a hearty breakfast of omelette and toast.

I rang Dixie as soon as I thought there was the slightest chance that she would be awake. She was groggy until I told her what had happened the night before last.

“Are you shitting me?” she exploded. “You said *no*? You turned Heller down? Tilly, are you insane? You said no to the best fuck you are probably ever going to get in your entire life? Oh man, you are so stupid.”

“It would only make everything complicated and intense.”

“Hey, do you reckon he’s still horny, cause you can send him my way if he is. I bloody well wouldn’t say no to a piece of that! Ever!”

“I think he sorted it out for himself already,” I said and told her my suspicions.

She laughed. “What a dirty dog he is! That’s what happens when you don’t put out, Tilly. They go find someone else. There’s always someone else, especially for someone as hot as him.”

“You know Dixie, you are *such* a comfort to me at times like this,” I said sarcastically. “And anyway it really pisses me off that he just waltzes off and gets laid, like nothing happened.”

“You need to do the same. Ring that Will guy. Get some action, Tils,” she advised.

“I don’t know if I want to,” I complained and could almost hear her rolling her eyes down the line. We rang off.

I chose my clothes carefully that morning. Heller had told me that we were going to meet a potential new client and I wanted to look my professional best. I waited for him in the office and grew anxious when he didn’t appear. We had to leave in ten minutes or we would be late for the appointment. It was another well-paying assignment and it wouldn’t be smart to keep the client waiting.

“Daniel, I don’t know where Heller is. We have to meet a new client. Should I go up and check on him?” We agreed to go together.

Daniel knocked on his door. No answer. He tried again. We listened, but couldn’t hear anything stirring. Daniel pounded on the door. We waited half a minute, but still nothing. Daniel took out his swipe card and opened Heller’s door. It was quiet and cool in his flat. We could hear a strange noise coming from his bedroom and reluctantly walked towards that door.

“You better go in,” I suggested, in case Heller was doing something embarrassing. Daniel opened the door and disappeared. He came back out again, uncertainty on his face.

“I think he might be sick. What do you think?”

I walked into the room and saw Heller sprawled on his back across his bed, still wearing his clothes from the previous night. He was dead to the world, snoring like a champion, a miasma of alcohol fumes around his head. I noticed he had several hickeys on his neck.

I looked up at Daniel and said in astonishment, “He’s plastered!”

“No way!”

I grabbed his shoulder and shook it roughly. “Heller! Wake up.” He half-opened one eye, tried to focus, groaned loudly and rolled away from me onto his side. I tried to shake him awake again, but it was no good. He was a write-off.

“Daniel, take off his shoes and jeans if you can. Try to get him to drink some water and have some paracetamol and let him sleep it off. He’s going to have a bitch of a hangover later. Let’s keep this to ourselves too. I don’t think he’d appreciate anyone knowing. Now I’m going to this appointment myself. I’m sure I’ll be okay.” I patted him on the back and took off down the stairs. I met Sid walking up the stairs and had a bright idea.

“Sid, Heller’s a bit, er, busy at the moment and we’re supposed to be meeting a new

client. Would you mind coming with me? I'll do all the talking."

Sid readily agreed and we jumped in a fleet vehicle, noting that Heller's 4WD was parked at a very unusual angle. *He must have driven home last night. What an idiot!* I thought angrily.

After our interview with the potential new client, I was gratified when the assignment was offered to us. It was some ongoing surveillance at a major building site that would provide a decent stream of income for the next couple of years. It was fortunate that I had taken Sid with me because he was able to answer some of the technical questions that would have had me floundering. There's only so much a nice cleavage can do in the business world, let's be honest. Sid drove me home and we chatted about inconsequential things. He told me a tiny bit about the surveillance side of Heller's business, which was fascinating. Back home, I returned to the office to ask Daniel to organise the contractual paperwork to be couriered to our new client for signing.

"How's his lordship?" I asked in a low voice. "Have you checked on him recently?"

"Yeah, I popped my head in about thirty minutes ago. Still snoring." He shook his head in bewilderment. "Tilly, I just cannot believe that Heller could be drunk. It's never happened the entire time I've known him and that's over ten years. He hardly ever even has *one* drink, let alone enough to become drunk. And I've never known him to go out again so soon after just going out the other night. Something must have happened recently to unsettle him. But I can't imagine what it could be though, because nothing unsettles Heller. Nothing."

I professed ignorance, but was weighed down with secret guilt. It couldn't be my refusal to sleep with him, could it? That seemed so unlikely that I couldn't give it any credence. He had cared so little that I had said no to him that he had gone out and found somebody else the very next night. It couldn't be that, I was sure.

I tried to push it out of my head, but keep chewing over it all morning. I did a little paperwork and flipped through information on some potential new assignments coming up. Dixie had sent me a photo of Mike the mechanic, fast asleep, lying spreadeagled on her tiny bed, his impressive penis flaccid between his legs. I had a quick squiz before deleting it. I checked Niq's schoolwork and had a cup of coffee with Daniel. We chatted about food, and he expressed an interest in borrowing one of my new cookbooks and trying a simple dish himself. I was giving him some recommendations for basic starter dishes when Heller walked into the office. Daniel and I exchanged loaded glances, not daring to speak to him.

He had obviously bathed and shaved but looked rough, his skin pasty and his eyes bloodshot. The cautious way he was moving suggested he had a massive headache. He had made no attempt to cover his hickeys. His eyes slid in our direction, but he didn't say anything. He walked to the fridge, took out a bottle of water and went into his office.

Daniel pinched my arm. "You go in," he dared.

I pinched him back harder. "You go."

"I don't think so. I quite enjoy living! Anyway, you're the sweet talker in the family. Especially with him."

"Lily-livered lackey!"

"Fearful flunkey!"

"Them's fighting words. Okay I'll go, coward," and sticking out my tongue at him, I walked to Heller's office and rapped loudly and cheerfully on his door. There's nothing guaranteed to make you feel smugger than witnessing someone else's hangover. He winced and eyed me balefully.

"Do you have to make so much noise, Matilda?"

"I don't have to, but it's fun."

"I feel like I'm dying." He leaned his forehead on his palms.

“You’re not.” I went in and sat down, giving him a good raking over with my eyes.

“Death seems like a very good option at the moment.”

“You’ll feel better in a few hours.”

“Who knows about this?”

“Just Daniel and me. I asked him to keep it to himself.”

“Thank you.”

“You missed an appointment. I took Sid with me instead.”

He cringed and rubbed his eyes. “I forgot. I’m sorry.”

“They gave us the job. It’s a good one. A couple of years of income at least.

He raised his tired eyes to mine. “Thank you for being so professional about everything.”

I shrugged. “What happened last night?”

“I can’t remember. It’s such a blur. There was a woman. Not the kind I’d normally go for; a bit rougher. I can’t even remember her name. I just remember she was very . . . demanding. I had a few drinks in the bar while I waited to pick up someone. And she mixed me more drinks in her room, and then some more and then I can’t remember much.”

I stared at him accusingly. “Do you know that you drove home this morning?”

He grew even paler. “No.” A long pause while he processed that information. “How stupid of me. I don’t even remember doing that.” He covered his face with his hands for a few moments. “Imagine if something had happened to me? I can’t believe I was so stupid, especially with everyone to think about.”

“Why did you do it, Heller? It’s so unlike you.”

He avoided my eyes, lowering his own to gaze intently at his motionless fingers resting on his desk. I thought he wasn’t going to speak, but then he did. “After the other night between us, I felt . . .” He sighed heavily. “I thought it might help me feel better if . . .”

He stopped and remained silent for so long that I knew he wasn’t going to say any more. I guess he wasn’t a man who liked to examine his emotions. I didn’t push it and instead let my eyes linger on the hickeys on his throat. That woman had had her fun with him last night. They’d obviously done a bit of rough.

His hand crept up to his neck and his expression wasn’t quite embarrassed, but more annoyed. “I don’t know how to hide them. They’re so ugly.”

That made me smile. “I have some concealing makeup. I’ll go get it.” I ran up the stairs, grabbed the makeup and ran back down again, noticing with delight that I wasn’t even out of breath. I closed Heller’s door and spent five minutes covering up the bruises. “There! It’s not perfect because you’re browner than I am, but at least you won’t scare Niq now.” I handed him the concealing stick. “You’ll need this for tomorrow.”

He looked pathetic, which I’m sure he was doing on purpose. “Can’t you do it for me every morning till they go away, please Matilda? I wouldn’t be any good at this.” I gave a resigned sigh and agreed.

“There’s more. My back is stinging.”

“She scratched you?”

He nodded. “I remember she had these long red nails.”

I stared at him, suddenly tense. “Did she have blonde hair too? And was she tanned?”

He nodded again, frowning slightly. “How did you know?”

“Oh man, that’s creepy.” He was puzzled, but I didn’t see how I could tell him without sounding completely crazy.

“Take your shirt off.” He unbuttoned it and stood up with his back to me. Eight deep gouges rent his smooth skin, four down each shoulder blade. His shirt had fresh blood seepage on it.

“Holy shit, Heller! Are you sure she was human?” He shrugged ruefully, which caused

him to grimace in pain. “You have truly suffered for your pleasure. I hope it was all worth it.”

“I gave as good as I got. She’ll be feeling sore this morning too.”

I held up my hands in protest. “Please, no more details. I really don’t want to know what you got up to. Sit down. I’ll be back in a minute.” I went out to the main office and retrieved the small first aid kit from its spot in the kitchenette.

“He needs first aid?” Daniel whispered in surprise. “Must have been a wild night!”

I nodded at him emphatically, rolling my eyes, and returned to Heller’s office. I made him sit, leaning forward, while I stood behind him and gently patted the blood away, dabbing on disinfectant, and applying dressings where I could. The pain would have been palpable and personally I would have been bawling my eyes out by then if someone had doused my raw wounds with that much disinfectant. But he showed absolutely no reaction at all. He didn’t even blink.

“Tough guy, huh?” I smiled. He glanced up at me and held out his hands. I placed mine in his, regarding him affectionately. He closed his fingers around mine and rubbed his thumbs gently across the backs of my hands.

“Do you forgive me, Matilda?”

“What for?” I asked, surprised.

“For asking you to sleep with me even though I knew you weren’t sober. I promise it won’t happen again. I don’t want you to be afraid to be alone with me,” he answered quietly. “I’m not a rapist, Matilda. Women have always agreed before I’ve slept with them.”

I was momentarily stunned and had to think fast before I opened my mouth again. “I told you before, I’m not afraid to be alone with you. I asked you to stop and you did. That’s a lot more than some men would do. Besides, I *wanted* to sleep with you and I’m sure it would have been wonderful. But it just isn’t a good idea, Heller. It would be too intense. And, I’m your employee. We’re better off the way we are.”

“Which is?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve never had a relationship like this before.”

“Me either.”

“I guess we’ll just have to make up the rules as we go.” I dug up a clean shirt for him, gave him a couple of paracetamol tablets and then shooed him off back to bed to recover from his excesses.

I sat at my desk for ages that afternoon thinking about Heller and me. There was definitely something between us, but what was it? The only thing I knew was that whatever it was, it would never be any normal kind of relationship. Then I remembered that I still hadn’t called Will.

That night I helped Daniel cook a real meal in his own kitchen. He finally chose to make corn and zucchini fritters with a simple salad. And although his kitchen looked like a warzone afterwards, he proudly dished up his meal to Niq and me. It was pretty good, to be honest, and I don’t know who was beaming with more pride afterwards, him or me.

## Chapter 24

After dinner with Daniel and Niq, I returned to my flat and flipped on the TV. I caught the end of the news and the newsreader was summarising the main stories for the day. A photo of a toothy, over-brown, heavily made-up woman with brassy blonde hair flashed onto the screen.

“And a woman was found murdered in a room at the Chancellor Hotel late this morning by hotel staff. It is believed she was strangled. She has been identified as Grace Owens, a

mother of three. Police have declined to comment on the progress of their investigation. Tomorrow's weather will be fine with a maximum of –". I didn't hear any more as I flew out of my flat, up the stairs to bang on Heller's door.

He opened the door in surprise and I pushed past him, inviting myself in.

"What hotel were you at last night?" I demanded.

"The Chancellor. Why?"

"Have you seen the news?" I grabbed the remote to his giant TV and flipped through the channels until I found the tail-end of another channel's late news. The same photo of the woman flashed briefly on the screen.

"Was that the woman you were with last night?"

"Yes. What's going on?"

"Heller! She was murdered, strangled! This morning! Her body was found by hotel staff *this morning!*" I shouted at him, waving my arms wildly, half-hysterical. "How rough were you with her?"

"It wasn't me, Matilda," he said calmly. "She was definitely alive when I left. She tried to persuade me to stay by offering to . . . Never mind, you don't want to hear that. But when I left she was sitting up in bed. Definitely alive."

"I saw you coming up the stairs this morning. It was about five o'clock. I was up early to go to the gym. Do you remember that? We crossed paths on the stairs and you said 'Don't look at me like that Matilda.'" I hoped I wasn't coaching him.

"I remember." He stood up, went to his phone and punched in some numbers. "Corby, I need you over here immediately. I have a problem. Thanks." He hung up.

"Who's that?"

"My lawyer. I want him with me when I go to the police."

I stared at him as if he had taken leave of his senses. "You can't go to the police! They'll arrest you."

"Matilda, I don't have any choice. My DNA will be all over that room, everywhere over that woman. In her, on her, all over the bed, the floor, the bathroom, everywhere. It's better if I go in voluntarily. It looks bad for me, but it will be okay because I haven't done anything wrong."

"Heller, didn't you use condoms?" I was embarrassed asking him, but my anxiety drove me to.

His expression was as neutral as usual. Talking about his sexual activities didn't seem to embarrass him at all. "I know. It was foolish. I always do normally, but I really was very drunk last night and I didn't use them."

I waited with him until his lawyer arrived, a trim, smartly dressed, intelligent-looking man in his early forties, with sharp gray eyes and a serious face. Heller introduced us and gave a brief outline of the situation. Corby questioned me closely about my meeting with Heller on the stairs – the time, what he was wearing, what state he was in and what he said, making quick notes as I spoke. Then Heller asked me to leave so that he could discuss things in detail with Corby. I grasped his hands and squeezed them tightly, feeling slightly desperate.

"Don't worry," he assured me with a kiss on the forehead. "I'll be okay. I'll come and see you when I get back from the police station." I nodded unhappily and returned to my flat.

I couldn't settle that night, waiting to hear some news. I spent the night pacing back and forth in my living area. I tried to distract myself with the TV, a book and then the internet, but it was no good. Nothing helped me loosen up. Night turned to dawn and still I hadn't heard anything. Heller had been at the police station for over eight hours by then. What the hell was happening? I was going insane with worry.

There was a gentle knock on my door. I flew over and flung it open. Heller stood there, completely exhausted, strain lining his face. I threw myself on him, hugging him tightly and promptly but stupidly burst into tears of anger, stress, relief and tiredness. He pushed me gently inside and closed the door with his foot, holding me close against him until my sobbing subsided and I was spent.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, snuffling loudly. “I don’t know where that came from.” He handed me his handkerchief. I mopped up as best I could and we sat on the lounge, me gripping his hands tightly as though he might be snatched away from me at any moment.

“Your brother was the lead detective in the team that interviewed me,” he said grimly. His accent was prominent again so I knew he was exceptionally angry. “And I could tell that he enjoyed every second of it. He played games with me, Matilda.”

“What do you mean?”

“He knew I hadn’t done anything before I even said a word. The woman, Grace, she rang room service after I left and had some breakfast delivered. She was definitely alive at five-thirty when it was delivered, by which time I was fast asleep on my bed, after you had seen me.”

I blinked at him dumbly for a moment. “But why would he put you through that? I don’t understand. It’s cruel.”

“Because he’s a sadist who enjoys power games. He made me spell out every last detail of my night with her. Everything I did to her, everything she did to me. In explicit detail. It was unnecessarily humiliating. Your brother was very upset to hear that it was you who could alibi me. He didn’t like that little detail at all. You’ll probably have to go down to the station to make a statement to him later today. Sorry, my sweet.”

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t mind.”

“There’s also CCTV footage of me in the hallway leaving her room, in the foyer heading for the carpark and in the carpark itself driving away before she even rang room service. And that time gels with the time you saw me walking up the stairs.”

“Sounds cut and dried.”

“But worst of all was that while I was being interviewed for hours and hours, going over and over the same information, another set of detectives was processing her estranged husband who had already confessed to stalking her to the hotel and strangling her after I left.”

“They had a confession from him but he still kept interviewing you? That’s unbelievable!”

“Your brother made a big mistake today. He thought he was being clever, top dog wielding his power, but he’s made an enemy of me.” Heller cut me with his icy eyes. “I will have my revenge, Matilda. At some point, maybe in the future, your brother will pay for today.”

