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Opening Extract from...

Destination India

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CHAPTER 1

Turbid (adj.) Confused; muddled

The first thing I heard were the keys at the door, scratching and jangling against each other as the lock slowly turned.

Bollocks. I'd done it again.

I whipped my head off my laptop, QWERTY imprinted on my left cheek as I rubbed my tired eyes, probably wiping the residue of clumped, black mascara everywhere. I heard the clanging of the metal bell as the door opened, and quickly hid under my desk, wincing at the pain of cracking my funny bone on my metal chair leg – not so bloody funny at all. Pulling my knees up to my chin I tried to tuck myself in the corner, hoping that he wouldn't notice my shoes forlornly left at the edge of my desk.

I heard his heavy footsteps slowly clump across the tiled floor, tiles that had been imported from Morocco by the previous owner, once dusted with desert sand but now forever ingrained with Manchester mud and dirt in the narrow cracks. They were beautiful but a bugger to keep clean. He was whistling to himself; I could just make out the tune from that TV series that everyone was talking about but I'd never got around to watching. I mentally slapped myself for being in this position again but there was no way I would let him find me here. No way.

Suddenly his footsteps stopped. My breath caught in my throat. I could make out his smart chestnut-brown shoes from here, the ones that I'd seen in the shop window down the road when they were in the January sales and mentioned how much they would suit him.

The shoes were now facing in my direction. I tried to stay as still as I could. A deep sigh replaced the whistling. *Why is he not moving?* I could feel my heartbeat hammering through my chest. Why had I done it again? Put myself in this ridiculous situation with only myself to blame. As his feet picked up and started to edge closer to my desk, I heard the door being flung open once more.

'All right?' Kelli's croaky morning voice filled the silent room.

'Morning, Kel, did you leave the lights on last night before you left?' he asked.

I heard Kelli groan. I could imagine her rolling her heavily kohled eyes, throwing him her best sarky look, the one she had down to a tee.

'What? Nah, weren't me. I left before Georgia did.' She yawned loudly. I could now see her dirty, battered Converse trainers edge into my view, her once-white laces caked in what looked like brown sludge. I really did need to give this floor a proper going over, something else to add to my forever growing to-do list. Maybe I'd hire one of those super-duper carpet vacs or steam cleaners. I was sure my mum had one that she'd won at the bingo a while back. *Focus, Georgia. Focus on staying out of view.* I tensed my body once more. My shoulders ached from being hunched over my laptop all night and now pins and needles started tickling my legs.

'Oh, right,' Ben said. His feet were out of my eye line now. I heard the wooden sign clang against the pane of glass in the door, turning us from closed to open. 'Can you

just turn Georgia's lamp off then? I'll have a word with her when she gets in. Maybe it's some new security measure she's put in place,' he called out.

Shit. I'd forgotten that I'd left that on.

'Yeah, fine,' Kelli mumbled, sloping over towards me. Her feet were just next to my chair. I could see her pale white legs through the rips in her faded denim jeans. 'Can't she turn her own bloody lights off?' I heard her grumble under her breath as she reached across my desk. I scrunched my eyes shut. How was I going to get myself out of here without either of them seeing me?

'Damn. We're out of milk. Could you go and grab us some coffees? You can take some change from the kitty tin,' Ben called over from the small kitchen at the back of the room.

'Fine,' Kelli huffed, knocking one of my pens to the floor.

'Careful,' Ben warned. 'Don't mess up her desk.'

'Yeah, we both know how OCD she is,' Kelli replied, sniggering.

'Organised, Kelli. The word you're looking for is organised,' Ben said. I could sense a smile in his voice.

'Hmm, more like psycho control freak if you ask me,' Kelli muttered quietly.

'What was that?'

'Nothing. I just said I won't make a mess.'

I wasn't a psycho control freak nor did I have OCD. I just liked order. I liked to keep tabs on things, to have a plan, to know that everything was going as it should – so yeah, I did need to have some level of organisation, something Kelli could do well with learning, I silently seethed.

Kelli's skinny arm dipped down to pick the pen up, her hand fumbling on the floor inches from my feet followed

by her blue-streaked hair and anaemically pale face. Her bloodshot eyes clocked mine. 'Oh!'

I pressed my finger to my lips, wincing.

'What?' Ben called out.

I shook my head and pointed to the roof of the desk. A slow smirk broke out on Kelli's face and she straightened herself up.

'Nothing. I just, erm, just found that stapler I've been looking for.' Her feet backed out of view. 'Erm, actually I think you should get the coffees. I've got lady problems and shouldn't be out in the cold air for too long.'

I stifled a laugh. Nicely done, Kelli; every woman knows if you want to get out of doing something then talking about your period is the number one way to spook a man out.

