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Game of Scones

Written by Samantha Tonge

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Game of Scones

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CARINA

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My darling Immy, this one's for you!

CHAPTER ONE

Word to the wise: never Google “Dutch” and “Sex” in the same sentence. Mmm, tempted you, haven’t I? A graphic image hovered in my mind after I closed the page on my browser. *Really?* How was that even possible? With a brief smile, I put my phone on the coffee table and snuggled back into the black leather sofa. On my lap lay a pen and sheet of paper. For important decisions, I had to map out my thoughts the old-fashioned way. On one side I’d scrawled a list titled HEAD: *reasons for staying together*. On the other, HEART: *reasons for breaking up*.

Breaking up, that was, from my six-foot-four boyfriend, Henrik from Holland. Okay, so he was only half-Dutch, thanks to his mum Greta, a divorced liberalist, who strutted around her house half-naked. However, he showed several of the stereotypical characteristics of a Dutchman that I’d just discovered on the internet, in a bid to come to a decision about our future. Despite Henrik’s ever-increasing earnings as a real estate developer, he counted every single penny. Plus he could be direct to the point of sounding rude – although I just called that honesty.

On the plus side... what can I say, his lack of inhibition in the bedroom had rubbed off onto missionary-position me. Talk about fifty shades of yay! In fact, on hearing that Christian Grey’s safe word was “red”, for a joke we’d set ours as “pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis”,

the longest word in the English language. Just as well our love life, whilst adventurous, didn't really include risky whips, clamps or cable ties.

A picture of Henrik came into my mind, with his slicked-back oat-coloured hair, Atlas shoulders and Titan height. This guy had the swoon-factor in excess – or at least that's how I used to feel, until recent months. The first time our eyes had locked, his crinkled in a way that made me feel like a teenager crushing on a boyband. What's more he was ambitious – for both of us – could wire a plug, kept fit and cooked a mean bowl of pasta...

Gushing now, wasn't I, as the list under HEAD (to stay with him) grew longer? It sounds shallow, but hands up, I've been constantly bowled over by his Hollywood looks – until lately when, for some reason, his super suave appearance has grated. I know. Ridiculous. Talk about picky. Yet, thanks to my maths degree, I am analytical to the extreme, which means weighing up *all* the evidence – including my gut feelings. So I'd almost come to a decision – that just this once, I should listen to my heart and tell myself I'm actually *not* being silly. Despite Henrik's considerable physical assets and appealing personality traits, my head needed to listen to my heart shouting that our relationship no longer felt right.

With a sigh, I stood up, went into the bedroom and slipped out of my trouser suit. I yawned. Would my body ever get used to the six a.m. starts, one-hour commute to work and busy days in my power suit? Without concealer, dark rings circled my eyes and at night my brain found it hard to switch off. Henrik was the same, both of us often working in bed on our laptops. But that was good, right? Showed we were motivated and getting the most out of life?

Carefully I hung up my suit, pulled on cut-off jeans and a T-shirt, and headed into the open-plan kitchen. I tied a

cake-themed apron around my waist. After one last look at my list, I tucked it into the front pocket. Now, flour, butter, milk, sugar... what flavour of scone would I bake today? Late afternoon sunbeams warmed my face and I gazed out of the window, onto the small regimental garden. Such a bright summer's day called for sun cream-smelling desiccated coconut with a zing of fresh lemon juice...

I sieved the flour and rubbed in the butter, enjoying the sticky sensation. Scones were brilliant – like a blank canvas, you could colour with either a savoury or sweet theme. What's more, gently kneading the dough, after adding the milk and sugar, never failed to lessen worries... It was the one time of day I took an hour out and emptied my mind of sums and equations. Stressed or happy, nothing beat creating something scrumptious out of such basic ingredients. However, you had to be careful not to pummel the mixture too much. Ideally, before you cut out shapes, the dough should still feel crumbly. Over the years I'd picked up the tips for perfect scones – keep the butter cold to improve the rise, too much milk would make the dough tough, and scones do best on a hot oven's top shelf.

I jumped as the front door to our swanky ground-floor Notting Hill flat opened and slammed shut.

'Had a good day?' I said and turned around to face Henrik. He leant down to brush my lips with his. At five foot ten, my inner cavewoman had always loved the rare experience of a man towering over me. I used to think he'd make a heartbreaker of a uniformed hero, like a scrubbed-up surgeon or cabin crew member.

