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Opening Extract from...

The Proposal

Written by Tasmina Perry

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The Proposal

Tasmina Perry



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For John



PROLOGUE

She hesitated before she put pen to paper, her pale hand shaking as it hovered over the form.

Apparently this was the old-fashioned way of doing things – even people her age were internet savvy enough these days to submit a classifieds advertisement online. Instead she had popped into the magazine offices on impulse, having been in Covent Garden on a lunch date with some friends. Familiar people, on familiar territory, London's traditional publishing heartland. Her own former workplace was just a stone's throw away, and its restaurants – Rules, Christopher's, Joe Allen – were where she had spent many happy times, doing deals, drinking with friends. It was her life. And it had been a good one.

So was she now in her right mind doing this? Was it time to finally let go of the past rather than go running headlong into a fantasy of a life she had not even lived?

She looked up and glanced at the woman behind the desk, hoping for an encouraging gesture, or some other

sign that she was doing the right thing. But the lady was on the phone and the only other thing she had to spur her on was a nagging voice in her head. The voice that had been reminding her for weeks that if she was ever going to do it, if she was ever going to go there, it was now, whilst she still could.

Today she felt every one of her seventy-two years. Recently she had noticed that society was trying to pull some sort of a con trick on millions of people just like her, that there was something good, something joyful, about getting old. She had seen the adverts around London, in magazines. Smiling white-haired women with beautiful bone structures advertised cheaper road insurance for the over-seventies. Suspiciously well-priced flats in glossy estate agent brochures were luxury retirement bolt-holes only available to the over-fifty-fives. The grey pound was apparently a potent economic force, whilst the term 'silver surfers' for those of her generation more internet savvy than herself implied an athleticism she had not felt since the eighties.

But right now there felt nothing good about being old. Her friends were beginning to die. Not many, not yet, but it was happening, and every time she heard more sad news, it was a reminder of her own mortality.

She had been thinking about it so much lately. Thinking about *him*. She wasn't entirely sure how you could have memories about things that hadn't even happened. All she had were her daydreams about a life they could have had together if it wasn't for the one night that had changed her life completely. But lately it had

consumed her thoughts to the point that she just had to go to New York – the one major Western city she had never been to. The one city that represented a life unlived.

Steeling herself, she began to write. Now was not the time for regrets or doubt. Old age was about doing the things you had always wanted to do, about tying up loose ends, before time ran out.

No, she was absolutely right to be here. Absolutely right to do this. She handed her form to the classifieds woman, paid her money and, after confirming when the advert would run, picked up her bag and left the office. She glanced at her watch. It was not even four thirty in the afternoon. She had things to plan, phone calls to make, and only a few hours left in the day to do it all.



CHAPTER ONE

2012

'He's going to propose tonight, I can just feel it.'

Amy Carrell looked across the kitchen at her friend Nathan Jones.

'And what makes you so sure?' she said, picking up three plates and expertly balancing them on one arm. 'If he was whisking me off to Paris, then I might be suspicious. But we're going to an office party – not exactly what you'd call romantic.'

Nathan rolled his eyes.

'Are you kidding me? It's Christmas, darling, and the party's at the Tower of London. At night! It's what I would call the very essence of romance.'

'Nathan, they used to behead people at the Tower of London . . .'

'Correct. Anne Boleyn for one. Apparently it took several attempts because she had a very small neck.'

'As I said. Not exactly romantic,' grinned Amy, pushing through the double doors of the kitchen and into the roar of the dining room at the Forge Bar and Grill, one of the more fashionable eating houses on Upper Street in Islington, north London. She moved with the grace of a ballerina, swaying between tables and deftly positioning the plates in front of the diners. Tonight Amy didn't need to remember who was having the squash risotto and who was having the escalope – everyone was having turkey. This was the sixth Christmas party she had done in the last week, and they weren't getting any better.

'Oi, love!'

She jumped as someone slapped her bum.

'Bring us out another bottle of the fizz, eh?' yelled a red-faced man, leering up at her. 'And what about your phone number too, eh?'

'I will send the sommelier over for you, sir,' she answered, forcing a smile.

'Ooh, a sexy American,' he laughed, pinpointing Amy's accent. 'Why don't you come and join us for a glass of champagne? Maybe after hours, eh?' he added as Amy fled back to the kitchens.

'Groper, table two,' she said to Nathan. Her friend just nodded and peered through the porthole in the kitchen door. 'Pink cheeks, white shirt?'