A knot of dread settled in my stomach. “What do you mean, Heller? I won’t let you do anything to Brian. He’s my brother.”

“I don’t care. This is between him and me. It’s nothing to do with you.”

“It’s everything to do with me. He’s my brother! I’m going to warn him.”

“Go ahead, but he won’t take you seriously. Corby wants me to lodge an official complaint about both his and his partner’s behaviour. But I prefer to get my revenge in more creative ways.” He wore the most evil expression I’ve ever seen on a human being, teeth snarling, eyebrows drawn together in a frightening angle. I was afraid of him again, remembering what he’d done to those men at the bikie bar.

I threw away my dignity and begged. “Please don’t hurt him. He has a wife and small children. You met my nieces. The girls are so young. Please don’t do anything that will hurt his family.”

“He should have thought of them before he decided to mess around with me. I’ve got nothing but contempt for people like him who abuse their official position. People like him give the police a bad name.”

I wanted to defend Brian more, but the truth was that even as a child he would abuse any power he had over others. I used to dread the nights Mum and Dad would leave him to babysit Sean and me. He would make us fetch and carry, treating us as his personal slaves, threatening all the while to tell our parents that we had misbehaved if we didn’t do everything he demanded. Sean was always so much more eager to obey than me, and being more defiant and prone to talking back, I copped the bulk of his punishments. I could easily imagine Brian holding back information that would have cleared Heller instantly so that he could extract as much discomfort from him as possible.

Heller stood up and with a quick kiss on my cheek, left to get some sleep. I tried to do the same, but kept worrying over his words. He wouldn’t really do anything to Brian, would he? It wasn’t as though he was a cold-blooded killer, although Daniel thought he might be. All I could do was to warn Brian to keep his wits about him. But for heaven’s sake, he was a cop and if a cop can’t look out for himself then what chance have the rest of us got?

Later that day after I managed to get some sleep, I rang Brian to tell him I was coming in to make my statement. He was curt on the phone and said no more than necessary to make the arrangements. I told Heller what I was doing and he insisted that I take someone with me. I think he really wanted to go with me himself, but it would have been apparent to anyone that was a terrible idea. In the end it was Tysen who was free to accompany me. We chatted about self-defence and security on the way to the station and he was pleased to hear that I was going to be training for my licence soon. I had the strong impression that he had worried over setting me loose on the world with the limited knowledge he’d been able to impart to me at that training session.

At the station, Brian kept me waiting for forty minutes. It was another typical ploy of his. I sat patiently, not showing any of the increasing anger I was feeling. Tysen paced around like a caged animal. Being at the police station seemed to make him nervous and I wondered if he’d done some time in the past. Then I wondered if you could even be a security officer if you’d done any time, which only reminded me how little I knew about the whole career.

Eventually Brian came sauntering out, thumbs hooked through the belt loops in his trousers. I watched him indifferently. There is no one person on earth less likely to be impressed with a man than his own sister. He jerked his head, presumably to indicate that I should follow him to the back of the main reception area.

“Nice to see you again too, Brian,” I said sarcastically, standing up. Tysen fell in behind me as I walked towards Brian.

“Not him. Just you.” I raised my eyebrows slightly to tell Tysen to stay at the reception area. He didn’t look happy about it. It was probably contrary to his orders from Clive or Heller to keep a watch on me. Brian led me to a small interview room, windowless, minimally furnished and smelling of desperate men. I sat down without being invited and stared at Brian belligerently, my arms crossed.

“Tilly, how did you get mixed up with a man like Heller?”

“He’s my boss.” I sounded sullen, even to my own ears.

“I know that. But surely you’ve got the good sense to see that he is not the kind of person a girl like you should be associating with.”

I remained silent, arms firmly crossed. I really hated being called a girl. I wasn’t twelve anymore.

Brian sighed and ran his fingers through his short dark brown wavy hair, which was a mere shade or two lighter than my own hair colour. We also shared the same big, light brown

eyes. He was a nice-looking man, not stunning (Sean was better-looking), but nowhere near the unattractive side of the ledger either. He had an unexpected and disarmingly sweet smile, not that anyone ever saw it. His job as a homicide detective didn't naturally predispose him to sunny smiling, and a lot of that spilled over into his personal life. In fact, I couldn't even remember the last time I saw him smile. But I wondered if living with Gayle all these years had killed his *joie de vivre*, and immediately gave myself a mental slap for that bitchy thought. We were a tall family and he was taller than me but not as tall as Sean, with a tight, average-sized body. He worked out regularly, always an advantage for a cop. He was smart, suspicious and generally untrusting. He could also be a complete bastard, as I knew from growing up with him. This was my first encounter with him in his professional role.

"I've been led to believe that you can alibi Heller at approximately five o'clock in the morning yesterday. Is that correct?"

"Yes." And I made my statement, watching carefully as he laboriously typed it into the official format, correcting him on multiple occasions. When I was satisfied, he printed it off and I signed it with a flourish.

"Are you sleeping with him?" Brian asked me bluntly when I handed the form back to him after signing it.

I shook my head in disgusted disbelief. "Why is everyone so interested in my sex life? No, I am not sleeping with Heller. He's my boss! How many times do I have to tell everyone?"

"You stay away from him, you hear? Do not get involved with him." His eyes were burning with intent. "Do you know what he did to that woman? He's no better than an animal."

I locked eyes with him, but didn't say a word.

"We found his body fluids – his semen – in every single one of her orifices. Do you understand what I'm saying, Tilly? Every single one. Would you want him to do *that* to you? The woman also had bite marks on her buttocks, breasts and thighs. It's no wonder her husband went ballistic when he saw them."

"So you're blaming the victim now? You're saying she deserved to die? Because she had a night of rough sex with someone who wasn't her husband?" I stared at him, enraged. "They were *separated*, Brian. She was free to do whatever and whoever she wanted."

"It would drive any man to the point of madness to find out that his wife was up to that kind of thing with someone like Heller."

"It's none of my business what Heller does in his own time. All I know is what he told me and it sounded as though whatever he did to her, it was what she wanted him to do. She did a few things back to him too, you know."

"You have very frank discussions with him, don't you? I wouldn't talk to my boss about stuff like that."

"We're fairly close, yes."

"But not sleeping together?"

"No!"

"You've changed since you started working for him. You're getting hard, just like him."

I was furious at that unwanted observation. "I'd rather be hard like Heller than be as big an asshole as you."

"Tut, tut," he sneered. "Such bad language from such a nice girl. What would Mum and Dad say?"

"Why don't you go and tell them?" I scorned. "You always did like getting me in trouble."

"Always Mum and Dad's little angel. They don't know what a devil you really are."

I smiled sweetly at him. "Heller has a message for you."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. He wasn't happy about how you messed him around this morning. Keeping him here for hours when you knew he couldn't possibly have done it." Brian had the good grace to squirm a little. "His lawyer wanted him to lodge an official complaint against you and your mate."

Brian laughed contemptuously. "Am I supposed to be scared?"

I grew serious and leaned forward, moving my hands out towards him. "Yeah Brian, you probably should be. Heller's not going to do that. He told me you've made an enemy of him now. And he will get some revenge on you one day."

He leaned back in his chair, away from me, and folded his arms. "So what? How melodramatic. He's all piss and air. He's nothing but a nancy boy."

I entreated him with my eyes. "Brian, please. He means it. I'd be worried if I was you. You didn't see his face when he said it. Maybe you should apologise?"

"Fuck off! I'm not apologising to *him*! He should be sucking my dick with gratitude for not chucking his pretty arse in jail."

I eyed him in disgust. "God, listen to yourself, Brian. You sound like you've got a hard-on for him."

He stood up quickly, forcing his chair to teeter on the verge of falling, before righting itself. "Fuck off! We're done."

"Lovely to see you again too, dearest brother. Take care now. Kisses for Cara and Libby." And I ambled out of the station, collected Tysen and returned home.

Our weekly staff meeting was scheduled for that afternoon. I went into Heller's office earlier than the others and told him about my meeting with Brian, recounting all the details. "You were right. He wouldn't listen to me. He doesn't believe you're any threat."

"His mistake." His face was cold, hard and evil. There was no other word for it, except evil. I believed everything he had said. And threatened.

As the others trooped in and sat down, he rearranged his features back into a neutral position and we progressed through our normal business items. Daniel noted that revenue was up again for the previous month and I felt proud about that, knowing that some of that was due to the business I had brought in.

Heller didn't react to that news, but merely regarded me quietly for a moment while everyone waited for him to speak. "Matilda, I have an assignment coming up in the next few days that I want you to do. I'll talk to you about it later, but I don't think you're going to be very happy about it."

Daniel and I exchanged surreptitious glances and he gave the slightest shake of his head as if to deny any knowledge of the assignment. My curiosity was piqued, but infuriatingly Heller didn't expand further.

That night, I lay in bed worrying about everything. It was only as I was finally drifting off that I remembered that I still hadn't called Will.

## Chapter 25

A couple of days later, I checked my bank account. There was more money in it than I'd ever had in my life. I couldn't spend my salary fast enough. Heller was a very generous boss, paying for all of my day-to-day needs as well as paying me to work for him. But he did expect a lot, as I was about to be reminded when the devil himself walked into the office. He crooked his finger at me as he walked past and I followed him into his office, sitting down

without being invited.

“Time to talk about that new job for you. It’s your first sleepover job.”

“Okay,” I said docilely, half-excited and half-nervous. I was also proud that Heller felt confident enough of my ability to give me the responsibility of safeguarding a client overnight. It was unexpected.

“We have a pastor coming to the city for a few nights. He’s giving two lectures while he’s here and wants someone to look after his wives during the visit.”

“That sounds all right. Why did you say I wouldn’t be happy? I’ve done that kind of work . . .” I broke off as his words sunk in. “What do you mean *wives*? You meant to say wife, didn’t you?”

He ran his hand through his spiky hair in procrastination and avoided eye contact with me, his gaze fixed on his fingers that were playing with his expensive gold pen.

“Heller? What did you mean by wives?” I repeated myself impatiently.

He shrugged and blasted me with that lovely blueness. “Matilda, it’s self-evident, isn’t it? It’s a plural word. The man has more than one wife.”

My blood pressure rose a few points, but I kept my voice deliberately calm. “How could he? That’s not legal.”

“It is tolerated in some states in the United States. He’s one of the world’s leading proponents of polygamy. He runs his own religion, the Church of the Manifold Flowers of God.” I rolled my eyes in disbelief. “He’s here in the city from the US for the next few days to give some lectures to like-minded people.”

“Heller, I am *not* the right person for this job. It’s like a red rag to a bull,” I warned him, arms crossed with attitude.

“Don’t you think I know that, Matilda? But he wants a woman. He doesn’t trust his wives with a male security officer apparently. There are a lot of people opposed to his ideas, so he employs security whenever he leaves his own compound.”

“For God’s sake! I can’t believe what you make me do sometimes.” I was struck by a sudden thought and smiled at him, pleased with myself for finding a loophole. “But I can’t do this job. I’m not licensed to perform security work.”

“I know. I wouldn’t let you do security work without a licence, but this is more like escort work.” I stilled immediately and glared at him. He smiled sheepishly. “Sorry, bad choice of words. What I meant was that you’ll be acting as their companion, not security. Similar to what you did with Mrs Hayek. You don’t need a licence for that. It’s like being their friend.”

“Well, I won’t be their friend. I don’t want this assignment. The whole idea of polygamy is repugnant to me. Get someone else to do it.” I stood up to leave.

“Matilda,” he warned in his sternest voice, which is an extremely stern voice, let me tell you. I sat back down again. “I’m not *asking* you to do this assignment, I’m *telling* you to do it. You’re my employee and you’ll do it because I tell you to do it. And you’ll do it with a smile, remembering your big pay cheque.”

There was absolutely no doubt that he was efficient at communicating his thoughts clearly. I set my jaw stubbornly, but I knew when I was beaten. He was the boss, after all. He looked at me doubtfully, as if not entirely sure of my acquiescence. “I’ll take you over there tomorrow when they arrive. But you’re going to have to take care around him. He may not be used to modern women. He’s very religious and old-fashioned.”

I swept my hair over my shoulders and stared back him in defiance. “I couldn’t give a shit what he is. He’s nothing but a creepy pervert. I’m going to set his wives free.”

“Matilda! You’re going to have to mind your language, please.”

“Keep your hair on, Heller. I won’t ruin your chance of bringing in more money.” And

with that sneering comment, I flounced out righteously, stamping to my desk with all the attitude and muttering of obscenities under my breath of a teenager told the internet was down for the evening. I had actually witnessed that terrifying event once with Niq, so I knew what I was talking about.

The next day I wanted to make sure I made an unforgettable first impression on the Pastor, so dressed in a highly provocative outfit. I chose a tight deep purple short-skirted suit that showed more of my thigh than was usual for a business environment, teamed with a low-cut lavender blouse. I made sure I had on my best push-up bra, laciest panties and a lot of makeup. I spilled my hair out softly around my shoulders and gave myself a generous spray of a seductive floral perfume. I slipped on my highest heels. I smiled wickedly at myself in the mirror and flung my overnight bag over my shoulder, carefully making my way down the stairs to the office, where Heller was waiting to drive me over to the hotel.

Daniel wolf-whistled admiringly when I walked in. Niq almost gave himself whiplash turning to stare, a big smile on his face.

"I'm going to meet a religious nut," I explained.

"God help him!" Daniel replied with a grin.

I entered Heller's office. His eyes gleamed with interest, running up and down my body appreciatively, but he frowned. "No Matilda. That outfit's all wrong for this job."

"This is what I'm wearing," I insisted, and there was no way I was budging from that position. For once, I stared him down. He sighed resignedly, muttered under his breath and stood up to leave. We drove, not to one of the six-star hotels where we usually met clients, but a more run-down hotel, once the most fashionable place in the city but now seedy and neglected with age. It looked as though it hadn't been renovated since its hey-day in the 1960s.

"Why here?" I queried as we walked through the shabby unattended foyer over to the lifts, one of which had a dusty 'out of order' sign across its doors.

"Apparently running your own religion isn't as lucrative as you'd expect," Heller commented dryly.

"How many wives does this prick have?"

"Matilda," he warned.

"Sorry! How many wives does our greatly esteemed client have, my dearest lord Heller?" I said in my sweetest voice, blinking up at him with mock-adoration in my eyes. He reluctantly smiled down at me as we stepped into the creaky lift.

"Six."

"Another Henry VIII on our hands, huh? Has he chopped off any of their heads yet?"

"Not as far as I know," he said patiently, ignoring my bad-humour. "His name is Pastor Merton Peachey."

"You're kidding me? Pastor Peachey?"

"I kid you not."

"Christ almighty, he sounds like a cartoon character!" He glared at me and I held up my hands in apology. "Okay, okay. I promise I'll behave myself. Mostly."

He gave me a gentle, exasperated nudge with his arm so I elbowed him back harder, not in a good mood. We stepped out of the lift and headed down the dingy hallway, the wallpaper peeling, scuffed and stained, the carpet virtually threadbare. Three of the six ceiling lights had blown and nobody had bothered to replace them.

He knocked on the door of the hotel room to which we had been directed. It was opened by a thin, hard-faced, dour man, dressed in an old-fashioned black funeral suit and white dress shirt, accessorised with a black tie. *How merry*, I thought. He was in his late fifties, salt-and-pepper-haired, mean-mouthed, with mesmerising gray eyes that goggled with instant

disapproval at the sight of me. I flicked my hair back and pushed my chest out further in response, and it was all I could do not to smile seductively and wink at him.

Heller allowed me to enter the room first, pretending to be a gentleman, then jabbed me viciously in the back with his finger as I walked – his warning to behave myself. As I arched forward in pain, I kicked backwards with one leg and made satisfying contact with my high heel on his shin. He sported a slightly pained expression as he sat down at Pastor Peachey's behest on the much worn lounge. I sat next to him and assumed my most vacuous, wide-eyed expression.

Pastor Peachey was clearly uncomfortable in my presence. His glance moved rapidly between Heller and me. He didn't look impressed. I felt guilty then that I had probably ruined a chance for Heller to snare a presumably lucrative assignment. He didn't usually take on any other kind. The cheapness of the hotel must have been compensating for the expensiveness of my services and I felt doubly guilty.

The good Pastor spoke with a southern-US rural twang, and started our conversation by bestowing on us an obscure, lengthy and as far as I could tell, completely irrelevant passage from scripture. I think it had something to do with wanton women. We listened to it politely, oblivious as to its point and then when he had finally concluded, Heller questioned the Pastor about his exact needs in his precise business-like manner.