I could sense Ben's face turning a lovely shade of crimson as I heard him stutter. 'Right, OK. Not a problem. You just, erm, get to work and I'll grab us some coffee.'

Kelli dramatically slunked onto the office chair opposite. 'Thanks, Ben. *Really* appreciate it. I promise I'll go when I'm off the blob.'

I heard a rustle of fabric and the bell tingling as the door opened and quickly closed again. Nervously I peeked around my filing cabinet to check the coast was clear.

'S'all right. He's gone,' Kelli said, swinging her feet up. I crawled out from under my desk and picked off large pieces of fluff from my creased skirt. 'You slept here again then?'

'I don't know how it happened. I was working on the European trips and the next thing Ben's coming through the door waking me up. He really can't find me like this, not after what happened last time.' Kelli and I both winced at that memory.

A few weeks ago I'd been burning the candle at both ends to get a pitch presentation finished for a new tour

operator we were hoping to partner with when I'd fallen asleep at my desk. Ben had found me drooling on one of the slides and when he'd woken me so abruptly I'd accidently spilt a whole mug of cold tea over my laptop. The laptop where I'd collated all our hard work and hadn't saved a copy, meaning all that effort was for nothing. The technicians hadn't been able to save anything as brown drips puddled around my keyboard. Ben had shrugged that it was just one of those things, a lesson in the importance of backing up our work, but I knew he was pissed off.

When we first started this business I had visions of us spending our days working hard but having fun with it, and our evenings wrapped around each other in bed. I hadn't realised how much this company had pushed us away from each other. The come-to-bed eyes had been replaced with looks of disappointment.

I glanced at the clock; it was gone nine a.m. I wouldn't have time to get home and change without Ben wondering why I was so late. I'd just have to hand iron the crumples in my skirt and hope he wouldn't notice I was wearing the same blouse as the day before. I pulled on my black, scuffed heels and scurried to the bathroom to try and sort out the bird's nest masquerading as my hair.

'I've got some make-up you can borrow if you want?' Kelli called out behind me. Glancing at the purple bags under my bloodshot brown eyes, my sallow, almost greyish skin and the furry coating on my teeth, I accepted. Moments later I resembled less the night of the walking dead and more the morning of the walking dead. Heavy powder caked my cheeks, a smear of maroon lipstick and a flick of thick kohl completed the look. I wasn't sure if it was an improvement but at least I'd got the crusty sleep from my eyes and rubbed the creases from my face. My hair was another matter – in desperate need of some TLC

I couldn't even remember the last time I'd managed to visit a hairdresser, let alone had some home hair care. Wiry, dull and sticking up in tufts, it looked a mess.

''Ere, just try and pin it back.' Kelli handed me some grips.

'Thanks, Kel, I really appreciate this.' I took them and smiled at her, hurriedly pulling strands of hair from my face and prising a hairgrip in.

'No probs, boss. I, erm, didn't mean what I said about you being a psycho control freak either.' She scuffed her shoes on the floor.

'I don't know what you're talking about,' I said with a half-smile. The dinging of the bell caught us both.

'Kel?' Ben called out. 'They didn't have your half-fat, extra-tall, two-shot latte so I got you a normal filter coffee that's apparently for someone called Heyli.'

Kelli left me to continue sorting myself out. 'Right, fine, thanks.'

'Is Georgia here? Why is her coat on the floor?' I heard his trousers rustle as he bent down to pick up my jacket that I'd dropped in the hurry to make myself presentable.

'Erm, well, er…' Kelli mumbled.

'I'm here!' I walked out smiling, trying to look as fresh and well slept as I could. 'Sorry, I must have knocked my jacket over as I nipped to the loo.'

'Hey, morning,' Ben said looking slightly bemused by the new look I was rocking on my face. 'You…erm…look nice today. Here, they didn't mess up on your order.'

'Thanks.' I blushed and quickly sat at my desk, acting as normal as I could. I gratefully took the steaming coffee from Ben, trying to ignore his furrowed brow that suggested he was trying to work out what was different about me. 'So, you ready for our staff meeting?'

'Yep.' He pulled himself together and headed over to his desk.

Staff meetings were in all the business management books I'd been trying to read; OK, well, I'd downloaded the audio books onto my iPhone as they helped drown out the noise of rowdy school kids getting the same bus as me to town every morning. Apparently staff meetings were vital in ensuring that all tasks are evenly distributed, targeted and have measurable results, as well as checking in with your colleagues in a bid to strengthen team relations… or something like that. I never could concentrate on the droning voice on *1001 ways to improve your business* when some spotty teen was playing Justin Bieber out of their tinny phone speakers.