'The best, thanks – but nothing compared to this evening when I'll reveal a surprise.'

He put his shiny briefcase on the laminate floor. Not for the first time, I appreciated how well an expensive suit showed off his athletic outline. Henrik removed his jacket,

slipped off his tie and undid the top two shirt buttons. This revealed a patch of tanned chest that I'd have once found tantalising, in the extreme. Henrik led me to the sofa. My stomach had lurched when he mentioned a surprise, thanks to a recent night out with Greta, who'd texted, asking to meet.

'My boy is about to propose to you,' she'd said after too many gins. 'Marriage can get messy – make sure you carefully consider your reply.'

Despite feeling annoyed on his behalf at her indiscretion, I secretly appreciated the heads-up – but hence the pressure on me to make up my mind about her son. I'd rather break up with him before any proposal, to avoid bruising his pride even more – to not witness the hurt on his face if I refused to accept a ring. My mind swirled for a moment. But what else could this surprise be? His eyes shone and his smile exuded warmth, so it was unlikely to be something he'd dislike announcing such as... a promotion abroad or *him* wanting to break up with *me*.

'Tell me about your day first, Pippa Pattinson,' said Henrik. 'How is the new team that you're overseeing?' We sat down, hips and legs touching. The list in my front pocket rustled and with a grin he plucked the sheet of paper out of my apron. 'I can't believe you still have to consult recipes, after all the baking practice you've had. What's on the menu today?' He waved the list in the air, before turning away to unfold it.

With a squeal I draped my arms around his taut waist, jostling for the paper. My heart thumped. What if he read it? Did I really want to split up? Would he be upset or agree with me that things between us had changed? Either way, I wasn't yet ready for a confrontation.

My knotted stomach unfurled as he chuckled and gave it back.

‘It’s, um, also a surprise,’ I said, cheeks burning as I stuffed the list back into my apron pocket and folded my arms.

His lips twitched into a smile. ‘Bet it won’t be as big as mine.’

Henrik had the knack for surprising people, as his mum found out last month. He arranged an amazing fiftieth birthday spa morning for Greta and her best friends, followed by afternoon tea at The Ritz. My arms loosened and out of habit, our fingers intertwined. In truth, his caring nature had been the biggest turn-on of all, although just occasionally I wished conscientious Henrik could be a little less perfect and forget someone’s birthday. Again, urgh! Talk about ungrateful. The prospect of a proposal from such an impeccable lover should make me super-happy.

‘Today was okay, thanks. Although the customer service supervisor is twice my age and probably considers me too young to be training for management.’ I shrugged. ‘But that’s not new territory for me. She seems hardworking...’ Plus had the cutest photo of a cat on her desk – must ask her about that.

‘And the vending machine?’ he asked, with a serious expression.

I smiled and gave the thumbs up, my heartbeat having returned to its normal pace. It was our little joke – whatever office we worked in or visited, we rated it by the supply of drinks. A rich mochaccino or creamy latte never failed to perk up a gruelling day.

Henrik tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear. ‘I’m so proud of you, Pips, you’re zooming through the bank’s trainee manager internship. It seems like only yesterday you graduated from university.’

My eyes tingled. More supportive than an underwired bra, how could faultless Henrik not be the ideal man?

Yet over the last few months, a slight sense of unease had crept over me, because of phone calls he'd leave the room to deal with... Then there were really late nights at the office and unexpected trips that totted up more air miles than ever... But then why would he bother cheating? He could just end the relationship. When I'd asked, Henrik said, in an excited voice, that the company was developing fast and it meant more man hours if he was going to get a promotion.

I sighed. Okay. Really my suspicions were unfounded – Henrik hid nothing in life, including his One Direction CD and tub of anti-ageing cream. So onto the main reason that I'd recently felt he and I fitted together no better than a phone with the wrong charger... If you'd only ever had one proper relationship to talk of (um, life's been busy,) how do you know if you're really head-over-heels? Movies rave about love at first sight... Sex scenes on telly show couples tearing each other's clothes off. Occasionally I still felt leg-trembly over my boyfriend's movie star looks, but physical attraction aside, what remained? *Was Henrik my soulmate out of bed, or even in it?*

Lordy, now I sounded like Carrie Bradshaw typing questions into her computer in *Sex and the City*... But tons of thoughts had swirled in my head these last few weeks, without getting answers. Perhaps I'd overdosed on romantic novels, which talked of fairy tale meant-to-be's. Plus, I should be grateful for our fancy executive lifestyle, despite dreaming as a youngster I would one day own an old-fashioned afternoon teashop.