He told us that he had been the object of abusive attacks for his beliefs in the past and didn't wish to subject his wives to such harassment while he was visiting the city. He wanted them kept busy and supervised while he prepared his lectures and met with local members of his congregation. Pastor Peachey looked at me uncertainly, but decided that twenty-four hour companionship was probably what he needed. Heller was so convincing that, with an insultingly obvious lack of enthusiasm, Pastor Peachey agreed to keep me on for the next three days during his visit.

I had unwillingly packed for this eventuality and Heller went to fetch my bag from his vehicle. The Pastor stared at me in intense silence the whole time Heller was gone. I began to feel like an abject sinner under his brooding gaze and started to fidget uncomfortably. A few more minutes and I might even have even felt compelled to confess to my many, many sins, including the ones I'd only ever thought about. Well, there was a whole thick volume of them on Heller alone, wasn't there?

Pastor Peachey suddenly spoke gruffly, breaking the awkward silence. "I'll introduce you to my wives."

He picked up the phone and spoke tersely into it. After less than a minute there was a soft knock on the door. He answered and ushered in five plain women, ranging in age from barely twenty to nearly forty. They were dressed dowdily, in noticeably home-made flower-printed dresses that primly covered their bodies neck to ankle, including full-length sleeves. Head scarves covered their long plaited hair. They wore boots that I suspected came from an army surplus store. They appeared to be channelling their fashion inspiration from *Little House on the Prairie*. None wore one speck of makeup or a single piece of jewellery, not even a wedding ring. Their eyes were modestly downcast.

They stood obediently behind their husband, arranging themselves neatly in a semi-circle. They obviously hadn't been exposed to a woman like me before, except perhaps during their husband's sermons on wickedness. Individually, they stole furtive glances at my clothes, makeup, hair, boobs and heels, either drinking it in for further heated discussion on sin amongst themselves, or hopefully I thought, ploughing the seed for future rebellion. I met their eyes boldly, smiling in a friendly way. I wasn't optimistic though, as they all seemed thoroughly under the rule of their husband and master, who happened at that very minute to be glowering at me, noticing my friendly efforts with his wives. God! I'd never get used to

saying that. *Wives*. It was just plain wrong.

“These are my wives, Miss Chalmers – Mary, Elizabeth, Rebecca, Hannah and Sarah. Wives, this is Miss Chalmers, who will be looking after you for the next few days while I conduct business in this city.” It appeared as though he had introduced them oldest to youngest. Perhaps there was a wifely hierarchy in the family. I’d have to ask them later.

“Please, call me Tilly,” I requested and smiled at them warmly. They nodded shyly at me, and I received a few small smiles in response. Heller’s subsequent return to the room with my bag generated quite a stir among them though, with so much whispering and giggling that Pastor Peachey’s face flushed an unbecoming red and his lips pressed so tightly together they were in danger of disappearing. They had evidently never seen a creature such as Heller in their neck of the woods.

“Ladies! What is this commotion?” the Pastor admonished in a harsh voice, and they all subdued instantly. “This is Mr Heller. He will not be staying with us.” And for the first time in my life I witnessed five adult women experiencing simultaneous disappointment. The Pastor didn’t bother with a reciprocal introduction because of the briefness of the relationship, but I would have bet a large sum of money that each of those women would have loved a direct blast from Heller’s amazing blue eyes as he regarded them during an introduction, even if only for a second. It would have been a treasured moment for the rest of their lives.

After further lengthy religious pontificating from the Pastor that also seemed to relate to wanton women, Heller made urgent, almost desperate, moves to escape, leaving me behind. In truth, I couldn’t blame him – I didn’t want to be there either. It was going to be a long three days. I walked him to the door. There he stroked my cheek with surprising tenderness, his eyes filled with some emotion that I wasn’t in the mood to interpret and that he seemed unwilling to experience.

“See you soon, Matilda. Behave yourself and keep in touch,” he said quietly.

“Sure,” I replied coolly and spun around to return to the room. He suddenly clutched me by my upper arms and pulled me out into the hallway, away from the curious eyes of the wives and husband. He pushed me against the wall, pressed himself on me and kissed me. I hadn’t been expecting that at all, but responded as best I could in the circumstances. He was a great kisser and it was a very nice kiss. I could have done with a couple more.

“I love that outfit you’re wearing,” he murmured and kissed me again before stalking off towards the lift, not looking back. I watched him until he disappeared, willing my heartbeat to slow to normal. When the lift doors shut, I returned to the room and sat on the scruffy lounge again, the intense focus of six pairs of eyes.

“Isn’t there a wife missing?” I asked the Pastor politely. “I thought Heller told me you had six wives.”

“Mr Heller was not mistaken,” he replied, regarding me reprovingly for questioning the veracity of a man’s word. “My first wife Martha has stayed at home to mind the children.”

“How nice for her. And how many children do you have?” I was the queen of polite chatter.

“Twenty-eight,” he replied with pompous conceit.

“Goodness me! What a lot of children. You must be proud.” I couldn’t help myself. By my calculations that was 4.6667 children per wife, which far exceeded the average number of children per woman in this country.

“My wives are blessed with fecundity,” he proclaimed sanctimoniously, with an unspoken but evident self-credit for being some kind of super-stud. Such arrogance made my stomach turn. I would have loved to have told him to go fecund himself, but I was trying to be diplomatic for Heller’s sake.

“Your first lecture is tomorrow night, is that correct? And you will be giving two

lectures? Here in this hotel?" He nodded sagely. "I presume you would like your lovely wives to attend both of your lectures to illustrate the spiritual and physical benefits of polygamy?"

"Of course." He didn't appear to possess a sarcasm-detector.

"What would you like me to do with your . . . wives . . . during the day while you're busy, Pastor Peachey?"

He stared at me in astonishment. "They shall spend the days as they usually do – in solemn contemplation of our Lord and in service to their husband."

"Sounds fun, but you don't wish for them to visit the tourist attractions while you conduct your business? I understand they have never been to this city before? There are some wonderful attractions, including the zoo, the harbour, galleries, museums, and of course the fantastic shopping. I would be very pleased to escort them around safely."

The wives collectively raised hopeful faces to their husband at my question. He crushed their hopes without even acknowledging them.

"Certainly not. They will maintain the Lord's work during our stay, not serve the false god, Mammon." Five sets of eyes lowered, disappointed, but not surprised. They were used to the hard bastard after all. He continued. "I want your presence with my wives at all times. I'm not anticipating any trouble, even though I've suffered harassment in the past. I don't want to appear aggressive or alarmed. It would be my preference for you to blend in with my wives." His eyes scanned my body, lingering on my legs and lips with scathing distaste. "More than you currently do."

"Would you like me to dress more casually? In jeans?" I offered.

"No, you will still look too different to them. I want you to dress as my wives do. Then you won't seem so noticeable." *No way on earth*, was my first reaction. I looked over at the wives again. They were so old-fashioned, drab and submissive. "Mr Heller said I could have the arrangements that best suited my needs," he reminded me, with a hint of something disagreeable and domineering in his eyes.

*Oh, did he just? Well, Heller wasn't the boss of me!* I thought angrily, and was about to open my mouth to argue. Oh, hang on. He *was* the boss of me. Damn. I agreed with little eagerness. The Pastor furnished me with a look that I couldn't read, but it set my hackles rising.

"Ladies, please escort Miss Chalmers next door and help her change." They made moves to quietly leave his room, when he called out. "Sarah. Stay behind please. I feel as though you didn't quite grasp the metaphorical meaning of my sermon this morning. I would like to instruct you further on the matter."

Sarah was the youngest wife. "Yes, Husband," she answered timidly and obediently returned to the Pastor, while the rest of us streamed next door.

## Chapter 26

Their room was slightly larger, but no less shabby than the Pastor's, containing two double beds.

"You all sleep in here?" I asked in surprise.

"Yes, Miss Chalmers," answered Mary? Elizabeth?

"Please call me Tilly. But there are five of you?"

"One of us must stay with our husband during the night. The other four of us remain in this room."

*Eew!* It was as if he had his own harem.

It seemed as though I'd be relegated to sleeping on the lounge for the few nights I was

with them. I tested it with caution and could feel inner springs poking through uncomfortably. *Just great! Just brilliant! Thanks a bunch, Heller.*

I made them reintroduce themselves to me again, memorising their faces. Mary was thirty-seven and was plain with an unattractively large mole on her left cheek, but lovely gentle brown eyes; Elizabeth was thirty-two and was plain with watery protuberant blue eyes and surprisingly sensuous lips; Rebecca was twenty-eight and almost pretty with large dark brown eyes, lush black eyelashes and a delicate mouth; Hannah was twenty-three and had beautiful clear skin and startling blue eyes, but a concerning vacant look in her eyes; and then there was little Sarah, who was only nineteen, with glossy black hair and a sweet heart-shaped face. She was the wife still next door.

“Sarah is our husband’s favourite at the moment. She is always getting further instruction from him,” complained Rebecca.

“Yes, it’s not fair,” agreed Hannah. “I didn’t understand anything he said this morning, and yet he blesses Sarah with extra attention. Again.” She sulked.

“Now, now,” soothed Mary, the mother hen of the clutch. “It’s only natural that he needs to give Sarah more instruction at the moment. She is the youngest of us and the newest wife.”

“Our husband is not only instructing her,” contended Elizabeth. “They’re having relations. Well, that’s what always happens when *I* have extra instruction with him.” She looked ashamed at her boldness, but also a little smug for a fleeting moment.

“Yes,” explained Mary patiently, ignoring Elizabeth’s pride. “But the relations are part of the instruction. They illustrate the very sinful nature of relations, as our husband is always teaching us. Unfortunately, Sarah must be a very poor learner and needs to be taught quite frequently about how sinful relations are. I wouldn’t be feeling jealous of her for that reason.” She glanced around the other women, gently daring them to contradict her.

“I see what you mean. When you put it in those words,” conceded Hannah.

I bit my tongue so hard during this exchange that it started bleeding. They fussed over me when the blood trickled from between my lips. I ran to the bathroom, waving them away, insisting it was nothing, rinsing and spitting in the cracked powder blue vanity bowl. I took advantage of my bathroom break to close the door, pulling out my phone. The bathroom was ugly with floral rose pink wallpaper, a blue bathtub, blue toilet and patterned blue and pink crazed vinyl that was severely cracked in places showing its age. I sat on the closed toilet to ring Heller. He answered straight away, still driving back to the Warehouse.

“Matilda? Is everything all right? Have you forgotten something?”

“I’m miserable already,” I complained plaintively.

He wasn’t in a tolerant mood. “What did I tell you? You’ll do it with a smile.”

“But Heller,” I moaned, “He rotates his poor wives to share his bed every night. I can’t do this. Have some mercy.”

“Matilda!” His voice was showing patent signs of becoming angry, so I hung up on him, spilling out everywhere with plenty of angry myself.

In my absence, Mary had rummaged in her suitcase and handed me a hideous dress made out of stiff cotton, with a nausea-inducing pattern of roses entwined in a trellis that was repeated regularly on the cloth. I snatched it from her ungraciously, not even saying thanks, still angry with Heller.

“This is my prettiest dress, Tilly,” she said humbly, her eyes anxious when she noted my annoyance. “I hope you like it. I made it myself with material and thread I paid for with my own money. I don’t have a lot of my own money, so I only wear it on the most special occasions.”

Well, I’m sure you can imagine just how low I felt right at that moment.

“It’s very beautiful, Mary,” I lied. “But shouldn’t you save it? It’s far too precious to give

to me to wear. I'm not good with nice clothes and I've ruined a lot already this year. I'm a bit reckless and I would just die if something happened to this beautiful dress. Nobody's ever given me something so special to wear before and I'm feeling nervous about taking it. Don't you have a dress less important for me to wear?"

She glanced down, red flushing her cheeks, ashamed for a minute, before facing me again with a determined smile. "Why no, Tilly. I don't have much of a wardrobe, and I'll need all my ordinary clothes for our public appearances here. This is the one dress I can spare the most. And our husband was most insistent that we give you a dress. We don't want to displease him. And none of the other wives has a special dress to spare."

Damn my big mouth! I thanked her prettily and determined there and then to send her some money to replace the dress, because I just knew something was going to happen to it. No, forget that, thinking of the mean-mouthed Pastor taking the money for his own purposes. I would press some cash, some American cash, into her hands as we parted. It was the only way she could use it for herself. But how on earth was I going to get my hands on some US dollars though, stuck in this dump? I'd have to ask someone for a huge favour, and by someone I certainly did not mean my dreamboat of a boss, the Ill-Tempered One, but someone sweeter, more amenable. I smiled suddenly. *Daniel!* I'd call him first thing in the morning.

I proceeded to take off my jacket and blouse in front of them, not bothering to go into the bathroom. I was surrounded by married women after all. Where was the danger? The women's eyes goggled with interest at the sight of my lacy push-up bra.

"That's real interesting underwear," Rebecca noted with almost overbearing curiosity. She wasn't alone in the room in that level of inquisitiveness, all the wives pressing in on me for a closer look.

"It's a push-up bra," I explained. "It makes your breasts look bigger. Improves your cleavage." And I showed them. There was a buzz of excited chatter among the women.

"But Tilly, you already have a very nice bosom. Anyone can fathom that just by casting their eye over you. Why would you want your breasts to look even bigger?" asked Rebecca again, genuine puzzlement on her face. "Surely that would only encourage men to look at you in a lustful manner?"

"Yes, that's the whole point." There were four gasps of disbelief.

"You *want* men to look at you in lust?" asked Elizabeth, aghast at the thought.

"Some men. Sometimes." I pulled off my skirt and again there was great interest in my lacy panties.

"They're so pretty," said Mary. "Why would you wear something so pretty when it will only be hidden under your clothes?"

"They make me feel feminine. I love to wear them. I love to think of a very special man discovering them for himself one day." Heller suddenly flashed into my brain. My brain then crushed the thought mercilessly. He was my boss, for God's sake! I wouldn't be showing him my lacy knickers anytime soon.

The concept of wearing clothes for personal pleasure was clearly unknown to them and a disbelieving chatter rippled through them again. I suspected that I would be the topic of many a conversation for a good while after this visit was over. I slipped the horrible dress over my head, and Mary did up the back zip for me. I went to the long cracked mirror tiles glued to the wall and looked at my reflection. Yuck! It hung like a circus tent on me, except that it was too short, my wrists and ankles poking out, as I was much taller than any of the wives. I took hold of the cloth of the dress and pulled it back behind me, making the dress tighter against my body, emphasising my curves.

"That looks better. You should make these dresses tighter. You all have lovely figures

and should show them off a bit more.”

“Goodness, Tilly! Our husband wouldn’t allow that,” Mary insisted, but she stood in front of the mirror and pulled the material of her dress tightly against her body as well, giggling ashamedly at the result. They all took turns to do the same, all with the same gales of guilty giggles.

I sat on a chair while Elizabeth plaited my hair for me. It wasn’t anywhere near as long as the other women’s, but she was able to give me a fairly neat plait. I tied the brown headscarf over my hair and contemplated myself in the mirror. I looked a sight and smiled at my reflection. If only Heller could see me now!

I went into the bathroom to remove my heavily applied makeup. It was a bit crowded in the bathroom with the five of us, but I didn’t have the heart to ask the other four women to leave. I was the most interesting thing that had happened to them for years.

“Our husband doesn’t allow makeup,” warned Hannah, as she watched me wipe away my mascara.

“Yes, but I’m not one of his wives, am I? So I don’t have to do what he says.” That concept was revolutionary to them and they discussed it heatedly for a while as I continued to clean my face, before deciding that I was correct. I didn’t have to do what he said.

“Do you do what Mr Heller says?” enquired Elizabeth.

“Sometimes. If I’m in the mood. Depends what he wants.”

“Are you having relations with Mr Heller?” asked Rebecca breathlessly. “He’s very . . .” Her vocabulary failed her at that point. The other wives nodded enthusiastically, agreeing with her unspoken but unmistakable judgement on Heller’s incredible very-ness.

“No! He’s my boss. It’s not a good idea to have, um, relations with your boss. I don’t have a boyfriend at the moment, but I hope to have one again soon, and I can tell you ladies that I plan to have relations with him as often as possible.”

“You want to have relations?” Rebecca queried.

“Oh God, yes! I’m desperate for them.” They were shocked by my blasphemy. “Sorry,” I apologised.

Mary was puzzled. “You enjoy relations?”

“You better believe it, sweetheart! I can’t wait to have them again. I’m going a bit crazy without them, to be honest. It’s been such a long time.”

“But our husband teaches us that righteous women never enjoy relations. They are a burden for women to suffer for their sinfulness so that they may please their husbands and bear their children.”

