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Opening Extract from...

Escape to the Riviera

Written by Jules Wake

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For Super Agent Broo,
thank you for everything x

CHAPTER ONE

Surely, no judge in the land would send her down for giving in to temptation and throttling her niece? The phrase 'justifiable homicide' rattled around Carrie's brain with pleasing harmony. Yes, she'd almost certainly get away it. Teenagers were tricky little sods, although her sister might have something to say about it. Angela managed her daughter's strops with understated equanimity, but then she was very good at putting up with things. Carrie, on the other hand, found it difficult not to react. How come she could cope with a class full of other people's kids but was ready to strangle her own niece for being a first-class, there was no other word for it, madam? It would be wrong to come right out and call her that, strangulation was therefore entirely reasonable. Her fingers twitched. So, so tempting.

'Told you we wouldn't get in,' Jade pointed out for the third time, in her loud 'I'm disgruntled voice', attracting pernicious interest from the people in the queue behind them. No doubt a score of parents were heaving fervent sighs that she wasn't theirs.

Did Jade have any idea how close she was to having the very living breath choked out of her?

'You should have booked the tickets online, like I said to. It's ridiculous,' moaned Jade, contradicting any pleasure she might have gained in being right.

Carrie scowled at her niece. One, she flatly refused to pay a two-pound fee, per ticket, mind you, for the luxury of booking tickets in her own home and two, especially not for a film you could flipping well see for free on television. *Breakfast at Tiffany's* had been around for fifty years.

'Now, now, I'm sure there's something else we can see,' said Alan, stepping back to look up at the bank of screens advertising at least another eleven films being screened.

'Yes,' said the girl at the desk, with a touch of desperation, trying to hurry them along. 'One of the films starts in two minutes.' Whose side she was on? She'd soon be out of work if people paid the over-priced booking fees and didn't buy tickets at the desk.

If that happened and you had to do it all online, there'd never be any chance to be spontaneous and decide to see a film. Take pot luck. Not that Carrie had done anything that random in ages. With sudden dismay it occurred to her that spontaneity was in short supply these days. Did that happen to *everyone* with age? Was it growing up? Maturing? Or just her getting duller?

'Which one starts in two minutes?' asked Carrie, straightening up and flashing the girl a brilliant smile. 'Wait. Don't tell me.' She turned to the others. 'Let's go for it. It'll be a surprise.'

They all stared at her as if she'd gone mad. As well they might, where had that crazy thought come from?

'What! We can't do that,' said Angela. 'We don't even know what it is. We might hate it.'

'That's the most ridiculous thing. Why would you do that? That's so lame.' Jade shook her head. 'Anyway there'll only be tickets left for the crap films no one wants to see.'

'And also rather risky, darling,' added Alan.

'Or it could be fun!' Her voice lifted with enthusiasm, looking back at the united front of three deeply sceptical faces. 'We might see a film we'd never normally choose and enjoy it. Broaden our horizons. A voyage of discovery! You might love it and you'd never have known. And what about that sense of anticipation?'

'Like who does that?' Jade punctuated every word with a different facial expression.

If displeased gurning ever became an Olympic sport, she'd surely clean up. 'Sounds a pathetic, losery sort of thing to do.' She continued.

'Erm, if you could . . .' the girl at the desk nodded her head, indicating the restive queue. 'Or perhaps step aside while you're deciding.'

'No. Not happening. There's no way I'm queuing all over again.' Jade turned to the girl. 'What tickets are left for anything that's not totally shite?'

'Well there are two screens showing *An Unsuitable Man,* which is pretty popular.'

'Done.' Jade gave Alan an unapologetic smile. 'Sorry Al, it's a chick flick.'

'That's fine, I think I'll cope,' replied Alan, amusement glinting in his eyes.

Carrie shot him a grateful smile and got her purse out. 'Four tickets for that, then.'

'Does anyone know what it's about?' asked Angela.

'Not a clue, but it's got Mr Delicious Arse in it, so if all else fails we've got man candy. Sorry, again Al.'

All was right again in Jade's world.

'Isn't that a tad sexist?' teased Carrie, on safer ground now.