When I'd suggested we hold weekly staff meetings both Kelli and Ben had tried not to laugh at me. With just the three of us working here, plus the occasional visit from Ben's godmother and previous owner Trisha, they'd scoffed that we didn't need them but I'd insisted. Mostly because I needed to make sure that every ball we were juggling wasn't being dropped.

'Kel? You ready?' I called out.

'Yeah.' She grabbed a notepad, mostly full of her angst-ridden scribbles, and sat on the edge of the sofa, ignoring my pursed look when she flipped her feet onto one of the chenille cushions.

'Great, so…' I scanned my tired eyes down my to-do list, mentally reminding myself to add steam clean the floor and bring in a spare change of clothes that I could leave under my desk, in case I pulled an all-nighter again. Just in case. 'We've got the visuals back for the summer campaign that I sent both of you. I didn't have time for your feedback so signed it off but trust me it looks really good. Then coming up this week we've got the tour going to Iceland; Kelli, will you make sure that you email the tour guide with everyone's passport details?' She nodded.

'Actually, I can just do that; it'll only take two minutes. We also need to send the updated itinerary out. I've started that so may as well finish it,' I said, crossing a line through it.

I ignored Ben's quizzical look and continued to scan down my list.

'OK, so next on the agenda is the Indian tour leaving in a couple of weeks. As you know this is proving to be one of our bestsellers and definitely where we need to be focusing our energy, so although the demand is there I really think we need to question our relationship with the visa company that we've been using.'

'What's wrong with them?' Ben asked.

'Well, nothing. I just think we could do a better job if it was all in-house. Apparently streamlining a business's services only adds value.' I ignored them both raising an eyebrow at me. 'I'll look into that –'

'Georgia,' Ben cut me off.

'Yep?' I looked up from my list.

'Is there anything you want Kelli and me to do?'

'Oh yep, sorry,' I replied sheepishly. 'Kel, if you could sort out getting a steam cleaner as these tiles need a good going over?' She wouldn't be able to mess that task up. 'And, Ben, you've got enough to worry about with preparing for the Travel Trade Convention and getting the copy finalised for the website. You said you'd have the new "what's happening" page live by last week…and well…it's still not gone up.'

'It was yesterday that you asked me to do that. Not last week,' he said with a slight frown.

'Oh really?' God had it only been yesterday? 'Well, either way it needs to be sorted, please.'

'Consider it done,' he replied with a wink that made my lady parts do a funny wiggle.

I cleared my throat, forcing myself back on track. 'Thanks, and finally I was also thinking that we should

look into each learning a new language? Take a class over lunch or something like that? It would really help with attracting new clients and in building relationships with foreign guides if we can speak their language.'

Looking expectantly at their faces I could tell my new idea had fallen on deaf ears.

'I think that might be one for the future maybe?' Ben said softly, trying not to laugh as Kelli yawned dramatically.

'Yeah, maybe we can re-visit that soon, although I've read that Mandarin is the most widely spoken language in the world, so we really should be hitting that market. Oh and then last but not least, I've managed to get a meeting with Hostel Planners later this week to see if we could tie in some of our tours with them.'

'You didn't say.' Ben's deep brown eyes caught mine. A flash of confusion and hurt flickered across his face.

'I only found out this morning, I-I mean last night,' I stuttered.

'You want me to come with you to that? You know your list is sounding pretty heavy – it might be best to share the load a little, Georgia?' He tilted his head at me.

'It's all under control. Trust me.' I smiled weakly, not wanting to look at Kelli who I could feel was giving me a look that said she knew things weren't under control.

'If you're sure.' Ben wasn't letting this go.

'Ben, I'm sure,' I said, a little more forthrightly than I'd meant to. I softened my tone. 'Sorry, I think you've got enough to look after with preparing for the convention. How's your speech coming on? Do you want to practise it with us? Maybe you could send it over so I can check it before you go?' I tried to say it as lightly as I could, hoping to sound like a caring colleague, not a control freak who needed to keep tabs on exactly what it was he would be saying.

'It's all under control.' He grinned, tapping a finger to the side of his head.

'But you *have* written it down?'

Ben smiled and waved his hands around. 'Yeah, it'll be fine.'

He hadn't written it down. He always said that he preferred to speak off the cuff, but just the thought of that made me physically shiver. I nodded and added *write Ben's speech* onto my notepad. I'd just try and sneak it into his pocket so it would be there if, sorry *when* he needed it and he'd come back thanking me for helping him.

'Right, so, anyone else got anything to add?'

Ben shook his head but Kelli raised a skinny arm. 'It's not really work-related but my band are playing at the Academy tomorrow night.'

'Wow, that's amazing!' Ben said.

Kelli blushed. 'Nah, it ain't the real Academy, it's the one in Rusholme above a curry house but still it's a gig. I guess.' She paused collecting her thoughts. 'So, I wondered if you both wanted to come? I'll put you on the guest list if you fancy it. You know, if you weren't too busy or anythin'?' She nibbled her thin bottom lip.