'You got it. Total sleazeball.'

'Don't worry, I suspect his shirt is going to be bright red when he leaves here. I feel a wine-related accident coming on.'

'Nut roasts!' screamed a voice. They turned as a dishevelled woman crashed through the door. Cheryl, the Forge's owner, had a heart of gold but swore like a trooper and was not a woman to be crossed when she had a scowl on her face like now.

'I got three arseholes giving me crap on table six; say they need their nut roasts asap or they're walking.'

'Sorry, I'll get on it,' said Amy, moving towards the serving hatch, but Nathan held up his wrist, tapping his watch meaningfully. 'I'll deal with the veggies, you better skedaddle.'

'Where are you going?' said Cheryl, frowning.

'It's Daniel's party, remember.'

'Jeez, Amy. You only just got here.'

Thanks to an audition running seriously behind time, she had been thirty minutes late for her shift and Cheryl hadn't let her forget it all day.

'I'll come in early tomorrow.'

'You'll do more than that. I need someone to take a double shift tomorrow. Think of the tips and tell me you'll do it.'

'I'll do it,' said Amy, knowing she needed the money.

'Off you go then. Go, go,' said Cheryl, shooing Amy away with both hands. 'Want to use the flat to change?'

Amy smiled gratefully as her boss pushed her hand into her jeans pocket, pulled out a jangling set of keys and threw them at her.

'He better bloody well had propose after this,' Cheryl shouted after her as Amy grabbed her bag and vanished up the stairs.

Inside the pub's top-floor flat, Amy looked at herself in the mirror and sighed. Her light blond hair was all over the place, her cheeks flushed from the heat of the kitchen and – God, she sniffed her blouse – she stank of goose-fat potatoes. She looked longingly at the little shower cubicle, but there was no time for that. No time for anything, really.

Unzipping the bag, she emptied the contents on to the bed. Two crumpled dresses fell out, tangled up with heels, a hairbrush and her make-up. The first dress was a black knee-length shift she had found in a charity shop, the second rust-coloured and covered in sequins, bought in the summer sales for an occasion just like this one. It wasn't particularly well-made – there were sequins already floating around the bottom of her bag like little lost pennies – but there was no doubt it was a knockout look-at-me dress. Considering her options, she wondered what image she wanted to project tonight. Sexy and irresistible? Or did she want sophisticated, a woman of the world, good wife material?

Back in the kitchen, she had mocked Nathan's suggestion, and two days earlier she would have had absolute conviction that Daniel Lyons, her boyfriend of little more than one year's standing, was more likely to fly to the moon than get down on bended knee. But that was before she had gone rummaging around his sock drawer and seen a duck-egg-blue gift box tucked away among the neat balls of fabric – a Tiffany gift box. It had been too tempting to ignore it, but before she'd had further opportunity to examine the size and shape of its

contents, Daniel had come back into the bedroom and she'd had to slam the drawer shut.

She hadn't been alone in his bedroom since, but it had sent her giddy with excitement and she had tried to read hidden meaning into every comment, every affectionate gesture he'd made since. 'Dress up,' he'd said about tonight's party. And she was certain that he'd been a little anxious about something, which for someone as poised and confident as Daniel was very unusual indeed.

With twenty minutes to get to the Tower, she held one dress up against herself and then the other. *What do you wear for a night that just might change your life for ever?* she thought, staring at her reflection in the mirror. For a split second she allowed herself to imagine him slipping a sparkling solitaire on her ring finger in the creamy moonlight. They'd take a picture of themselves with her camera phone and she'd post it on Facebook to show to all their friends. At some later, unspecified time, it would be shown to their children and be smiled at wistfully in their old age. It would be a forever photo – an image you'd remember and talk about for many years to come and one for which you wanted to look your very best.

'Screw it,' she whispered, quickly pulling on the sequinned dress and leaning into the mirror to tie up her hair. The dress was very short and tight and she did wonder if there'd be any sequins left by midnight, but sexy had to be better than looking like someone's mum, she thought, throwing the shift dress back on the bed.

She slipped on her heels and ran out of the pub, hearing a wolf-whistle from Nathan before she exited

on to the street, where a black cab pulled up almost immediately.

'Tower of London,' she breathed to the driver as she slammed the cab door. 'And don't go down City Road, it's always crazy at this time.'