'Sue me.' Jade grinned. 'But I bet you agree. Sorry Al, again, but the man with the oh-so-yum butt is serious sex on legs.'

'Jade!' said Angela with a half-hearted exclamation of consternation, before adding, 'But we still don't know what it's about.'

'I'm guessing,' said Carrie, paying for the tickets and tucking away her purse, 'there's a clue in the title, which probably contravenes the trade descriptions act. Cute unsuitable man reforms to become cute suitable man.'

'And there speaks the scriptwriter,' said Alan, wrapping his arm around her as they walked towards screen seven.

'Then it sounds like a very good alternative,' said Angela. 'Although perhaps a bit unfair on the sole male in the party.'

'Well Al would prefer that to a shoot 'em, beat 'em and kill 'em, fast and furious thing, wouldn't you? You're used to all that *Pride and Prejudice*, *Far From the Madding Crowd* stuff.' Jade shuddered. 'I'm so glad, once this year is finished, I never ever *ever,* have to do English Literature again.'

'So too, I suspect, is your teacher,' said Al with a wink. 'And no, I'm quite happy to watch something undemanding. I'm sure there'll be some lady candy for me.' His hand resting on Carrie's shoulder squeezed her.

Thank goodness he was used to teenagers. Carrie lifted her hand and wrapped her fingers around his, squeezing him back. Being a teacher at the same school as where she taught drama part-time meant Jade's behaviour, thankfully, didn't faze him or put him off.

*

They shuffled into their seats and sat down in the semi-darkness. The ads had already started but the audience, blasé and indifferent to the stylish mini-films, paid no attention. Jade's phone glowed as she scrolled through pages on the internet, reminding Carrie to switch hers off. Next to her, Alan did the same.

'Richard Maddox,' announced Jade, showing her phone to her mother.

Carrie heard Angela's quick, sharp gasp.

Her stomach flipped. In the dark she saw the light from the phone reflected in Angela's wide-eyed expression.

Angela grabbed her arm on the rest between them.

'He's Mr Delicious Arse,' explained Jade, leaning over her mother to show Carrie a picture of Richard Maddox's naked backside.

All the air whooshed out of Carrie's lungs and someone had removed the bones in her legs. Thank goodness for Angela's grip on her arm, otherwise she might have slipped out of her seat like a slick of jelly, sliding right out under the seat in front of her all the way to the bottom.

'It's a YouTube vid. Him buck-naked on a beach in California. All you can see is his butt.'

An image of a tiny heart-shaped mole wormed like a determined maggot into Carrie's head, and no matter how hard she blinked, she couldn't dispel it.

'Not the meat and two veg, thank you. That would just be vile. Don't look, Al.' Jade waved the phone at him.

'Thanks, Jade, I won't.'

A sudden burst of music, ebbing from left to right of the cinema in a cacophonous wave, silenced the chatter and Jade snapped her phone off.

Angela's hand crept into hers with a limp grip. Carrie

clung on to it, her heart leaping about in her chest like a bucking bronco on acid. Her stupid brain insisted on replaying an image of a finger tracing that blinking mole, the tip of her index fingernail a perfect fit for each side of the heart, which nestled on the top left side of a right buttock. She squirmed slightly in her seat and stiffened when she realised what she was doing.

'You okay?' whispered Angela.

In the darkness Carrie shook her head, unable to speak. A sense of dread and anticipation rolled around in her stomach. She sat straighter. It seemed a miracle she could keep her body still when inside it felt like someone had switched on a blender.

It was bound to happen one day. A miracle that she'd managed this long. Richard Maddox starred in one block-buster after another.

Sickness and curiosity warred. It had been a long time. She'd been good. Not stalking him. Not Googling. Managing to avert her gaze from the front of *Hello* magazine at the checkout in Marks and Spencer, training herself not to flinch when someone in the staff room talked about his latest movie or when his name was linked with yet another blonde bombshell of dubious intelligence. Okay, that was her being a bitch. They might be very intelligent, but couldn't they give everyone else a break and not be completely gorgeous as well?

Maybe she'd built it all up in her head and seeing him on screen wouldn't affect her at all. She hadn't seen him for years. Eight years, ten months, give or take a day or two. And she only knew that because it was July 1st and he'd left on the August bank holiday. No other reason.