“All I can say is if you’re not enjoying relations, then your husband isn’t doing it right,” I declared firmly. “When it’s done properly, relations are equally satisfying and pleasurable to both men *and* women.”

They urgently wanted to discuss this radical idea further, but Sarah arrived back in the room then, and the conversation turned to more general matters. Sarah had not enjoyed pleasurable relations with her husband and appeared downcast. The others kindly pressed her on her troubles.

“Our husband tells me that I don’t understand religious matters and I need further instruction. I may even have to have more instruction tonight.” She shook her head sadly, her voice catching in a sob. “Why am I so stupid that I can’t understand what he says? I *hate* further instruction with him!”

“Hush!” admonished Mary nervously. “Our husband may hear! He is only in the next room. You must be a good woman and listen to him carefully. He is very wise in such matters and only wishes for you to be a righteous and obedient wife.”

“I *am* obedient! I do *everything* he tells me to. Even when to me it seems unpleasant and .

. . very sinful.”

Mary clapped her hands and enthused, “But that’s wonderful, Sarah! You are starting to understand the sinful nature of relations. And our husband is showing you the way by making you experience very sinful relations. That helps you to understand.”

Sarah nodded, but still was unconvinced. “Perhaps if I stop struggling so much, he may think of me as being more obedient.”

“Possibly,” chimed in Elizabeth. “But remember that our husband maintains that it is virtuous for a woman to struggle against relations, and that her ultimate submission is very pleasing to God as a sign of her obedience to her husband. Our husband is always particularly pleased when there is a struggle at the beginning of relations.”

They all contemplated this and agreed that it was true. I was sickened listening to them. I went to my bag and pulled out the boots I’d borrowed off Niq, pulling them on slowly. Should I do anything? Say anything? They were all adults and presumably all the women had been willing to join the polygamous family knowing what it entailed. Who was I to judge the way they lived? I always tried not to judge other people. None of them looked unhappy in their life. They were fed, housed and clothed and maybe they were truly contented. I had no way of really knowing. I pushed these thoughts out of my brain and decided to just concentrate on the job at hand. Ultimately, their personal affairs were none of my business.

There was a knock on the door, and Pastor Peachey stepped into the room carrying a very large and old Bible.

“Evening prayer time, wives,” he announced, scrutinising me in my wifely outfit. Again that strange look that I didn’t care for passed across his face. The women fussed around arranging chairs in a circle. There weren’t enough to go around and a couple of the wives subjected themselves to sitting on the floor, next to his chair. I sat apart on one of the beds, arms crossed, watching them in a detached way. I wasn’t going to pretend to be religious for their sakes, and it would be nothing but hypocritical for me to join in their prayer group.

Of course Pastor Peachey led the prayers, which consisted of an extremely lengthy reading from the Bible. That was followed by an even lengthier sermon on the sinful nature of relations, which appeared to be a favourite topic of his. I noticed Sarah straining to listen to every word and nuance, her lips moving as she tried to memorise what he was saying.

Afterwards, he questioned them all closely on what they had just heard. Poor little Sarah received the bulk of his admonishments, despite the fact that Hannah clearly had no clue about anything at all, not giving a single correct answer to any of his questions. In fact, I could have offered smarter and more cogent answers than she did and I wasn’t even listening properly. It looked as though Sarah was up for further instruction from her husband again that night and she didn’t look thrilled by the prospect.

## Chapter 27

The women and I dined very simply that evening on peanut butter sandwiches made with oily home-brand peanut butter on cheap white bread, potato chips, horrible tasteless apples and tap water. I noticed that the Pastor went back to his room to eat, not partaking of our ‘feast’. I suspected he was going to order room service for himself, probably a juicy steak and sides, leaving his wives to eat like preschoolers. I heartily loathed him more and more every minute.

I discovered that ‘doing the Lord’s work and serving their husband’ meant hours of embroidery for the women each day. They turned plain pieces of linen and cotton into beautiful works of art on tablecloths, napkins, place mats, pillowcases and any other piece of

haberdashery on which they could embroider. After we finished our humble dinner, they unpacked their embroidery equipment and busily started sewing. Their skill was breathtaking. Mary was particularly talented, dipping her needle in and out of the material faster than I could see. She was creating an exquisitely stunning floral border to a tablecloth, a riot of flowers in gorgeous colours bursting through a creeping emerald vine of leaves. It was simply spectacular. Being completely useless at arts and crafts myself, I couldn't praise them enough and insisted that they show me every piece they were each currently working on. They blushed at my effusive acclaim, but smiled into their laps, quietly pleased with themselves.

Mary explained that they sold their work at local markets, and with a modest pride stated that their work was much in demand, which I could readily believe given the quality of the workmanship. The money earned by their embroidery constituted the family's main income, the Pastor contributing only an insignificant amount through his writings and lectures. Martha, the 'head wife' and Mary were allowed by the Pastor to take on some small personal side jobs. They might embroider a skirt, a blouse or a wedding dress for someone, for example, keeping any profits they made for themselves to buy little treats. This was how Mary was able to afford to make her special dress that I now had the pleasure of wearing. I gathered that treats were rare in the life of the Peachey wives, and that Martha and Mary were given this liberty by the Pastor as an honour for their senior wifely roles.

Rebecca piped up to tell me that both women were very kind and thoughtful though and often bought little treats for the other four wives or their multitude of children with their precious money. Mary gave her a small, self-effacing smile and she smiled back fondly. I was surprised by how much affection there was between the wives. I guess if I'd given polygamy a second's thought before I met the Peachey family, I would have imagined a lot of bitchiness and one-upmanship taking place, but these wives were supportive of each other and generally harmonious in their relationship. They genuinely appeared to love each other.

Eventually poor Sarah received the summons to go to the Pastor's room for the night. She packed her meagre things hurriedly. I was told that the Pastor didn't like to be kept waiting.

"Where's the conjugal nightgown?" she asked in a panic. There was a flurry in the room as the wives frantically searched for it. I would have helpfully joined in the search, but I had no idea what they were talking about. Finally Elizabeth waved it over her head. It had accidentally fallen down the back of one of the beds.

"What is it?" I asked her curiously.

"It's the conjugal nightgown that we must wear when we share our husband's bed for the night," Elizabeth said, holding it up for me to see. It was a thin, filmy floor-length nightgown that left little to the imagination, being completely see-through. It was incredibly revealing.

"You wear that? Just that?" I asked incredulously.

"We all do. Whoever shares our husband's bed for the night must wear it. It is his wish," said Mary.

"It's not very modest, is it?"

"Our husband says that it reveals a woman for the sinful creature that she is. And that is his wish," she repeated.

I rolled my eyes in disbelief and watched as Sarah scurried to go next door. I stripped out of my horrid dress and unplaited my hair, waiting patiently for my turn in the shower. I checked my phone while I waited. A missed call from Heller. I rang him back.

"Having fun, my sweet?"

"An absolute ball." And I couldn't have forced one more drop of sarcasm into that response if I'd used a shoehorn.

"Any trouble so far?"

"No. We've had a very quiet day."

“You’re not tempted to join the family?”

“No fucking way!” Heads turned in my direction in alarm at the profanity. I mouthed ‘sorry’ to them.

He chuckled. “You sound very sure about that.”

“I am.”

“But remember what I said about minding your language, please.”

“Yeah, yeah. Look, I gotta run. It’s my turn in the bathroom.”

“Sweet dreams, Matilda.”

I hung up, had a quick and cold shower, all the hot water used up already. I changed into my singlet top and boxer short pyjama set and retired at the extraordinarily late hour for them of nine o’clock.

I had a very uncomfortable sleep that night. The lounge was full of lumps and springs and I couldn’t find a restful position. One of the women snored loudly, the air-conditioner was making a strange pinging noise and the tap was dripping in the bathroom and no amount of turning the faucet could make it stop. It was just one of those nights you have to endure and I spent it trying to deduce why Heller used a fake name. Witness protection? Former spy who’d been burned? Assassin who hit the wrong target? Con man on the lam? Father avoiding child support? Bankrupt who needed a fresh start? Bigamist whose wives were on to him? When you started pondering, it was easy to think of loads of reasons why someone might need a fake name. None of them were particularly appealing though, and I wondered what his story was. Maybe I’d find out one day. Then again, maybe I wouldn’t. Daniel didn’t know and he’d lived with Heller for years.

I was glad when dawn came. The women rose very early and we breakfasted on more peanut butter sandwiches, accompanied this time by a cup of tea each from the hotel room’s complimentary stock, making five cups of tea from only four teabags. Sarah returned from the Pastor’s room and immediately headed into the shower, eyes downcast. No sooner had she come out then the Pastor arrived for morning prayers. The women had all dressed as soon as they rose, but I sat in my pyjamas still, slowly brushing my hair in front of the mirror while he led the women in another lengthy prayer session. His eyes kept crossing to me in the mirror the entire time he was in the room, that odd, unsettling expression on his face again.

That day the Pastor singled out Hannah for correction and requested that she attend his room for further instruction at eleven. Sarah appeared mightily relieved and Hannah’s face held a mix of proud apprehension. The day passed slowly. The women read their Bibles, discussed the Bible, discussed their husband’s sermons or did more stitch work, conversing in low voices. I was bored out of my brain. Battling overpowering ennui, I picked up the nearest Bible and flipped through its pages, noting that all the passages relating to fornication, begetting and wanton women had been underlined. I gently placed the book back down where I found it.

Just before Hannah was due to attend for further instruction, I rang the Pastor in his room. “Would you mind if I escorted your wives to the park across the road for some exercise? A walk would be very beneficial for us all.” I thought quickly. “And very godly, as I’m sure you’d agree.”

He wasn’t pleased, but knowing that he would be occupied with Hannah for some time he reluctantly agreed, with the strict proviso that we could roam no further than the park. I didn’t care – it was a big park and we could manage a decent walk within its boundaries. The women were overjoyed when I told them, all except poor Hannah who had to make her farewells to join her husband.

“Sorry Hannah,” I consoled, patting her arm sympathetically.

There was no chance of me wearing the ugly dress in public, so I slipped on a pair of

jeans and chose between a couple of t-shirts that were the only other clothes I had bought to wear besides my original suit. I escorted the women down in the lift and we had an enjoyable stroll around the park, soaking up the sunshine and fresh air. They were enchanted with the flora and the small amount of fauna we saw, educating me in return on the different types of plants and animals native to their part of the world. As we ambled through the park, two *Heller's* men in their distinctive uniform approached from the opposite direction, probably heading out to lunch from their assignment.

"Hey!" they hailed me and we slapped hands in the traditional high-five *Heller's* greeting.

"On a job?" one queried, looking curiously at my charges.

"Yep. I'm mother hen today, taking the chicks for a walk." They smiled.

"Lovely day for it."

"Sure is. Anyway, gotta get these lovelies back to the coop. Have a good one, guys."

We slapped hands again and went our separate ways, the whole mundane exchange leaving me with a warm glow of happiness. They had been friendly and treated me like just another colleague, so maybe not all the men thought I was sleeping with the Boss. Or if they did think that, it didn't bother them enough to feel that I was getting any special treatment. It struck me then just how badly I wanted to be considered part of the *Heller's* team.

I ushered the women back to the hotel. They didn't seem to notice the nosy looks their appearance elicited, or just didn't care. It was hard to tell. Safely returned to their room, they chatted excitedly about their outing to Hannah who arrived back not long after we had. She struggled bravely to be happy for the others' opportunity to stretch their legs, but bitter disappointment was stamped on her face.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully, and it wasn't long before Pastor Peachey arrived once more for the evening prayer session. He gave me that creepy look again, taking in my jeans and loose hair. I sat on the bed and stared at him intently during the whole session. *Let him see what it was like, for once*, I thought nastily. He didn't enjoy the scrutiny, judging by the number of times his eyes shifted over to me.

He was out of sorts that evening. All the women got a blast for not concentrating and not thinking about the scriptures properly, even though it was him who constantly lost his train of thought or place in the Bible. I thought he was very hard on them and it was a subdued little group of women who readied themselves for the evening lecture. Reluctantly, I pulled the dress back over my head and had my hair plaited again.

When it came close to the start of the lecture, the Pastor knocked on our door and like a group of obedient schoolgirls we all walked the few floors down to the hotel's large conference hall. I felt curious eyes on us as we made our way there and was mortified to be thought part of this weird family. I wanted to walk to one side, but what was the real use of that? I was dressed like one of his wives, and everyone would think of me as one of them anyway. I hoped I didn't run into anybody I knew.

The other five women kept their eyes lowered modestly, only peeking up on occasion to take in the faded baroque extravagance of the conference hall. It had been built lavishly in less economically rational times, but like the hotel in general, had a general air of squalor and neglect about it.

The wives and I stood in a line at one side of the hall. They stood uniformly, their hands clasped in front of them, chattering quietly to each other. I stood in the middle, towering over them in height, arms crossed, one foot in front of the other, hip cocked, eyes suspicious and a strong expression of contempt on my face. I looked pissed off and menacing, exactly the type of woman you would run a million miles from if you were a polygamist. And how do I know how I appeared just then? Because some dropkick of a photographer took a shot at that exact

moment that ended up in the next day's newspaper under the headline, *Beauties and the Beast*, which was neither accurate nor witty. I really should have done what I wanted at the time and smashed that camera over his head. I strode towards him in an intimidating way, and he ran off without taking another shot, which is presumably how that truly awful photo ended up in the newspaper instead. Never mind, I told myself, nobody read that trashy little tabloid anyway.

There were a surprisingly large amount of attendees at the lecture. *God, how many boring, ugly, middle-aged sexual perverts were interested in multiple wives in this city anyway*, I thought derisively. It seemed like an outlandish number of them to me. I made it my personal duty that evening to individually glare at each one of them, until they turned away from my reproving gaze, squirming in embarrassment.

Pastor Peachey was introduced by a local advocate of polygamy, Robert Rigby, a boring, ugly, middle-aged sexual pervert. He was on the news on a regular basis, staging repeated one-man pickets in front of Parliament House trying to persuade the legislators to make polygamy legal in this state. He was a lunatic and a joke and I don't know what his long-suffering wife of thirty-five years thought of his continual attempts to legally bring young brides into their marriage bed, but she should have chopped his knob off years ago and saved the rest of us from his dull diatribes.

The Pastor spoke for two long, long hours, during which I made absolutely no attempt to hide my gigantic yawns. The wives and I were sitting down by then, but still segregated at the side of the hall, so that everyone could observe us with pity, or longing, depending on your viewpoint. Mostly longing I suspected, casting my eyes scathingly over the assorted bunch of weirdos and perverts gathered together. The wives were hanging on their husband's every word, except Hannah who looked as though she was singing quietly to herself.

Pastor Peachey finished his speech with another lengthy section of scripture that sounded as though it was also about wanton women and sinful relations. He was a one-note band, that man. There was tumultuous applause, some of the perverts even jumping to their feet in acclamation. The Pastor stayed behind to chat to attendees and to answer questions about his beliefs and lifestyle, which he was more than happy to do.

I took the opportunity to hustle the wives back to their hotel room. In the hallway of our floor we were accosted by three very drunk guys who evidently mistook us for a bunch of coy strippers. They deliberately blocked our progress in that aggressive way drunken guys have, thinking that they're being flirty and playful, when they're actually being quite menacing. One of them, a drop-dead gorgeous man with wavy golden hair and stunning gold eyes, his handsome face loose and rubbery with the alcohol, grabbed Hannah around the waist and tried to kiss her. She screamed loudly and swatted at him ineffectually with her hands. I sighed, my stock of patience all used up by the tedium of the lecture.

I started off nicely, pulling Hannah gently away from his busy hands. "Look guys, we've had a long night and we just want to go to bed, so if you don't mind . . ."

Golden Guy turned his attention on me. "We wanna go to bed too, sweetheart," he slurred and leered, advancing towards me. "Six of you, three of us. Would be fun. Good time had by all. Guaran-fucking-teed."

"Do we look like whores to you?" I asked him scornfully, trying to dodge his groping hands.

"You look like girls who need a good fuck." The wives shrieked in horror at the suggestion, but he certainly had my measure – I was in dire need of a good one. "And we're the men for the job," he boasted, swaying as he stood there, sweeping his hand to include his equally inebriated mates – a lanky, freckly man and a stout, balding man. I was less sure about that. He leaned forward, blinking, trying to focus his eyes on me. "You're pretty."

“Yeah, pretty pissed off that you won’t get out the way.” I tried to push past him, but despite his drunkenness, he stood his ground firmly, a buddy behind each shoulder. I was fondly thinking of my capsicum spray right about then, but my handbag was back in the room.

“Last time,” I said, looking up into his beautiful eyes. Why are the good-looking ones always the biggest jerks? “Out of the way, sunshine.”