Amy didn't really have any idea if City Road was mental or even if the cabbie would have gone that way, but she always tried to say something to imply she knew London inside out, otherwise the driver would hear her American accent and immediately think 'Tourist!' and add a zero to the price – a zero she definitely couldn't afford. She sank back into the seat and watched the little red numbers tick around on the meter, resisting the urge to open her bag and check the lining for stray twenty-pence pieces – after all, this was a cab ride she could barely afford.

For a brief moment, Amy allowed herself to think about what Nathan's premonition might mean. How becoming Mrs Amy Lyons would change her life forever, because the reality was that it would change everything. No more taking double shifts at the Forge to scrape together the rent for her tiny Finsbury Park studio; no more auditions, praying that someone would finally give her a job in a chorus line; no more stumbling from date to date hoping she wasn't making a complete idiot of herself; no more rooting around sock drawers searching for validation that someone actually loved her.

'Blimey, Tower's lit up like a Christmas tree,' said the cabbie, sliding his window back as they turned on to Lower Thames Street. Ahead of them there was a

queue of sleek cars and people spilling on to the street in black tie.

'Special night is it tonight, love?'

'I hope so,' she grinned, leaning forward and handing him the only twenty-pound note in her purse.

She left the cab and walked down the cobbled road towards the gatehouse. Wow, she thought, stopping and looking at the ancient building, artfully floodlit against the pitch-black sky. Her family and friends had all been surprised when she'd announced that she was leaving New York for London to take a job with Blink, a physical theatre performance group that had transferred from Broadway to the West End two years earlier.

No one close to her back home had ever left the United States – not even for a holiday. I mean, why go to see the Alps when they had amazing snowy peaks of their own? Why bother with the Loire valley when they could visit Napa for the price of an internal flight? Her dad particularly was of the mindset that if it hadn't happened in New York's Five Boroughs, it didn't happen. But Amy had always been fascinated by England, by London – its history, its culture, its majesty, the fact that kings and queens and generals and ladies in their huge skirts had walked across this very spot – so while she had been nervous about leaving her New York life behind her, now she wasn't sure if she ever wanted to go home.

She handed over her invitation and hurried inside – the wind was cutting right through the thin dress despite her coat and she didn't want any more sequins to get blown off.

'The FO, miss?' asked an old man in a dark uniform.

'I'm sorry?'

'The FO, you are here for the Foreign Office dinner?'

'Oh, yes, yes I am,' she stammered, feeling suddenly very self-conscious. Didn't she look like she should be going to the Foreign Office party? she thought, trying to pull the fabric of her dress a little further down her thighs. She glanced at the man again and could see that he was simply trying to help, make sure she didn't get lost. He gestured to her right.

The party was being held in the Pavilion in the moat area of the grounds. It was a spectacular space, the grey-white Tower walls rearing up behind it spotlit with purple neon. There were hundreds of people there already and she looked around feeling vulnerable and lost. She texted Daniel and went to look at the big table plans in front of her.

'Look at you,' said a voice as she felt a hand snake around her waist.

Turning round, she saw Daniel, handsome in a single-breasted dinner suit, standing out like a movie star in the more ordinary-looking crowd.

'You like?' she said, feeling suddenly happy and in the party spirit. Growing up, Amy had never been particularly confident of her own looks. Her hair had a tendency to frizz, especially in the humid New York summers, and a slight overbite gave her a look of Liv Tyler, but most of the time made her paranoid that she was just a bit goofy.

But standing next to Daniel Lyons made it impossible not to feel part of the beautiful crowd.

He leant in towards her ear. 'I want to put you over my shoulder and carry you home to bed, except my parents might not be too happy about it if I went missing in action.'

'Parents?' she stammered, moving a fraction away from him.

He looked at her with his bright blue eyes.

'I didn't know they were coming until today. And they're apparently on our table, but don't worry, I can do a bit of switcheroo with the place cards if we get there in time.'

'Maybe try putting us at opposite ends of the Pavilion.'

A slight frown creased the space between his brows.

'Come on, they're not that bad.'

It was her turn to feel piqued, remembering a particularly uncomfortable afternoon at the polo, in the middle of summer, when she had first met Vivienne and Stephen Lyons. Amy still wasn't sure what had upset her more. That Daniel had only introduced Amy to them as his 'friend', or the fact that Mr and Mrs Lyons hadn't thought she was sufficiently important to say more than two words to her for the rest of the day.

'How was your day?'

'Good. I had an audition.'

'Sweetheart, I'd forgotten. How did it go?'