Why the hell hadn't she done this before? Put her demon

to rest? Except he wasn't a demon. Or even a bad person. Just someone from her past. She should have done this ages ago.

She squeezed Angela's hand back to show she was fine. Absolutely fine.

Carrie approved of the sassy character of the female lead, a willowy blonde, who kept the hero on his toes. The well-written screenplay had lots going for it. Entertaining. Good snappy dialogue. Gorgeous location. New York without the traffic, the noise or the humidity. She liked the conflicts that kept him and the heroine apart, and the will-they-ever-get-together moment, where he cast a wistful backward look at her sitting alone on the Highline. Carrie was doing really, really well. Focusing on the film. The mechanics of it. Stoic and impassive. She was doing well, right up to the point when on the Staten Island Ferry, Richard Maddox's character removed the suitcase from the heroine's hand, turned her to him, cupped her face in his hands, pushing her long windswept curls out of the way, and leaned in. The camera homed in on the wistful, longing expression on his face, his lips centre-screen as he uttered the words, 'I love you,' before leaning in to bestow a kiss of heart-rending intensity.

He might as well have punched her right in the gut. She almost doubled over with the impact.

A flush of heat raced through her as memories loosened, tumbling down like an avalanche. The way he'd lazily snake one of her curls around his finger when they were lying in bed in the mornings. His eyes holding hers when he kissed her, the quick nibbles at the corner of her mouth, those spontaneous public pecks on the Tube as if he couldn't hold

them back and the long, slow langorous preludes to love-making. A myriad kisses danced in her head.

The pain sliced hard and sharp, like a crack suddenly tearing its way through her heart. She tensed, her diaphragm clenching as she fought to hold in a shuddering sob, which threatened to launch itself into orbit.

Mindful of Alan on her right and Angela on her left, she swallowed hard. She clamped her lips in a mutinous line, wrapped her arms around her chest and shut her eyes, praying that these precautions would succeed in repelling the emotion fighting to leak out. Tears streamed down her cheek, gathering speed and a single hiccoughing sob escaped.

Al slipped an arm along the back of her chair. 'You big softie,' he whispered.

Blinking back the tears, feeling all kinds of fool, she ducked her head to scrabble around in her bag at her feet to find a tissue. It gave her time to take her attention away from the screen and to get a grip.

'Aw, Auntie Carrie's been crying,' teased Jade as they filed out of the cinema, blinking as they emerged into daylight. 'You big wuss, you.'

'She's an old romantic, aren't you love?' Alan shrugged into his jacket as they stepped out into the early-evening drizzle.

'It was a lovely film,' said Angela, her eyes anxious as they scanned Carrie's wan face. 'Made me cry too.'

Carrie winced at the blatant lie. She did love her sister.

'Mum, what are you like? Seriously? What was there to cry at? Honestly, you're a pair of saps. I'll give him hot, though. Up in the old Fahrenheit register. Hot, hot, hot,' she paused with a cheeky raise of her eyebrows, 'for an old guy.'

'Old?' chorused Angela and Carrie at the same time, exchanging secretive smiles.

'Yeah, he must be at least thirty. Old.' She grinned. 'Obvs, not for you geriatric crustys, of course.'

Carrie and Angela each linked an arm through Jade's.

'What do you think?' Carrie said to Angela. 'Bread and water for the next ten years?'

'Ladies, you can do better than that.' Alan frowned as if giving it serious thought. 'How about no phone upgrade for another year?'

'Nooo!' howled Jade, dramatically locking her hands in mock prayer, 'anything but that.'

'Or we could give her away?' suggested Angela

'Who'd have her?' Carrie shrugged as Jade poked her tongue out.

'There is that,' agreed Angela with a long-suffering sigh. 'Look's like we're stuck with the brat.'

'You know you love me. Both of you.' Jade tugged at their arms, pulling them closer to her.

Her mother placed a kiss on her cheek. 'We do.'

Carrie followed suit. 'Course we do.'

She pushed back at the sense of melancholy hovering over her, as if ready to snatch her away.

She had plenty of love in her life. What more could she ask for? She had a tight-knit family and a lovely man, who adored her.