“Gimme a kiss first, pretty girl.” His hand shot out and grabbed my butt, having a good feel. “Mmm, nice and tight. Bet you’re hot in the sack.”

That whole exchange riled me for two reasons: one, I hate people (men) presuming they can touch me without my permission, and two, as I said before, I really hate being called a girl. I didn’t bother reasoning with him any further, but just quickly fisted my hand and forcefully punched him in the neck, right in his Adam’s apple. It was one of the manoeuvres Tysen had taught me because it doesn’t require a great deal of skill to perform and it’s very painful for the assaulted. While he was distracted by that unpleasant experience, I took him by surprise by ramming against him hard with all my force, unbalancing him in his drunkenness. He went down heavily, taking down his buddies at the same time like bowling pins, them being too dull-witted by the booze to get out of the way.

“Ladies, quickly!” I suggested with urgency and we all hurried down the hallway, half-running, half-walking, towards our room. I ushered them ahead of me so that I was last in the line to step over the struggling bodies on the floor, attempting to disentangle themselves from each other.

One of the men shot his hands out and grabbed both my ankles as I passed, causing me to fall flat on my face. Fortunately I had the time and reflexes to put my arms out to stop my face breaking my fall. I glanced up at the wives, huddled in fright in the doorway, looking back at me.

“Ladies, get inside and lock the door!” I shouted slowly and patiently and hoped I didn’t sound as patronising as I felt. The man that tripped me, and it wasn’t Golden Guy but one of his friends, the lanky, freckly one, had a death grip on my ankles.

“That wasn’t nice what you just did to us,” he complained, and while I could agree with his line of reasoning – it undoubtedly *wasn’t* a very nice thing to do – I found it hard to muster up any remorse.

“Well, it wasn’t very nice what you just did to me either,” I pointed out politely. “I could have broken my nose. And it wasn’t nice for you to hassle us and block our path and swear at us. Or for him,” pointing at Golden Guy, “to grope me or try to kiss my friend. Will you let go of my ankles now, please? You’re hurting me.”

And just like that, he did. To my utter surprise, he then stood up and offered me his hand to help me up as well. The others rose to their feet and stood in the hall, hangdog expressions on their faces.

“Sorry for being so obnoxious. We’ve just come from a buck’s party for one of our friends and we’re a little bit frisky. None of us have girlfriends at the moment,” said Golden Guy, as if that excused anything, rubbing his throat and bathing me in his incredible eyes. He was killing me with that admission though, because he was simply edible. I wished I’d met him in better circumstances, without me looking like, you know, a stupid polygamous wife in a hideous dress.

“Sorry,” echoed the other two sheepishly.

“Well, all right then. I’m sorry for pushing you all over. How about we just call it quits? Enjoy the rest of your evening, gentlemen,” I said, not quite believing the turn of events but taking advantage of it to move quickly down the hallway, rapping on the hotel door. “It’s Tilly, let me in. Quickly!”

I twisted to look back at the sorry trio, afraid they were going to rush me, but they had already turned away, making their staggering way down the hall towards the lifts. Golden Guy glanced back over his shoulder once to throw me a sweet and regretful smile. I gave him a little wave of equal regret. Damn, he was smoking hot! Even from the rear.

The women welcomed me back as if I was a hero warrior returning from a bloody but victorious battle, and fussed over me continuously. I gave a mental shrug and let them. It wasn't very often I was fussed over, so I sat back and enjoyed it. They made me a cup of tea, although to be frank I would much rather have been given a nice cold glass of sauvignon blanc. Then they insisted on treating the minor grazes I'd received on my arms when I fell, and I didn't have the heart to tell them that the disinfectant they liberally applied caused me more pain than the grazes had.

After a while they settled down and we ate our meagre dinner: cheese and crackers, apples again, tap water again. Then we commenced our queuing for the bathroom routine. Elizabeth received the call to spend the night with their husband and the conjugal nightgown was carefully folded and taken with her. It was just as I was ringing Heller to report in that I remembered I had wanted to ask Daniel to get some US currency for me, even though the dress was still fine.

So far.

Heller groaned with exasperation when I told him about the hallway altercation, probably imagining that I'd started a riot at the hotel. But when I'd finished my story, he congratulated me on defusing the situation with my politeness. When he said that, I was glad that I hadn't had the capsicum spray handy, because I'm pretty sure I would have used it. And then the situation wouldn't have ended so nicely, especially for the men, and I wouldn't be feeling so warm and tingly with Heller's praise ringing in my ears.

After we said goodnight, I sent Daniel a text message asking him to do that little favour for me and he texted back his willingness to help. I thought \$US200 should cover it. Then I had the last, cold shower for the night and bunked down again on the lumpy lounge. I was very tired though and fell asleep immediately.

## Chapter 28

The next day passed almost identically to the previous one. At the morning prayer session, Elizabeth was given rare praise for her answers and the Pastor looked on her with something approaching fondness. She blushed modestly, smiling down at her hands and jealousy briefly flared on the other wives' faces. *She must have outdone herself in the sinful relations department last night to have earned such a reward*, I thought cynically, trying not to let the thought bring my breakfast back up. Rebecca was singled out for further instruction during the day, so I assumed I could take the ladies for another stroll around the park, while he was occupied screwing, er, sorry, *instructing* his wife. Hannah perked up at that plan, having missed out on the excursion the day before and it was lovely to see her simple happiness in being outside the hotel room.

After the evening prayer session, where Mary was appointed the designated husband-shagger for the night, I pulled on my horrible dress and submitted again to having my hair plaited, tying the scarf in place as soon as it was done. We all filed downstairs again. And if I thought that the previous night's lecture had exhausted the city's supply of ugly, middle-aged sexual perverts, I was sadly mistaken. The room was full again. The crowd had a slightly different composition that night though and a different atmosphere, and I wondered if some of the audience had turned up looking for trouble. It didn't take long before I knew the answer to

that interesting little question.

About fifteen minutes into his speech, a small group of women stood up and started heckling Pastor Peachey. I sat up on my chair on full alert, but my brief was to look after the wives, not to protect the Pastor from dissent in the audience.

The women appeared to be refugees from a polygamous cult who had dedicated themselves to rescuing other women from the same fate. I'm sure they were well-meaning but they were over-emotional and an easy target for the abrasive tongue of the Pastor, who skilfully ridiculed them and their claims, questioning their credibility. They soon lost any support from the audience who had come to hear about the blissful joys of polygamy, not about the sexual and financial exploitation of young girls and women. The women were booed down every time they tried to speak and eventually stormed out of the meeting, throwing threats, obscene gestures and explicit curses at the Pastor in particular, and the audience in general, as they left.

I relaxed back in my chair again, although I spent the rest of the boring lecture keeping an eye on the hall's entrance. Once the lecture was over, we again left the Pastor in the hall while I escorted the women back to their hotel room.

Walking across the foyer to the lift, there was a fracas behind us. Without any warning, I found myself being picked up by the elbows in two sets of very strong hands and half-carried, half-dragged out the sliding glass doors of the hotel's entrance. I tried to twist around to view my abductors, but they had such a tight hold on me I couldn't move. I presumed it was two men.

A woman, who I recognised from the earlier altercation in the hall as one of the hecklers, came rushing up from a dark van that was parked at the entrance and shepherded the men towards the open side door of the vehicle. The men tried to force me into the van but I decided not to cooperate. I kicked, scratched and bit my assailants in wild fury until one of them partially released his grip on my arm in pain. I took the opportunity to kick him hard in his stomach and he doubled over, letting me go. But there was still the other goon who picked up his partner's slack by roughly throwing me into the van and attempting to slide the door shut on me. I forced my boot into the door entry and grimaced as he slammed the door hard on my foot. Repeatedly. *Bastard!*

He leant over trying to push my foot back into the van, and I raised my leg suddenly and collected him under the chin with the full force of my boot. He fell back clutching his neck and I flung back the door, jumped out of the van and, head down like a bull, charged him in the stomach. He lost his balance and fell back hard onto the concrete.

"What the hell do you people think you're doing?" I screamed at the woman, who was cowering next to the cabin of the van.

"We want to rescue you from that life of servitude," she trembled. "I noticed you seemed really uncomfortable during the lecture. You don't look as though you belong in that lifestyle. I wanted to get you away before you become brainwashed like them." She pointed to the wives, who were huddled at the entrance, watching everything with huge eyes and horrified expressions.

I began to tell her just how mistaken she was when the first goon, recovered, made another attempt to get me into the van. He swept me off my feet and not in a romantic way either, flinging me over his shoulder, fireman-style. I punched and kicked him viciously. He crushed me so hard with his arms that I had trouble breathing.

"For God's sake! Are you insane or something?" I wheezed, continuing to hit out feebly. "Let me down. I'm not one of the wives."

He wasn't listening though, concentrating on squeezing me so hard I thought I was going to throw up. The wives ran to him and started pummelling him with their fists and feet, until

he was surrounded by angry women assaulting him. He staggered around, unbalanced by my squirming weight on his shoulder and being attacked from every direction. Rebecca was pulling cruelly on his hair and Mary was valiantly trying to gouge out his eyes. Elizabeth was kicking his shins, and Sarah and Hannah were punching him weakly on his torso and back. It was Gulliver and the Lilliputians re-enacted in front of a run-down hotel, but unfortunately without a happy ending. He dropped and shoved me unceremoniously into the van and slammed the door, helping his fellow goon up and into the front of the van. The woman jumped into the driver's seat after them and we all screeched off into the darkness.

It was the kind of van that had a solid partition between the cabin and the back, so I couldn't see or hear my abductors. There were no windows in the back either and that meant it was pitch black inside. I was very disoriented and tossed around as they drove recklessly fast away from the hotel. I clung on to the floor desperately. When the van pulled up at what I thought might be a set of lights, I sprung over to open the sliding side door to escape, but there was no internal handle. You couldn't open the door from the inside. There was no escape for me.

I started to panic, not having been in this situation before, when I gave myself a good mental shake. *Calm down and think*, I instructed myself. So I sat down on the dirty floor and asked myself a question: what did I have that could help me? The answer I gave myself almost made me weep with joy. My phone! I had my mobile with me. I dug it out of the deep pocket of Mary's dress and dialled Heller's number.

"Hello, my sweet. You're ringing me early tonight."

"Heller . . . um . . . this is embarrassing, but I've kind of been kidnapped."

Silence at the other end. "You've been kidnapped?"

"Yes."

"Do you know who they are or what they want?"

I sighed shakily. "They think I'm one of the wives, and they're trying to rescue me from a life of servitude with the Pastor. I guess they want to deprogram me. I'm in a van with no windows and no escape."

"Did you tell them that you're not a wife? Why would they even think you were one in the first place?"

"Because I'm dressed like the wives. It was the Pastor's wish that I blend in with them." A muffled noise issued from the receiver. My blood boiled. "Heller, are you *laughing* at me? Because it's not the slightest bit funny from where I'm standing. I'm being kidnapped! And anyway, you're the one who told him that he could have any arrangement that suited his needs. Me looking like a wife suited his needs, and now I'm being kidnapped because of that. *So it's all your fault!*" Yep, I was definitely starting to lose it.

"Okay Matilda, stay calm and don't panic," he said coolly, no further sign of laughter. "Did you manage to note the number plate of the van so I can see who we're dealing with?" I hadn't. "That doesn't matter. Your mobile phone has a GPS tracking system that we can turn on and monitor from here, so don't worry, I'll be able to find you soon. Are you hurt?"

My voice had an emotional wobble in it that I couldn't hide. "They roughed me up a bit. There are three of them – a woman and two big men. The men had a struggle to get me inside the van. I almost escaped from them. Almost."

"I bet you made it as hard as you could for them," he comforted gently. "I'm going to hang up now so I can organise Sid to track the GPS and Clive and I will come to rescue you. Be patient and brave please, my sweet. I'm sure these people don't mean to hurt you."

"Thank you," I sniffed and then I was alone again in the back of the van. I sat quietly, conserving my energy, thinking of what I'd do when they finally stopped and opened the door. Maybe there was something in the van that could help me. I felt around cautiously on

the floor with my hand to my left but didn't find anything useful, just some discarded fast food wrappings. I felt around to my right and ditto, until my hand came up against a metal box secured to the wall of the van. I moved my fingers up its side until they hooked onto a lid, slightly ajar. I opened the box and carefully felt inside, hoping it wasn't full of mousetraps, cacti or scorpions.

Hmm, tools, I realised as I cautiously ran my fingers over the contents. A toolbox. Tools are handy – there's a lot you can do with tools. You can make things, you can fix things, you can use them as weapons. My fingers closed over a long screwdriver. Oh yeah, that would make a good weapon. I pulled it free from the toolbox and slid it into my deep pocket. It's just amazing what you can keep in a deep pocket.

We drove along for another ten minutes, according to my watch. I wondered what Heller was doing and fought the urge to ring him again. I wondered if the wives had managed to get to their room safely. I wondered how on earth these people thought that kidnapping a woman would predispose her to: one, take them seriously, or two, be willing to cooperate with them in any way. Because I was feeling pretty damn disobliging at that moment and more than ready to let them know about it.

The van slowed down and we made a left hand turn, bumping down a road pocked with potholes. Of course I couldn't see anything, so didn't know if we were headed for a castle or a caravan, but it felt as though we were nearing our destination. The van stopped and it sounded as though everyone in the front got out. I tensed, waiting for the door to slide open, but nothing happened. Nobody came for me and I sat in the back, no idea what was going on, my anxiety growing with each minute that elapsed (another ten of them so far, according to my watch). They weren't going to leave me here all night by myself, surely? Maybe I was meant to be mulling things over and they were giving me some quiet solitary time in which to do so.

Suddenly the door was flung back, making me jump. Three faces peered into the van at me. I brandished my screwdriver with as much menace as I could muster. Six eyes widened in surprise.

"Get back and stay away from me!" I warned, thrusting the evil screwdriver in front of me and slithering towards the door. I didn't want to give them the chance to shut the door on me again. I was going to stab one of them if they came anywhere near me, I was that angry.

"Aw geez, Alan! Didn't you take your tools out first?" one goon said to the other, annoyed.

The other goon shrugged apologetically. "Sorry Jonno. I was flat-out at work today and came straight here afterwards. I forgot."

"We're not going to hurt you," said the woman soothingly, her palms held up in the universal symbol of peace.

"Yeah, well I plan on hurting you plenty if you come any closer, bitch," I snarled, and jabbed the screwdriver towards her ferociously. She jumped back in fright, offended by my aggressiveness.

"That's not a very Christian thing to say. Is that what Peachey has been teaching you?"

"Look, let's get something straight. I am *not* one of Peachey's wives. I'm a security officer hired to protect them from . . . well I guess, from people like you." A little white lie never hurt anyone and I was sure that they'd never go checking to verify my licence.

Jonno scratched his head. "Why are you dressed like them, then?"

I sighed and lowered the screwdriver. "Because Peachey made me. He wanted me to blend in with his wives so nobody would know that he had hired security."

Three sets of shoulders slumped in unison.

"Wow," said Alan, shaking his head and looking at his accomplices. "We really fucked

this up, didn't we? We grabbed the only one who isn't a wife."

The woman gave a resigned laugh. "I suppose that would explain why you appeared so disgruntled and bored. And why that dress doesn't fit you properly. But we knew he had six wives, and there were six wives on display. Come on, you must agree it was a reasonable conclusion to reach. How were we meant to know one of the wives wasn't real?"

"I suppose," I conceded reluctantly. "The other wife is back home minding the kids. Didn't you even twig when I spoke without an American accent?" They glanced at each other sheepishly.

"What's your name?" she asked me.

"Tilly."

"Come on, Tilly. Come up to the house and have a cup of tea."

I slid the screwdriver back into my pocket, just in case, and we all trooped up to the house and took a seat on its wide, sheltered veranda. She made the tea and soon I was enjoying a hot brew with my kidnappers. The woman introduced herself as Carla, explained that she had joined a polygamous marriage in a cult when she was sixteen, escaped with her four children when she was thirty-five, and had now made it her life's work to campaign against polygamy. Alan and Jonno were brothers, her cousins, and they weren't really goon-like at all once you got to know them better. They were actually quite friendly. Alan was a carpenter and Jonno a guitar player in a local bluegrass band.

I suggested to them that kidnapping polygamous wives and trying to deprogram them probably wasn't the way to garner support and that instead perhaps they should hit the media, polygamy being such a hot topic at the moment with the Pastor's visit. They promised to think about it. Then to be fair, I said, "Look, have you even asked the wives if they want to leave? They are adults, you know. It's a weird situation and makes me uncomfortable, but they don't seem unhappy to me. They seem to really enjoy each other's company." And that made them think even harder.