'Well, I think. It's being choreographed by Eduardo Drummond, who is the hot new thing in modern dance, and I think it's going to go big and I got the feeling he really liked me . . .'

'Well, it certainly is a night for celebration, isn't it?' He

smiled, waving across the room to a friend who had caught his attention.

Amy's heart gave a little skip.

'Celebration? I haven't got the job yet . . .'

They were interrupted by a group of thirty-something men who Daniel appeared to know well, judging by all the back-slapping. It happened a lot whenever she was out with him. He seemed to know everybody. There were friends from school, from Cambridge, work friends, football friends, female friends – she liked those sort the least . . . He introduced them to her but they all carried on talking about people in common, deals they'd made, and what they were up to over the holidays, which seemed to involve shooting and skiing and going to parties. Although she and Daniel were from two very different worlds, they never ran out of things to say when they were alone together. But she was never very comfortable in social situations like this one; she never felt funny enough or smart enough to speak up. After all, it was better to say nothing than say something stupid.

She accepted a glass of champagne from a waiter and sipped it gratefully until they were herded into the ballroom for dinner.

They threaded between the circular tables, all formally laid with crisp linens and polished silver, huge floral displays at the centre – and there on table fifteen, already standing by their seats, were Daniel's parents.

'Daniel. Amy.' They smiled tightly as their son approached. As Vivienne Lyons gave Amy a swift air kiss,

she inhaled the older woman's expensive pomade and perfume, which she hoped overpowered her own eau de roast potatoes.

'How are you both? Amy, you're between Stephen and Nigel Carpenter.'

Within seconds, she found herself wedged between Daniel's father and a giant of a man dressed in full military regalia. As she sat down, the hemline of her dress shot up so that it barely covered the top of her thighs. Nigel Carpenter, 'an old friend of the family', looked down as Amy threw a napkin over her lap in case he saw her panties.

'Good evening, Amy,' said Stephen formally, touching her shoulder. 'I trust you are well?'

'Very well, thank you,' said Amy, wishing she was back at the Forge.

Everyone else on the table – three sixty-something couples and Nigel's wife Daphne – seemed to know each other.

'So what do you do, Amy?' asked Daphne. She was a sharp-featured lady with a sleek grey bob and was around half the size of her husband.

'I'm a dancer,' she said quickly.

'Anything I might have seen you in?' she replied with interest.

'Depends on where you go to the theatre,' said Amy lightly.

'We're patrons of the Royal Opera House. That's how we know Vivienne.' She smiled.

'I do more modern dance. Smaller theatres.'

'The Rambert?'

'No,' smiled Amy, fairly certain that the woman hadn't seen any of her body of work. Certainly not her most high-profile gig – an MTV video for Harlem rapper K Double Swagg.

'So what productions have you been in recently?'

'Amy's been injured most of the year,' explained Daniel, looking rather uncomfortable. To his friends, and the sort of twenty- and thirty-something revellers they had met in the foyer, he usually explained with a sense of pride that Amy was a dancer. She was not naïve – she knew that when his friends smiled and looked impressed, it was because the word 'dancer' was some sort of code for being good in bed, and as irritating as that was, at least Daniel always supported her ambitions.

'Oh dear.'

'But she had an audition today that went well, didn't you, Amy?' said Daniel, looking increasingly jumpy.

'And what was that for?' asked Vivienne Lyons.

A light was shining on the top of Amy's head and she was beginning to feel hot.

'It's a new show,' she explained, taking a sip of water. 'With original music and dance. It's about the birth of tango.'

'Tango?' said Stephen Lyons with an amused half-smile. 'That's rather racy, isn't it?'

She saw Daniel's mother flash her husband a warning look.

Amy willed herself to keep calm and not to buckle. She had to make a good impression – these people were

potentially *family* – and besides, the tango was one of her favourite dances and she felt honour-bound to defend it.

'Done properly, tango is elegant, it's beautiful, passionate,' she explained.

'Tango is about sex,' said Vivienne Lyons matter-of-factly. 'It originated in the slums of Argentina, Uruguay. It was music for the bordellos. Every aspect of it is underpinned by sexuality, eroticism. Leading, following.'

She paused and smiled, although the gesture didn't reach her eyes. 'Still, at least you must be on the mend if you're auditioning.'