'Course we'll be there. Won't we, Georgia?' Ben said, interrupting me from scrolling through the calendar on my phone.

'It might not be your kinda vibe but the booze is cheap and you get ten per cent off any curry *and* free poppadums if you come.'

'Georgia? You in?' Ben persisted.

'Yeah, yeah sounds good,' I said distractedly giving them both a tight smile. 'Right, let's get down to work.'

It had turned out to be a good day actually, minus the dramatic, unprofessional start. We'd had four walk-ins who booked tours on the spot and another six who took

brochures away, making all the positive noises of coming back to pay a deposit. I was just in the middle of my emails when my phone buzzed: Mother calling.

'Hi, Mum, I haven't got long. I'm pretty snowed under,' I answered quickly.

'You always say that,' she tutted, and I rolled my eyes. 'Well, I won't keep you, it was just to check that you haven't forgotten about tonight.'

Tonight? Tonight? My mind raced through my mental to-do list. What was tonight?

'Erm… Yep. It's all under control,' I lied.

She breathed a sigh of relief. 'Great. Your dad is so excited to see you. We'll let the rush-hour traffic die down before we head out. You know he doesn't like to drive when all the maniacs fill the roads,' she babbled. 'What time is the restaurant booked for again?'

I paused. Then suddenly it all came rushing back. I quickly glanced at my calendar to check I was right. Yup. Shit. Today was my dad's birthday and weeks ago I'd promised my mum I'd get us a table at Chez Laurent's, the fancy French bistro that the Manchester glitterati raved about, the place where you needed to reserve stupidly far in advance.

'Erm, nine p.m.,' I lied.

'Perfect. Right, well I'll let you get on. See you later, love.'

I said goodbye and hung up, my stomach in knots. I forgot what I was doing and hurriedly found the phone number for the restaurant, crossing everything that there would be by some miracle a last-minute cancellation for tonight.

No such luck.

The snooty receptionist, talking in a blatantly fake French accent, told me that 'eet just wasn't posseeeble'.

I told her to leave it and focused my attention on scouring the net for other possible options, my workload suddenly seeming less important. I'd set alarms on both my phone and email reminding me to buy my dad a gift and book this place but every time they'd pinged I'd cancelled them as I was always in the middle of doing something else. I could kick myself now. After the stressful end of last year, I'd planned to really treat him for his birthday, to celebrate in style that he was still here with us when we had so nearly lost him. I sighed, mentally slapping myself in the face for being such a terrible daughter.

All the finest five-star restaurants were either fully booked, didn't answer the phone, or only had tables at five p.m. in two weeks' time. Now I was really behind. By this rate I'd be pulling another all-nighter just to catch up on what I'd not got done today.

I sighed loudly, which caught Ben's attention. 'You OK, Georgia?'

'You don't happen to know any Michelin-starred chefs who could come and cook dinner tonight, do you?' I asked, with my head in my hands.

'Sorry?'

'It's my dad's birthday and I promised him a fancy dinner but completely forgot all about it,' I half moaned.

Kelli looked up from her paper-strewn desk. 'My mate Sticky Shaun works at TGI Fridays. I could try and bag you a table there? Nah, scrap that – he got his name for a reason.'

Ben grimaced and turned to face me. 'Why don't you have a change of plan and cook for them at yours?'

I laughed. 'I want to treat him, not kill him. Do you not remember how bad I was at cooking when we were in Thailand?'

Memories of being in the spicy, steamy kitchen in Koh Lanta flooded my mind. I blushed slightly thinking back to

how close we'd been then, how I was convinced something would have happened between us by now other than swapping secret-Santa gifts and sharing business ideas in a friendly yet professional manner.

Ben smiled at the memory. 'Yeah, maybe stick with the restaurant idea.'

I went back to my laptop, wanting to focus on work instead of what could have been between us when Ben called out. 'Wait, didn't you go to some networking event or something at Verde, that new Italian place? You could call whoever organised it and see if they could fit you in.'

'Genius idea! Thanks.' I flipped through the stack of business cards on my desk; note to self, must get round to organising these one day. I thought back to that utterly boring evening where my restless mind had wandered away from death by PowerPoint to the fresh flowers and walnut fittings in the restaurant. I'd spent the rest of the dull meeting wondering whether we should redecorate the shop in similar hues.

I found the business card for Luigi, the restaurant manager, a no-nonsense Italian man with gelled-back hair and heavy musky aftershave who'd been very keen on sharing his advice on the best places to visit in Rome when I'd told him about our Italian tours. Five minutes later and I'd bagged us a table for three at nine p.m. tonight. Bingo. Maybe I could pull this back after all.