I had taken the last few sips of my tea and placed the cup gently back on the saucer when Heller's Mercedes screeched up the driveway at a dangerous speed for the night-time road conditions, skidding to a sudden stop. Heller and Clive jumped out, guns in their hand. I don't know anything about guns, so couldn't say what kind they were. But wow! Real guns! That really put my screwdriver to shame. I waved at them while the other three tensed in alarm. It's not every day two huge, furious, gun-toting men descend on your house. Heller quickly assessed the situation and ordered Clive to holster his weapon, as he did the same.

"I rescued myself," I told Heller with a smile when he approached.

He smiled back. "I wouldn't expect anything less of you, Matilda." The two men sauntered up to the veranda where I made introductions and gave them a quick rundown on what had happened since we'd spoken.

"Hmm, that dress you're wearing is very fetching on you," Heller teased.

"Isn't it just? However, sadly, I do believe I have ruined it in the scuffle and the back of the van was very dirty. It was Mary's special dress and I will have to replace it. As I expected."

Heller reached into his pocket and pulled out four fifty-dollar US notes, handing them to me. "Daniel forced me to bring these for you. Will that help replace the dress?"

"I expect so." I put the cash in my deep pocket. I was just loving that pocket to death tonight.

"Up you get, Matilda. I'm busy and have to get you back to work as well. Say goodbye to your new friends." He was making fun of me again.

"See you guys. Nice to meet you. Kind of," I said to them casually, pulling out the screwdriver and placing it on the table.

“Bye Tilly,” they responded, with Jonno adding, “And sorry again about roughing you up.”

I shrugged philosophically.

“You put up a good fight,” admitted Alan admiringly. “You’re a tough little thing.”

I smiled at him and jumped into the back seat of the Mercedes, waving at them as we drove away.

“You’ve had an interesting evening,” Heller noted, meeting my eyes in the rearview mirror.

“I can’t believe you guys thought you needed guns to rescue me. That’s so . . . so . . . hardcore!” They both laughed openly at me.

“You look so sweet in that dress, Matilda. Very submissive. I like it.” I pulled a rude face at him in the mirror. “I’m thinking of making you wear something similar as a uniform.”

“Well, you can stop thinking about that straight away. I can’t wait to take this dress off.”

“That’s something I’d never get tired of hearing you say.”

“Heller!” I protested, laughing. He smiled at me in the mirror and even Clive chuckled quietly.

Before long he was dropping me off back at the hotel and I was waving goodbye to them. It had been an eventful couple of days and I trudged wearily up to the wives’ room, knocking on the door. It was an understatement to say that they fussed over me again; in fact, they virtually crushed me with fussing. I was in real danger of being suffocated by their attention. Eventually when they had all petered out, I turned to Mary, who kindly hadn’t commented yet on the state of her precious dress. I apologised for a full five minutes for ruining her dress and when I insisted that she take the cash to make herself a replacement, pressing it into her hands, her eyes were huge orbs in her face. I emphasised it was for her use, not the Pastor’s.

“Mercy me, Tilly! This is enough money to make a special dress for all the wives,” she exclaimed breathlessly, her hands to her mouth.

“Really? I’m glad if it is. I was worried it wouldn’t be enough to replace your special dress.”

“Mercy.” She was genuinely knocked for six.

“Mary, I really am so sorry not to have taken better care of your dress. I hope you can find the same material again.”

“Tilly, I never gave my dress one moment of thought after you were kidnapped. And look at it. It’s only a little dirtied. That will wash out with a bit of soaking. There are no tears in it. I feel like a charlatan taking your money when my dress isn’t even spoiled.”

“Please take it. It will make me feel better.” She then noticed the time and rushed off to spend the night with their husband. I’d missed evening prayers, thank God, and was glad to jump into the shower, even if it was cold again. I slept like a log, not waking until it was time for morning prayers.

Pastor Peachey bustled in self-importantly to give the morning prayer session. Not even listening to his endless droning, I sat on the bed, half-asleep and still in my pyjamas, brushing my hair dreamily, in a complete reverie about a certain tall, beautiful blond man that I knew. The Pastor’s grating voice brought me back to earth again and I turned around in surprise. He had rarely addressed me directly since our first meeting.

“Miss Chalmers, as you know, we are flying out after lunch. Would you mind meeting with me to discuss the final arrangements before we head off to the airport?” I nodded my agreement and returned to brushing my hair.

When I went to get dressed, I realised I’d left my jeans lying carelessly crushed in a corner in the bathroom when I changed after our walk the previous morning, a very bad habit I didn’t seem to be able to shake. They were now soaked from six consecutive showers in the

tiny room. I tutted with annoyance at myself. I'd have to put my suit back on, because I certainly wasn't going to don the dress again. Oh well, it was a nice suit, so I didn't mind.

When I'd finished dressing I left the wives busily embroidering and knocked on the Pastor's door. He opened it and invited me in. I followed him into his room and sat down on the worn out lounge, frantically pulling down my skirt, which had ridden up a smidge too high for my liking. I gave him a brief but detailed account of what had happened outside the hotel last night. He nodded his head gravely and commented that the fee he was paying to Heller had been worth it, if one of his wives had been saved from being kidnapped.

I stood up to leave and he stood up as well.

"Miss Chalmers, you and my wives seem to have forged an affectionate bond in the time you've known them?"

I nodded. It was true. I liked them and they liked me.

"I understand you're a single woman with no man to take charge of you?"

Well, I wouldn't put it like that personally. But I guess that's what he thought a man's purpose was in a relationship, so I shrugged evasively, not wanting to offend a client unnecessarily and not sure if he'd paid Heller already or not.

"Miss Chalmers, I would like you to return to the States with me and become my next wife."

I stared at him in shock. *Holy shit!* I didn't see that coming!

He continued. "In return for bearing my children," *Ick!* "I will provide you with a home and protection against the sins of the world."

I didn't know what to say and stood in his hotel room as still and mute as the Easter Island heads. *Say something, stupid,* my brain screamed at me. "Um. Gosh. I'm sure that's a great honour to me, Pastor Peachey," and he nodded his head in arrogant agreement. "But I'm going to have to say no. But thanks so much for asking."

"No?" he asked in disbelief.

"I don't want to get married or have children right now. Sure, one day maybe, but not now." *And not with you,* I thought. "I'm only twenty-five."

"Two of my wives are younger than you and they are both mothers as well." Oh God, another man wanting to give me The Lecture.

"Yes, and I'm very pleased for them, but I'm not ready to marry. Thanks anyway." I turned to leave, but he grabbed me by my arm. I looked down at his hand firmly gripping my upper arm with hostility. "Can you please let go of me?" I suddenly didn't feel like being polite any longer.

"I should have known a woman like you wouldn't be interested in the honest sanctity of marriage. You know, Miss Chalmers, I've been puzzling and praying these past few days over why the Lord has sent me a temptation such as you?" He was breathing rapidly, moving closer to me. I shook off his hand and stepped backwards instinctively. "That hair and those lips. Those lovely big eyes. Those long legs. And those breasts. Oh dear Lord, those breasts! Why would the Lord put such a sinful temptation in my path?"

I stepped backwards further, warily. He was creeping me out with the burning intensity in his eyes.

"Then I realised you are a test from the Lord. I must conquer your sin and show you the evilness of your body. I must defeat your temptation to show you that I am the master who can light your way to the Lord."

"No thanks!" I snapped, stepping back further. This had suddenly turned into a tricky situation for me. Should I ram past him or should I knee him in the balls? Decisions, decisions.

"I have tried to be honourable with you and offer you my hand and a place in my bed."

*Double ick!* “But I can see I must use the other path, the more sinful path, with you. God will forgive me. God wants me to subdue you.”

He sounded pretty sure about that as he reached towards me, grasping my boobs and rubbing them frantically, urgent lust etched into his face. I took one further step backwards in alarm, but ran up against the bed, the impact buckling my legs, forcing me to fall.

Then everything happened with such terrifying quickness. He pushed me down forcefully onto the bed, one hand still on my breast, trying to rip my blouse off. He crushed me with his body before I had a chance to react. I found myself trapped beneath him, his mouth bruising mine with its pressure, forcing my lips apart and shoving his tongue so far down my throat I almost gagged. He let go of my breast momentarily to brutally force my legs apart with his hands, his fingers biting into the tender skin of my thighs. One hand impatiently rucked my skirt upwards and pushed my panties to one side, touching me, the other fumbling with his pants, trying to free his erect penis.

*If I don't do something now he was going to rape me,* I thought desperately. It frightened me how rapidly I had lost control of the situation. I struggled angrily against him, and he grabbed my arms with one hand.

“Yes, oh God, yes! Struggle away, my little fawn! It makes your submission to me even more righteous,” he moaned in ecstasy. Having trouble undoing his belt with just one hand, he unwisely let my arms go.

I immediately used both hands to push vigorously against his chin, my muscles straining, fuelled by sheer terror. I forced his head uncomfortably backwards, then used the fingernails of my right hand to dig into his Adam's apple as hard as I could, drawing blood. If I had been a stronger person I would have ripped it from his throat without a second thought. He choked, briefly releasing his weight on me, as he struggled to inhale. I took the chance to bring my knees up and kick him hard with both feet in his chest forcing him off me onto the floor. I sprang up immediately and ran for the door, but he also sprang to his feet quickly and threw his arm around my neck, pulling my body back up against his.

“You're a spirited one, are you not? It's going to make your ultimate submission to me that much sweeter and holier,” he gloated in my ear, and started rubbing my boobs again. I flailed around helplessly; he had unbelievably strong arms. I kicked back at him, like I had done to Heller a few days ago, and my high heel crunched into his shin. He released the pressure of his arm briefly and I twisted around so we were facing each other, a strangely intimate position considering our circumstances and my murderous intentions towards him.

He lunged forward to latch his lips onto mine again, tongue instantly buried in my mouth. I let him despite my disgust, to distract him by the kiss while I pulled back my arm, balled my fist and drove it as hard as I could into his stomach. He bent over in agony and I put my hand on the back of his neck and quickly pushed his head down, bringing my knee up at the same time to smash into his nose with an horrible crunching sound. He made a choking noise and I did it again. And again, until he collapsed onto the floor, blood streaming out of his busted nose. Then I stood over him and kicked him hard in his nuts over and over, so incredibly angry that I couldn't stop.

*“No means NO, arsehole!”* I screamed at him, remembering how his fingers had touched me up.

He curled into the foetal position, tears streaming down his face, begging me to stop in viscous gasps.

“I'm ringing the police,” I threatened, breathing raggedly with emotion and fear, stepping far away from the pathetic creature rolling on the floor.

“No! Please don't. My reputation,” he pleaded, crying.

“Your reputation is nothing but a pack of lies. You are an evil little maggot who deserves

to die. I'm going to ring Heller. He'll come over and kill you."

"No! I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Please think of my wives. They need me to look after them. It will never happen again."

"Too bloody right it won't."

I finally decided whom I was going to call, adrenaline pumping strongly through my veins, my breathing laboured. I rang next door and mastered my emotions enough to politely ask the wives to come to their husband's room immediately. They came obediently as I knew they would and I let them in. They were aghast to see my dishevelled, upset state and their husband rolling on the floor, clutching his genitals, his nose bleeding, weeping copiously. I viciously grabbed him by an ear and forced him to stand up. He was in so much pain he could hardly even stand straight.

"Tell your wives what you did, you fucking deviant."

The wives flinched at my bad language and anger. He clearly didn't wish to cooperate, so I balled my fist and punched him again in the stomach. He moaned loudly in agony, a spurt of vomit staining his blood-splattered white shirt. The wives shrieked in fear.

"*Tell them!*" I screamed into his ear.

The wives shrunk back in terror, clutching at each other for comfort.

"I tried to have relations with –"

I punched him again, even harder this time, merciless, not caring for his choice of words. He sobbed piteously, tears, blood and snot streaming down his face, more vomit dribbling from his mouth onto his shirt.

"I tried to force myself on Miss Chalmers," he admitted weakly, slumping heavily. It was all I could do to keep him upright.

The wives gasped in horror, buzzing with shocked commentary.

"But Husband, you've always told us that it is a deadly sin to seek relations outside a marriage," voiced Mary hesitantly, confused.

"And that it is a grave sin for a man to force himself on a woman. That is why you always instructed us to come willingly to your bed," said Rebecca in a near-whisper, tears forming in her eyes.

"I am a terrible sinner and a hypocrite. I have sought relations outside my marriage and I have tried to force myself on a woman," he confessed sobbing, without even any more fist-in-the-stomach prompting from me. His words had an immediate effect on his wives. They visibly lost respect for him and stared at him in hurt bewilderment.

There was utter silence in the room, except for his snivelling.

"Does one of you wish to tend to your husband?" I asked.

There were no takers. I didn't blame them.

"You're on your own, sport. Get ready for the airport," I spat at him, letting him go. He collapsed onto the floor and lay there quietly sobbing. We filed out and left him lying in pain, each of his wives throwing their disgraced husband a look of open disgust. I took the ladies back to the other bedroom, putting the chain on the door, where I told them the whole sordid story. They cried piteously, all of their illusions about the holiness and righteousness of their husband destroyed in a few minutes. I made them hand me the conjugal nightgown, which I ripped into as many pieces as I could, almost frightening myself with my rage.

"You never wear that again, okay? You have to stick together about things you hate or that make you feel sinful. You're six strong righteous women against one puny sinful man. You know better than him and you'll win every time as long as you stick together. And no more wives in this family. He's got enough wives and children for any man. Any more would be greedy. And that's a real sin."

They all nodded in fear, but I could see I'd given them much food for thought.

I mended my appearance as much as possible, called a maxi-taxi and accompanied the family to the airport. There was a distinctly frosty silence between the wives and their husband. He was very subdued, walking carefully, his nose bruising up nicely. He was going to have a horror trip home on the plane, confined to a seat for hours. I hugged each woman warmly and hoped that they would make some permanent changes to their living arrangements on their return home.

I stayed to watch their plane take off before gratefully caught a taxi back to the Warehouse.

## Chapter 29

First thing I did back home was have a long, hot shower and change into some fresh clothes. Then I cooked myself a real meal with lots of fresh vegetables and headed down to the office. I turned on my computer to check my emails and laughed out loud as soon as I saw its new desktop wallpaper. It was the newspaper photo from the lecture, with angry me in the middle of the soft, pliant wives. But Niq and Daniel's faces had been photoshopped onto two of the wives' faces, so it appeared as though they were with me, also wearing the hideous dresses.

"Nice one, boys," I said appreciatively, and they both grinned in response.

Heller was out all day, so I didn't see him until later in the evening, after I had cleared away my dinner plates. I'd showered and changed into my pyjamas and was lying on the lounge watching some mindless TV show, ready for my own soft, quiet bed. I can't even remember what the show was, but it involved beautiful and serious FBI agents solving weirdo murders in less than an hour. Brian would have laughed in derision at the prospect. I wondered if he even watched those shows. Then I realised that I didn't know much about my brother at all. He was a closed book to me.

Heller let himself into my flat after a token knock, plonked heavily onto the lounge beside me and heaved a huge sigh.

"Busy day?" I enquired sympathetically.

"Very busy couple of days. And I had to somehow fit in the rescue of an attractively dressed staff member as well."

"Who rescued herself," I reminded him.

He leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. "What a clever woman you are, Matilda." I leaned against him and he put his arm around me.

"I didn't even use any capsicum spray either." He laughed. I looked up at him. "The wives wanted to know if I'm having relations with you."

He laughed again in surprise. "Depends what you mean by relations."

I glanced away. "Your men think we are. Sleeping together, I mean."

"No, they don't. Why would they?"

"I overheard some of them calling me your little fuck-buddy."

He was immediately angry. "Who said that?"

As if I was going to tell him. They were my colleagues, and I'm not someone who goes running to the boss telling tales. "What's the point in knowing? It's my problem, not yours. They probably think you're a legend. Anyway, you can't change what people think."

"I can," he said grimly. I was pretty sure that I didn't want to know how he could, so I tried to lighten up the conversation again.

"I told the wives that we weren't having relations. Because you're my boss."

"I'm happy to change the status of that at any time."

“What?” I said, deliberately misunderstanding. “You don’t want to be my boss anymore? Are you firing me?”

“No, my sweet. That wasn’t what I meant, as you well know.” He kissed my forehead and stood up to leave, stretching. He glanced down, noticing the bruising on my thighs that was visible in my boxing shorts pyjamas. I hadn’t planned on mentioning what the Pastor had tried to do to me to anyone, but I hadn’t been expecting visitors, otherwise I would have covered up until the bruises had faded. His face hardened. “Matilda? How did you get those bruises? Did something happen when those men kidnapped you that you haven’t told me about?”