I know – mad idea, wasn't it? My lips tugged upwards. High-flying Mum and Dad were having none of it. They'd pushed me to do my maths degree, little knowing I attended baking classes on the quiet. Just as a hobby, of course, not that Henrik understood why I'd waste my mathematical

brain on creating something that fed your body and not your mind.

My chest glowed as I thought back to many summers spent in Taxos, a little fishing village on the northern coast of the Greek island, Kos. Having been sent to boarding school from the age of seven, it was the only time I saw my jet-setting parents consecutively, for every day of a whole month. 'What are you thinking about?' asked Henrik, as I felt a dreamy look come over my face.

'Taxos. Georgios and Sophia.' Mum and Dad's good friends who used to be like a second set of parents to me.

'Ah, yes. Pleasant people.'

'You got on well with them in January, didn't you?'

Henrik shrugged. 'I guess. Not that I could spend much time at their taverna. Jeez, dead as the tourist market in the Ukraine, that restaurant was,' he said. 'If the people of Taxos have poor summer takings, it must be a real struggle to make ends meet during the low season.'

Urgh, that was a harsh comparison, but remember what I said about the Dutch speaking their mind? A trait that could be highly uncomfortable or rather refreshing... In fact, it was one thing I'd always found attractive about him – his total transparency.

'Although Georgios did take me to the wetlands, to watch wading flamingos... Never far from his binoculars, is he?'

I grinned. 'Sounds like some things haven't changed. Dad used to tease him about looking for dollybirds.' I don't think we ever did explain that joke.

'You might get a shock when you see Taxos again.' Henrik shook his head. 'The recession has taken its toll.'

That's what worried me. I bit my lip. Six months ago he'd gone over as a favour to Mum and Dad when they received word that their villa had flooded. Henrik had a

business meeting on the Greek mainland anyway, and said his employer – ThinkBig Development – could pay for the detour. He was always flying off to meet foreign builders or architects, since ThinkBig had branched out into Europe.

‘I never asked – did you at least try Georgios’ homemade retsina?’ I gave a grin.

‘Yep – didn’t think you’d want the details as I was as ill as a dog the next day.’ He pulled a face. ‘Have you ever stuck your head down a Greek toilet? I can confirm that the flushing system copes with vomit as poorly as it does loo paper.’

I giggled. Yet I’d always envied everything about my Kos friends’ simple lives; rearing their own meat, growing vegetables and fermenting their own wine.

‘How long is it exactly since you’ve been there?’ asked Henrik and stretched back against the sofa, hands behind his head.

I thought for a moment. ‘Wow. Nine years – the last time I was fourteen and had just chosen my GCSE options. Then life got busy with exams, sixth form, university, getting a new job, renting this gorgeous flat with you...’ My chest tightened as I recalled comments Henrik had made about empty Taxos properties and rundown businesses... Of Georgios and Sophia’s home needing a good lick of paint... Although I cheered up as an image of their cheeky son Nikolaos – Niko – popped into my mind.

‘It’ll be a change for you, to be on a beach during your days off, instead of on the piste, during one of our usual ski breaks.’

I nodded. Even our holidays were busy these days, navigating snowy slopes or trekking up challenging mountains. Relaxing images floated into my mind of the

many summers Niko and I had spent together, climbing olive trees, chasing goats or diving for pretty shells. The clear waters and marine life inspired a love of tropical fish, and ever since my thirteenth birthday I'd owned the biggest heated tank I could afford. My current one was home to three angelfish, two mini shark fish and some colourful snails. I sighed, almost smelling the briny air of Taxos beach.

'On my last visit, Niko would have been fourteen like me and was sponge-diving and fishing with his Uncle Christos and helping out in the taverna... What's he doing now?'

Henrik shrugged. 'Much the same, from what I could tell.'

No surprise there. Niko never had aspirations to leave home and travel the world. Even as a young boy, he'd say "Like fertile soil, Taxos will provide everything I need for a lifetime of happiness".