I was ashamed to tell him, secretly feeling that I had brought it on myself somehow with my clothes or my behaviour, even though I knew that wasn’t true and I shouldn’t think like that. I knew that rape was a power act, a dominance act, a hate act, not a sex act, and the Pastor couldn’t stand to have a woman around him who wasn’t subjected to his control over her body and her behaviour. Nevertheless, I couldn’t face Heller and spoke down to the floor.

“No, it wasn’t Alan and Jonno. They’re nice guys. It was that Pastor. He tried to force himself on me this morning. He said I was a temptation sent by God and that he had to conquer my sinfulness. It was such a frightening experience. I lost control of the situation for a while. I always thought I’d be able to fight back if someone attacked me like that. It was terrifying to be overpowered so quickly and to feel so helpless. He almost raped me! I was lucky I caught a break and was able to fight him off in time.”

He stood as still as a statue, fists clenched, his face forbidding. His whole body was coiled tight with incredible anger.

“They’re on the plane back to the States, Heller. He’s gone. And in a lot of agony too, I hope. I gave him a lot of pain to remember me by. There’s nothing you can do about it now.”

His voice was harsh. “Why didn’t you call me? I would have dealt with him.”

“I know and I thought about it. I thought about ringing the police too.”

“Never ring the police about my business, Matilda,” he rebuked instantly, in a voice that warned me that he was not joking. “Always ring me or Clive and nobody else. We’ll decide if the police need to be involved.”

I thought about that for a moment and nodded to show that I’d heard and understood, although it worried me. I realised that he’d had an unpleasant experience with Brian, but I’d come from a middle-class background where I’d grown up thinking of the police as people to trust and the ones to turn to in times of trouble. I’d never really met anyone before who had such an ingrained distrust of them and I wondered if Heller ever took on assignments that weren’t quite . . . legal.

Pushing those concerns to one corner of my mind for now, I realised that he was watching me closely as if trying to read my mind, so I pressed on with my story. “Relax, I didn’t ring them. Instead, I decided on a different plan of revenge, one that I think will have longer-term repercussions for him than you beating the crap out of him.” And I told him in detail about what had happened and what I had done. He smiled grimly when I mentioned the half-arsed marriage proposal, but didn’t interrupt. “Is this going to keep happening?” I jumped up in sudden agitation and started pacing around the living room.

“What?”

I stopped pacing and turned to look at him. “I’ve only been working here a few months, and twice already men have tried . . .” I took a deep, shuddery breath, “have tried to assault me. That’s not going to happen with every job I do, is it? Because I can’t handle that, Heller. It’s such a frightening experience to go through.” And I had to sit down again, my legs trembling, the day’s events finally catching up with me.

He sat down next to me again and took my hand gently in his. “I don’t know. I hope not.

This line of work can be dangerous and we're frequently dealing with people who don't believe that laws and social rules apply to them, because they're rich or famous. You're an attractive young woman, Matilda, and you're going to draw the attention of a lot of men." He smiled at me in an appealingly self-deprecating way when he said that. "Some of them aren't going to be decent or reasonable. Some of them aren't going to care if they hurt others as long as they get what they want. And sometimes what they want might be you. If you're very concerned about your safety, perhaps you shouldn't get your licence? Maybe stay with the softer client work instead? I didn't hire you for this kind of work anyway."

I didn't want him to think I was a wimp. "No, I want to get my licence. I want to be a security officer. But keep me away from the perverts."

He smiled again, regretful. "I'll try, but they're not always easy to spot. You're an intelligent and resourceful person but I worry about you a lot, Matilda. There's something about you that attracts trouble. I'm going to book you into those courses straight away. I'd feel better knowing you had some good training in self-defence. And I'm going to have to watch you even more closely from now on."

"You don't need to do that. You don't do it for any of the other staff. I can look after myself. Haven't I proven that? I bet you don't ring any of the men ten times a day to check on them." I was becoming seriously annoyed with him, so he cleverly changed the subject in a very effective way.

"That's quite bad bruising," he said, looking down and gently running his fingers over my thighs. I bit off my moan of pleasure. "Do you want me to kiss it better?"

I thought for a second about Heller's head down in my lap, his lips on my thighs. Oh God! What a temptation. But no! I stood up so quickly I felt dizzy.

"I'm really tired, gottagotobednow," I shot out rapidly in one word, ushering him to the door with indecent haste. He turned at the door and smiled down at me in such a knowing, arrogant way that I was glad I had sent him packing.

The next day I at last plucked up my courage and rang Will. He was flatteringly pleased to hear from me and promptly suggested that we meet for coffee that afternoon. I agreed and we arranged to meet at a cafe in the city after school had finished. I managed to cadge a lift with a couple of the security guys who were going off to a job, but arrived far too early and whiled away the time with some idle window shopping. It was something I'd done a lot of when I was 'between jobs' and as I gazed at the luxurious goods displayed enticingly in the window of a smart boutique, I realised with a shock that I was now flush enough to buy those things right then if I wanted. It was a great feeling.

After forty minutes of time-wasting, it was respectably close to our meeting time and I walked briskly to the cafe. I spotted Will already sitting in a booth, looking as nervous as I felt, his curly brown hair as wild as I remembered. He stood up when I approached and we kissed each other on the cheek in an awkward, self-conscious way. We ordered our coffees and hesitantly conversed. It wasn't long though before the comfortableness we felt together the other night returned and we were chatting and laughing with ease.

"You look so different today than you did the other night," he commented at one point, his chin on his hand. I liked the way he gazed at me, his soft brown eyes showing his strong interest. "You looked incredible that night, very sultry. But today you look so sweet, angelic almost. Like a different person altogether."

"I'm two personalities for the price of one," I joked lightly.

"I'm having trouble deciding which one I like more," he smiled. He had a lovely smile.

We had long finished our coffees and he suggested we take a stroll around the city's botanical gardens. Somewhere in the rose garden, he captured my hand in his and smiled at me, and we held hands for the rest of our walk. We talked about everything and found similar

preferences in music, movies and books.

"I must have had you on my mind too much lately, Tilly," Will confessed. "Because I could have sworn I saw a photo of you in the paper the other day."

"Oh. Really?" I spluttered, not sure what to say. I wasn't going to own up to that.

"I know it wasn't you though," he laughed. "Not unless you're secretly part of a polygamous family from the US?"

"Not the last time I checked," I answered vaguely and hurriedly moved him on to another topic.

Time flew by until reluctantly I told him that I had to leave to catch my lift back home. He seemed gratifyingly disappointed and walked me to the security team who were giving me the lift.

Two *Heller's* man-mountains were lounging against the black 4WD in their uniforms, arms crossed, waiting patiently for me. They looked on impassively as Will, disconcerted by their size and indiscreet scrutiny, gave me a rushed but sweet kiss goodbye, making me promise to ring him again very soon. I had hesitated to give him my mobile number and he had been slightly hurt, but hadn't pressed me. He was understandably curious about the men, but again was too considerate or polite to question me further. No doubt it would arise in the future. *The future?* Guess I'd already decided that I was going to see him again.

"Had a good time, Miss?" asked one of the men, in what I thought sound a disapproving tone. *He's probably one of those who think I'm Heller's woman*, I thought sourly.

"Yes, I did," I replied sharply, sinking down into the backseat. "He's a really lovely person." The driver glanced at me in the rearview mirror. Another disapproving look? I checked my phone. Two missed calls from Heller. I didn't feel like ringing him back, remembering that smug smile the previous night.

"Has the Boss met him yet?" Was that said just a bit too casually?

"No, but he knows about him." I didn't want to risk any misguided vigilante action against Will by some Heller loyalist on steroids who thought 'Heller's woman' was doing him wrong. Another look in the rearview mirror from the driver.

*Piss off, neanderthal!* I thought savagely, glancing away. I couldn't even have an innocent date with a charming man without Heller's minions spying on me. I made sure I thanked them very politely for the lift though when we arrived back at the Warehouse. No point antagonising gigantic strong men unnecessarily, especially when I knew that they would be on the phone to Heller immediately, relaying every detail of what they had witnessed. I stomped up to my flat and had barely opened the door when my mobile rang.

"Hello?" I said grumpily, expecting it to be Heller again.

"Tilly love, it's Kristo."

I almost said '*Who?*' before I remembered my useless, nicotine-addicted agent. Scrub that – former agent. I hadn't thought about him for months.

"Kristo! What a surprise. What's up?"

"I have the best news you've ever heard! *Summer Days* wants to revive your character! For a year-long contract! Apparently they've never had so much hate mail as when you were on and the forums went crazy about you. Ratings were up twenty per cent when your character was in the show. The country loved to hate you. Aren't you excited?"

"Wow Kristo, I don't know what to say. You've really caught me by surprise," I said honestly. "But, didn't you dump me as a client?"

"Tilly, Tilly, my sweet love Tilly," he chuckled amiably. "That was just my little joke. You know that. I'm always joking with my most valued clients. But seriously, isn't this wonderful news? I always knew you deserved this. I worked hard to get you this, Tilly."

I rolled my eyes and made a wanking gesture with my spare hand. "I know you did,

Kristo, and I know you'll understand when I say I need some time to sleep on it."

"What the fuck? Just say yes. It's what you've always wanted."

"Once upon a time. But I've got a new job since then that I really love and I need to think things through. It's a big decision for me."

"You've hardly been in your new job for a minute. What's to think about? This is your big break. Think about the publicity, the magazine features, TV show guest spots, product endorsements, red carpets, the lot. *Dancing with the Stars!* Maybe even a singing career." I snorted quietly. I couldn't hold a tune to save my life. Not that that has ever stopped any of the others.

"Thanks Kristo. I'll ring you tomorrow, I promise."

"I can't believe you're not saying yes right now, Tilly. I've never understood you. Never mind. Ring me tomorrow. But remember, these people won't wait forever." And with that vague threat and the dream of dollar signs fading from his eyes, he hung up.

There was a soft knock on my door. I opened it and Niq stood there, looking up forlornly through his eyeliner.

"What's up, sweetie?" I asked, concerned.

"I looked for you before but you weren't here. I wanted to make you a cake to welcome you home again, but it's gone all wrong. Daniel and I have tried to fix it but it got worse. Can you help?"

I laughed out loud and ruffled his hair, spoiling his hairstyle. I went into Daniel's flat and there was smoke pouring out of his oven.

"Shit!" I shouted. "You're going to burn the place down!" I grabbed the oven mitts and rescued the cake from the oven, smoke billowing from it. I threw it in the sink and poured tap water over it, turning it into a sludgy, blackened mess, then switched the oven off. I ignored the boys' groaning about me ruining their cake and ordered them to open all the windows immediately before the smoke alarms went off.

The smoke eventually cleared and we stood mournfully examining the remains of the cake.

I grinned at them. "You were preparing burnt offerings for your goddess?"

"It was a banana cake," Daniel said sadly, viewing the mess in the sink.

"What temperature did you have it on?" I asked, dreading the answer.

Niq sighed. "Well, the recipe said 180 degrees for forty-five minutes, but we didn't have forty-five minutes, we only had fifteen minutes so we thought we should turn the oven up to 500 degrees instead. Then we started watching a movie and kind of forgot about it."

My lips started trembling and I looked away, but it was no use. The laughter burst out of me and I stood before them both, hands on my hips, laughing hard enough to make myself cry. And I'm ashamed to say that the distressed looks on their faces only made me laugh even harder. They weren't impressed with my levity.

"Where were you anyway? If you had been here none of this would have happened!" Niq shouted tremulously. My humour dried up immediately. Teenage hormones were on the rampage again. He sounded very upset, on the edge of tears.

"Niq honey, I was on a date. With a really nice man named Will. He's a science teacher."

"I don't care! I hate him!"

"You don't know him. If you met him, you would like him. He is very kind and very nice."

"You're going to leave us, aren't you? You're going to go away with this man and forget about us."

"Niq, no! I'm not going anywhere. Just because I had one date with a man doesn't mean I'm going away with him. I'm not going anywhere." I wrapped my arms around him and did

just what Heller had done with me that night on the roof-top. I held him tightly until he stopped struggling and relaxed against me, sniffing his misery. I stroked his back gently until he seemed very calm and his sniffles subsided. I kissed him on the forehead and let him go, lifting up his chin.

“Now you’re looking scary with your makeup running everywhere,” I teased with gentle affection. “Let’s go to the bathroom and clean it off.” He agreed and flinging a look of despair at Daniel, I followed Niq into the bathroom. He perched on the edge of the bath and I wiped away his smeared eyeliner.

“Did you mean it when you said you’re not going to leave? Even though you’ve met this really nice guy?” I nodded, but with a heavy heart, feeling the weight of his expectations. “Is he nicer than Heller?”

I laughed faintly. “Nice isn’t really a word I’d use to describe Heller, Niq. And I’m sure that he’d agree with that. But I do like Will, and maybe you could meet him one day and make up your own mind about him?”

He nodded in appreciation for the adult way I was treating him. “I guess that would be fair,” he agreed. We went back to the kitchen where Daniel had cleaned up very neatly, removing all traces of the offending cake. I smiled my gratitude.

“What will we do for the rest of the evening?” I asked, determinedly bright. We let Niq choose what he wanted, and for whatever reason he wanted to chat in the hot tub, so after dinner, we changed, grabbed some music and wine and headed up to the roof-top. The warm water felt divine and I sank down until only my head was above the waterline. The jets worked their magic and I felt my muscles relaxing. We had let Niq choose the music and although Joy Division didn’t really match my mood, I wasn’t going to tangle with teenage hormones again tonight.

At some point when I had my eyes closed, enjoying the warm pummelling, Heller silently arrived on the roof-top. I opened my eyes briefly, acknowledged him climbing into the hot tub with a glance, and closed them again. I was a jumble of emotions and hard decisions and wanted to avoid them all at the moment.

“Did you have a good time today?” Heller asked me, deceptively genial.

“Yes, thank you,” I replied politely, opening my eyes. The minions had obviously reported back to him, as expected.

“She had a date with a nice man. He’s a science teacher,” offered Niq helpfully. I smiled at him, inwardly cursing his blunt honesty.

Intense blue stare. “Was that Will? Did you ring him?”

“Yes.”

“You didn’t tell me.”

“I didn’t think you needed to know. It was a date. Nothing connected to work.”

“I need to know everything about you, Matilda.”

“No, you don’t.” He was really starting to get on my nerves with that possessive attitude.

“Yes, I do. I thought we’d established that.”

“No. You. Don’t. And no. We. Hadn’t.” I glared at him, enunciating angrily.

“Niq, time for bed,” Heller ordered in a strident voice. Niq knew better than to grumble and scrambled out of the hot tub without a word, turning off the music on his way to bed, wherever he decided that was tonight.

Daniel started making moves as if to leave.

“Stay Daniel, please!” I begged, desperate.

“Daniel, you can go if you want to. Matilda and I have things to discuss,” Heller said gently, and so Daniel also left, throwing me an apologetic look over his shoulder. I couldn’t blame him. I didn’t want to be around either. In fact, I decided that I *really* didn’t want to be

in the hot tub with Heller, so I started to climb out as well. He grabbed me by the foot. I thrashed around for a while, trying to kick his hand away. He slowly started pulling me backwards until the water was swallowing me up.

“Don’t make me drown you, Matilda,” he threatened in that scary, quiet voice of his. I stopped thrashing and plonked down ungracefully. I crossed my arms and refused to make any eye contact with him, like the mature adult that I am. Then, when he thought I would be compliant, I suddenly jumped out of the hot tub and ran down to my flat, water gushing everywhere, slipping on the stairs in my haste. I’d worry about the mess in the morning.

My heart was racing, I knew I only had a minute, so I stripped quickly, throwing my wet clothes into the bathtub, dried myself off and threw on some comfortable clothes. I was going to do this on my terms for once. I turned on some soothing music (for the savage beast about to arrive) and poured myself an enormous glass of wine. I had already sculled half of it and topped it up when, without even a knock, Heller flung open my door and barged in, slightly damp but dressed as well.

He opened his mouth to continue the Will debate when I spoke up first. “I’ve been offered another job.”

His mouth snapped shut. “No. What?”

“*Summer Days* wants to revive my character for a year-long contract.”

“The character that died in a fiery explosion after her car drove off a cliff?” he asked, sceptical.

I shrugged. “They’ll make up some reason for her return. Evil twin sister, plastic surgery, mistaken identity, witness protection. Whatever.”

He sat down heavily on the lounge. “You don’t want that job.” It was an assertion, a question and a hint of a plea all in the same sentence.

“I might.”

“Matilda.” He shifted angry and unhappy blue eyes to mine.

“Heller.”

We duelled with our eyes for a long moment. Unexpectedly, he sprang up, grasped my hand and dragged me up a floor to his flat. He took me over to two gift-wrapped packages sitting neatly aligned on a sideboard in his living room

“Go on,” he encouraged. “Open them up. They were going to be presents for you when you got your licence.”

I shot him a fierce look and unwrapped the first package. I unfolded the tissue paper to find a *Heller’s* work shirt inside. I frowned at Heller and pulled it out. I noticed immediately it was cut to a woman’s style in my size, not one of the usual huge man-sized shirts. I frantically turned back to the package and dug out the matching Tilly-sized black cargo pants. I opened the second package and discovered a pair of chunky black boots also in my size and a utility belt. I finally had my own *Heller’s* uniform. With no warning, tears sprang into my eyes. I tried to furtively wipe them away.

“What’s the matter?”

I sniffed as quietly as possible. “It’s just that what I always thought I wanted, I’m not sure about any more.” He didn’t jump to comfort me as he normally would. “What’s the matter with you?” I asked him angrily.

“You weren’t open with me, Matilda. You went off to meet your ‘boyfriend’ and didn’t tell me.”

“As if you didn’t find out five seconds after I went to meet him. Why do I have to tell you everything, when you already know everything?”

“I wish I *did* know everything!” he fired back, voice raised, accent stronger. “You know that I worry about you and I didn’t know where you were. Niq wanted you and I couldn’t tell

him where you were because I didn't know. *And* you didn't answer your phone."

"Why don't you just keep me on a chain in the backyard?" I volleyed heatedly.

"Matilda." His sigh was weary. "Why do you mind so much that I care about you?"

I suddenly deflated as well. "I don't know. You're so intense. It's just too much sometimes. I'm not used to someone being so intense about me."

"There's that word again."

"Intense. Yeah, it's a good word to describe you."

He turned away so I couldn't see the expression on his face. When he turned back, his face was blank as usual. "I can't force you to stay with us. But if you do decide to leave, can it be because you are following your dream, not because you are trying to escape from me? Niq and Daniel will never forgive me if that's the reason."

"I'm not trying to escape from you. I only want some space now and then."

"You like this man Will?"

"Yep. And you'll like him too when you met him."

"No, I won't like him, Matilda. When I meet him, all I will think about is hurting him."

I stared at him, appalled.

"Too intense?"

I nodded vigorously. "Yeah, *definitely* too intense!"

He stepped closer, tenderly pushing a lock of escaped hair back behind my ear and looking down at me with an alien softness in his eyes that made my heart beat faster. "I knew the second I saw you that I would hire you."

"Really?" All I remembered was that I'd been bleeding and clueless, dumbstruck at meeting him for the first time.

"There you were on your hands and knees, nose bleeding and bruised, dressed in that hideous suit, with a desperate expression in your eyes and no experience or skills –"

"Hey, steady on!" I complained. "You make me sound completely hopeless."

He didn't even hear me. "And all I could think about was that a gem had just dropped into my life."

"A *gem*?" What the hell? I'd never been called *that* before.

"Yes, a gem – someone rare and precious. Dropped right into my life, just like that, when I least expected it. And after I'd interviewed so many uninteresting, sycophantic people who told me what they thought I wanted to hear and who would never have fitted into this family. I'd almost given up on finding anyone. When I saw you, my instincts told me that you would end up being very important to me. And I always listen to my instincts because they're inevitably right."

I hardly dared to breathe, imprisoned in his blueness. "Were they right this time too?"

He smiled. "Of course they were. Just as they were about the twins and Daniel and Niq. And that's why I worry about you so much, because you are so important. It's an ugly world out there, Matilda, and I need to know that the people who matter to me are safe. I'm sorry if that means that you think I'm too controlling or over-protective, but I need it to be that way. I can't change the way I am."

We regarded each other in silence. "You think I'm important?"

"I think you're very important," he agreed. "And not only to me, but to all of us here."

I was lost for words. It was probably the nicest thing anybody had ever said to me before. *I* didn't even think I was important.

"And besides," he continued, a teasing note to his voice. "I felt sorry for you. Who else was going to give you a job looking like that? I was doing a public service by hiring you."

"Heller! I loved that suit. It was –"

"Cheap and ugly?"

“Half-price!”

He laughed, kissed me softly on the forehead and gave me a little push towards the packages. “Try on your uniform. I asked Mei to arrange it, so the sizing should be right.”

Without even thinking, I stripped off my t-shirt and slipped on the monogrammed black polo shirt. I was halfway through pulling my jeans off when I realised that he was watching, attentive amusement on this face. Of course I felt the telltale fire in my cheeks straight away.

“Sorry. I should have gone into the bathroom to change, but I was so excited.”

“Do you hear me complaining?” he said with a lazy smile.

Soon enough, I stood in front of him, a fully-fledged *Heller’s* officer. I twirled around, so he could see from every angle.

“Very nice,” he approved. “That uniform has never looked so appealing before.”

I stared at myself in the mirror, suddenly weighed down with responsibility. “I can’t leave here.”

“Of course you can’t. You love me too much.”

“That’s the main reason of course.” I rolled my eyes. “But I promised Niq that I wasn’t going anywhere. He was so upset at the thought of me leaving, and he doesn’t even know about this job offer.” I looked at my reflection again. “And I could never leave Daniel either. Not now that I’ve heard his story.”

“They’ve both become very attached to you. You’ve been very good for them. Neither of them has ever had a positive relationship with a woman before. They’ve had no constructive female role models in their lives. Both their mothers betrayed them in the worst possible way. Psychologically, having you around is very beneficial for them.”

For a moment I thought about that and all of its ramifications for me.

“I’m not used to anyone relying on me. In my family, *I’m* the one who can’t get their act together. The one who relies on other people when everything falls apart. To be responsible for someone else . . . well, it’s such a challenge for me, a huge responsibility. I’m not good with responsibility. I’m not good with challenges.” I thought some more. “Or commitment.”

“You’ll get used to it.” There was a hard edge to his voice, as if he wasn’t going to give me any choice about it. “I had to.”

I reached out to touch his forearm lightly. “There’s so much I want to know about you, Heller. Did you have a terrible childhood too? Is that what made you want to rescue other boys?” I paused. “And the odd girl?”

“You’re not that odd,” he smiled, tweaking my nose and dodging the scrunched-up piece of tissue paper I chucked at his head.

I returned to the mirror to assess myself again in my *Heller’s* uniform. I never thought that I’d ever be wearing a uniform, but I liked it. It suited me. I felt like a somebody wearing it, and I suddenly understood what Daniel had been saying.

“You belong here, Matilda. You belong with us.”

I made up my mind. “You’re right. I do belong here,” I said, my eyes flicking his way in the mirror. “I’m not leaving my new family.”

His hands landed on my arms and spun me around to face him. He slid them up to my shoulders, massaging them gently. “This is it, Matilda. Now you’ve made this decision to stay, I expect that you are making a full commitment to me and my team and that you will turn your back on acting forever. I expect you to be loyal to me and to put my interests – our interests – above everybody else in your life, including family, friends, and . . . any lovers. I demand complete loyalty from my staff, and I’ll expect nothing less from you.” He waited for me to object and when I didn’t, he softly squeezed my shoulders, his thumbs creeping up to stroke my neck. I tried not to purr. “In return, I promise to protect you, to provide for you, to be there when you need me, and to give you as much freedom as I think is compatible with

your safety and my need to be assured of your safety.”

We held each other’s eyes. It had the solemn sound of a marriage ceremony of sorts – a commitment ceremony, maybe.

“Do we have a deal?” he asked.

I hesitated. I was apprehensive about what was in store for me in the future, but the simple fact for me was that I couldn’t imagine any life that didn’t include Heller, Niq, Daniel and the twins.

I nodded at him. “We have a deal.”

“Good, come with me. I have something else to show you.” And he seized my hand and led me down the stairs, right down to the first basement where his personal fleet was parked. He lifted some keys from the cabinet and pressed them into my hand.

“We’re going for a drive?” I asked, confused, before facing him indignantly. “You’re not thinking I need some driving lessons in a 4WD, are you?”

“I do, now that you mention it, but that’s not why we’re down here,” he laughed and pushed me gently towards his 4WDs. Puzzled, I walked past the first one, Heller’s own Mercedes, instantly noticing the little car next to it that had been hidden from view by its bulk. I turned back to Heller in delighted surprise. He smiled at me.

“Heller! Did you buy a little car for me to drive?” I asked, excited. He nodded. It was a cute and sporty black Mazda 3 sedan with a personalised number plate that simply read HELLERS.

“That number plate is a statement about the car, not me, *right?*” I demanded.

“Of course it is, my sweet.” His face was unreadable, as usual.

“This is so generous of you,” I said happily, unlocking the car and sitting in the driver’s seat. I’d never driven a brand new car before. He joined me in the passenger seat, although it was squishy for him.

“I couldn’t risk you driving one of my 4WDs again,” he told me. “It took my men ages to extract that tree from the grill.”

“Heller! It was only a small shrub, not a tree,” I argued. We went for a little drive around the neighbourhood and I loved the car’s zippy compactness.

Back in the garage, car safely locked, heading for the stairs, I reached up and kissed him on the cheek in gratitude. As quick as lightning his hands dropped to my waist, pulling me crushingly close. He took control of the chaste kiss I had initiated, and pressed down on my lips. After a moment, his tongue forced my lips apart. I let him willingly. A flood of heat spread through my body and I slipped my arms around his waist, one arm sliding upwards to revel in the tight muscles of his shoulder blades. One of his hands tangled in my hair, the other cupped my butt, grinding my hips against his, forcing me backwards against the Mazda. God, I wanted him. Right then. I knew he had a big comfortable bed upstairs, lovely crisp cotton sheets. Or we could just do it in the back seat of my new car. He wanted to and I wanted to, so what was the harm? And it had been so long for me. Maybe we could just . . .

“I want you so much, Matilda,” he breathed hoarsely into my ear. “I can’t believe how much.”

I could, because it was pressing up against me in all its huge magnificence. Then I thought of that man sniggering about me being Heller’s little fuck-buddy and I mustered up every ounce of willpower I had in my being and pushed him away with my hands against his chest.

“Heller, no!”

He stopped immediately, as I knew he would. I don’t know from what inner-spring of steel he was able to dredge up his self-control and strength.

“It’s not very professional to shag your employees, you know. It’s taking workplace

relations a bit too far.” I plastered on a smile despite my thumping heart and gave him a light double slap on his cheek. “See you round, Boss.” I turned, leaving him gazing after me in frustration while I escaped, running up the stairs to the safety of my flat.

That night, I watched the late news while I ironed and nearly burnt a hole in my favourite blouse at a story about a blazing fire that had gutted the office headquarters of Select Security during the early morning hours. It was ‘extremely suspicious in nature’ according to the interviewed fire-chief.

No. *It couldn't be*, I thought to myself hesitantly. *He wouldn't, would he?*

Heller did say he would sort things out with Select, but arson? It was so illegal. So wrong. People might have died or been hurt, including the fire fighters – innocent people. I wanted to ring him and ask, but didn't dare. I wasn't sure that I really wanted to know the truth in any case. So I didn't and to my shame, I turned a blind eye.

I thought I would toss and turn that night after that unpleasant little shock, but instead I closed my eyes and fell into a deep and peaceful sleep almost immediately. I hadn't felt so relaxed for months. My last conscious thought was that day I had certainly made a deal with the devil, and that I couldn't be more delighted about it.

## Chapter 30

The next day I rang Kristo to break the bad news. He didn't take it very well, knowing that I would have been a guaranteed cash-cow for the next year for him. He threatened that I would never work in the industry again. I told him that I couldn't care less and hung up. Then I sneaked out for a few hours in the late morning, leaving Heller a note on his desk that I'd be back before lunchtime, but not telling him what I was doing. On my return he interrogated me on where I had been and what I'd been doing, suspicious that I'd been out with Will again, but I merely smiled and told him I would tell him soon enough. He almost grew angry with me about my implacable silence, but as I refused to budge, he had no choice but to let it be.

A week later I received a parcel in the mail from the States. Surprised, I opened it eagerly, having no idea what it could be. I was almost moved to tears when I pulled out the beautiful tablecloth with the gorgeous floral border that Mary had been working on during her visit to the city – the one I had admired so fulsomely. There was a little note inside.

*Dearest Tilly*

*A little 'thank you' gift from the Peachey wives for all your friendship and help during our visit. We are still very sorry about what our husband tried to do to you, and have made our displeasure known to him in no small measure. He has been without our wifely attentions for many nights now. He is quite humble about his terrible sinfulness and has become a more respectful and obliging man as a result.*

*You will be pleased to hear that we have told him we will no longer wear a conjugal nightgown and he has accepted our wish and has not sought to replace the one that you tore up. He has also accepted that we will not welcome any more wives into our family. We are slowly making some other changes that I'm sure will benefit us all.*

*Once again, thank you so much. We are all so much happier.*

*Love Martha, Mary, Elizabeth, Rebecca, Hannah and Sarah xxxxx*

**PS (from Mary).** *We all love our special dresses that I have made for us. They are beautiful. Thank you again for your unnecessary generosity. I was going to make one for you as well, knowing how much you admired mine, but I then*

*remembered your high esteem for my tablecloth and thought you might prefer that.*

*PPS. Please give all our kind regards to Mr Heller. We often speak of how we only wish we had been given a few moments more to properly make his acquaintance.*

I went into Heller's office and showed him the special gift, letting him read the wives' note.

"Shame about the dress," he smiled, and took my hands in his. He admitted, "You made the right choice about who to ring, Matilda. And you did set them free in a small way. You truly are a remarkable woman."

He squeezed my hands before returning the note and tablecloth to me. But I didn't leave his office, instead I remained standing in front of him, grinning mischievously.

"What have you been up to, my sweet?" he asked, with curious trepidation.

"Remember when I disappeared about a week ago and wouldn't answer your questions about where I was?" He nodded, annoyance compressing his eyebrows together at the memory. "I took what we said the other day about my commitment to you and your business very seriously, Heller, and I hope you did too. I wanted to prove my loyalty to you, so I had this done."

I lifted up my left foot and plonked it in his lap, pulling my jeans leg up to show him my new tattoo that had now healed. It was a small replica of the **H** logo on my left inner ankle.

"The thistle on my right ankle represents one of my families and this *Heller's* logo represents the other," I explained.

He was stunned, bereft of words. "That's so touching, Matilda. I don't know what to say." He bent down and gently kissed my ankle and then pulled me down into his lap, hugging me tightly.

"Did you mean it when you said that you would look after me and protect me, no matter what?" I asked him.

"Yes, I did. Forever," he answered seriously. We smiled at each other and I leant towards him until our lips touched lightly. Daniel walked in right at that moment and pulled a face.

"Gross!" he exclaimed. "No canoodling in the office please! Some of us are trying to work. Not to mention keep our lunch down."

I poked my tongue out at him. "I was just showing Heller my new tattoo," I explained, and waved my ankle around for him to see.

"Ooh, I want one of those too!" was his first reaction, and so I ended up back in the tattoo parlour that afternoon with Niq, watching while Daniel got his first tattoo, the **H**, inked on his right arm. Of course Niq wanted one as well, but Heller wouldn't let him until he was older. Sid and Clive both had tattoo envy when they saw Daniel's and mine, and I knew it wouldn't be long before they succumbed as well.

The **H** tattoo craze took off around the office, first among the security men, then the surveillance men, becoming a must-have mark of allegiance for every Heller loyalist. It became tribal, a sign of belonging, being part of the *Heller's* family. The security section even established strict rules around it, new recruits only being allowed to get one after serving faithfully for a year. A few months after I had my tattoo done, the grateful tattoo artist sent me a personal letter of thanks and the offer of a free tattoo anytime for bringing in so many patrons.

Heller himself regarded the craze with bemusement, possibly ending up as the only person working in his business without the **H** logo tattoo.

"I knew my men were loyal, but I never realised exactly how much before. It's very humbling," he admitted to me one night when we were lazing alone together in the hot tub.

“You inspire loyalty and respect in your staff. They think highly of you, because you’re fair and honest with them. That can be rare in a boss, you know.”

“And what about you, my sweet? Do I inspire you in any way?”

“Yes, you inspire me to stay very, very fit.”

He frowned slightly. “Why?”

“So when I’ve done something you won’t approve of, I can run away very quickly.”

He smiled. “Are you planning on doing something I won’t approve of?”

“I already have,” I confessed, and for once the enigmatic smile belonged to me. I leaned back in the hot tub, enjoying its pulsating warmth, remembering my afternoon phone call to Will. I closed my eyes, thinking with happy anticipation about my date with him the following night. He was taking me out to dinner and a movie and then . . . who knows?

I’d get around to telling Heller about it.

Eventually.

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About the author:

JD Nixon lives in Queensland, Australia writing and editing for a living during the day, but by night lets a wild imagination run free.

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