I kind of admired the confidence he had in his little hometown. And despite me studying and ultimately heading for university, we'd still had lots in common, that last summer – a love of nature and food plus the ability to tease each other mercilessly. Niko would call pink-hating teenage me Tomboy and being the tallest, I named him Shorty. We used to spend hours watching turtles and both joined the World Wildlife Fund.

'It was good of Mum and Dad to invite me on their annual visit this August,' I said and loosened my ponytail. And for three consecutive weeks! I'd never left my desk for that long, but since my chat with Greta, since my feelings for Henrik had shifted, I needed a good amount of time away from the daily grind, to think about our relationship. Fortunately, work had insisted it wasn't a problem, even though I'd just moved departments, due to all the unpaid overtime I'd happily put in over the last two years. 'I've always loved Taxos for being so untouched by

the glitzy eighteen-to-thirty crowd. You experience a real slice of authentic Greek life.'

Henrik's jaw tightened and he fiddled with his designer watch. 'I'd say it was short-sighted of any Greek village to hark back to the old days, in these economically-challenged times. Taxos didn't look to me as if it was doing well on feelings of nostalgia and the earnings from selling fish and olives.'

My head told me he was right, but the just the thought of puking, drunken tourists invading that community made *me* feel like throwing up. I shook myself. 'Anyway, it's a shame you've got that big contract to work on and can't go.' I cleared my throat. Truth was, I felt as relieved as an ice cream finding shade that I only had seven days to go until I left. With that marriage proposal on the horizon, I needed to come to a decision about him, without the distraction of his seductive slate eyes. They only reminded me of how I'd felt about him when we'd first started dating.

My own eyes misted up as I thought of struggling Taxos with its turquoise waters and shortbread sand – of my imaginary teashop where I'd do the school run, dance in the dark and wake with the birds. Oh, the hours Niko and I had spent thinking up ridiculous names for it: Scones Sweet Scones; Teacakes Ahoy; She Shells Cake; Shiver me Sandwiches. In the end, I'd plumped for Pippa's Pantry. BORING, Niko had declared – cue a generous handful of hot sand down his back.

I leant up against Henrik, wondering if I would miss him whilst out in Greece. He wanted kids, but not until our thirties and, like my parents, thought boarding school fitted the executive life best. A bustling family home like Georgios and Sophia's wouldn't suit him one jot.

'Funny you should talk of Taxos, you see my surprise...'
Henrik sat upright and turned to face me.

EEK! Greta's words rung in my ears. Was her son about to propose and take me to Greece on honeymoon? Because his surprise certainly wouldn't be chocolates or extravagant bouquets. Henrik wasn't the chivalrous, romantic type, and would consider such gifts a waste of money. Which was good, right? I was a successful, independent woman, not a Disney princess – although if I was, it would have to be Snow White, with her love of birds and forest life. Not that I've, um, thought that through at all *clears throat*. Knights – or princes – in shining armour, I knew, belonged in fiction books, and Henrik always respected my modern outlook. He rarely gave out flowery compliments either – said I was far too intelligent to be patronised by such "tosh". Neither of us could understand why I loved reading anything with a romantic theme.

'Oh, goodness, is that the time...' I rambled, desperate for a speedy exit. I moved forwards, to the edge of the sofa. 'Sorry, I've got to go out right now, forgot I have Zumba and–'

'Whoa! Slow down, Pippa! Surely an exercise class can wait two minutes?'

Aarggh! There was no way out of this. As if already feeling apprehensive about an engagement ring, my left hand curled into a fist.

'Guess what? Thanks to your parents and my boss, you're in for a great holiday abroad.'

Like the detergent-blue Greek tide coming in, a growing sense of uneasiness washed over me.

'As a thank you for me heading over to sort out the flooding mess, your mum and dad insist we have the villa to ourselves this summer. They will visit your aunt in Canada instead. My boss said he can just about afford to let me go for three weeks as long as...' Henrik fiddled with his watch again, '...I find a few days to head off to Kos Town to tie up some business at our new offices there.'

‘Since when did ThinkBig have offices on Kos island?’ I said, for a minute forgetting my total relief at him not having proposed.

‘Ignore all that for a minute – didn’t you hear? I’m coming with you, Pips! It’ll be just us, cocktails and waves... And who knows what could happen.’

Voice husky now, Henrik took my hand and – uh oh – ran his thumb over my ring finger.