Amy reached for the champagne this time, her good mood completely gone. Vivienne Lyons was such a snob. It was tempting to tell her exactly how she had broken the toe that had almost put an end to her career, let alone out of action for the last six months. If anything was *about sex*, it was that mini-break she'd had with Daniel back in June. The only time they'd got out of their four-poster bed was to go for a cycle down to the river, when she had fallen off her bike and crushed her foot with the wheel. She doubted that her boyfriend would volunteer those details at the dinner table.

The thought of it made her toe throb inside the confines of her Topshop shoe, but she was distracted by the arrival of the starter, which looked like a cactus sitting on a bone-china plate.

She picked up her knife and fork, careful to choose the smaller set on the outside of the arrangement – Daniel had shown her that on their second date. 'If in doubt, always work from the outside in,' he had said.

Which was all fine, but Amy had no idea where to start. At the same time, however, she knew Vivienne was watching her, and not wanting to seem inexperienced, she clamped the artichoke between fork and knife and attempted to slice off one of the sticky-up leaves. The ball-shaped vegetable immediately flipped over, clattering against the plate and knocking the small dish of what looked like nacho cheese dip on to the tablecloth.

'Shit,' said Amy, trying to retrieve the vegetable.

'I beg your pardon?' said Vivienne, her eyes wide.

'Slipped,' said Amy quickly, 'I said I slipped.'

Daniel leant forward to his own artichoke and calmly pulled off one of the outer leaves, dipped it into the sauce, then put it between his teeth, scraping off the goop. *Damn*, thought Amy, *that's how you do it.*

Flushing red, she set about copying Daniel, her eyes fixed on the plate, not daring to look up, wishing the ground would swallow her. She sat in silence through the rest of the meal, listening as the Lyonses made bland small talk, nodding in the right places, making sure she watched which item of cutlery everyone else was using before she even attempted to begin. By the time the dessert had been cleared away, she was quite tipsy on the champagne she had drunk to occupy herself and was looking forward to going home – even if someone had to carry her out on a stretcher.

'I think it's about time for a toast,' said Stephen Lyons, clearing his throat and turning his full attention towards Daniel. 'I am extremely pleased and proud to report that

our son has only scored himself a rather plum posting to Washington.'

A murmur of approval went round the table like a Mexican wave as Daniel raised his hand to object.

'Dad, please. It hasn't officially been announced yet.'

'Nonsense, a pal in Whitehall rang me this morning to congratulate me. To Daniel,' he said, raising his flute of champagne.

Amy shot a glance at her boyfriend. She knew that a promotion had been on the cards for months. She had shared his excitement, voiced her support and encouraged him, even though it had sometimes been with a heavy heart. She had always known that as a Foreign and Commonwealth Office employee on the fast track to the diplomatic corps an overseas posting wasn't just likely – it was inevitable. In fact before Daniel and Amy had met, he had just returned from a spell in Brussels, although as he had often pointed out, if he was sent back there again, it would only be like commuting from Liverpool to London.

'Washington,' laughed Amy nervously, deciding that this might be even more preferable to a European post. She reached for her coffee, but as her hand stretched across the table her fingers clipped a wine glass, knocking it over, the contents spilling across the tablecloth and into her lap.

For a moment, all was chaos, with Vivienne shouting for a waiter, Daniel jumping up to grab the glass and Stephen bending forward, dabbing at Amy with his napkin.

'Here, my dear, let me help,' he said. 'You must be soaked.'

'No, no, I'll be fine . . .' said Amy before she realised that the older man's hands were lingering. She felt his fingers brush across her bare leg and looked up in shock. Their eyes met for a split second.

'Sorry, I . . . I think I'd better go to the restroom,' she muttered.

'I think they're just about to start the speeches,' said Nigel, resting his hand on her knee for her to stay.

She nodded quickly and sat still as a middle-aged man came to the podium, eulogising for over twenty minutes about a superb year and the magic of London 2012, whilst Amy squirmed in her seat, the wine soaking the back of her thighs and dribbling towards her knickers.

As soon as he had stopped speaking and the applause faded away, she got up and fled.

Her heart was pounding. Had Daniel's father really stroked her thigh, or had she completely misread the situation? She had no idea, because she was definitely drunk and needed to get some fresh air.

'Amy, what's going on?'

She was relieved to see Daniel come out of the main hall.

'Are you okay?'

She nodded tightly, looking down at her dress – God bless the sequins – which had covered the worst of it.

'Wow, Washington,' she said finally.

'I know,' replied Daniel. He was trying not to smile but his happiness was written all over his face. 'I wanted

to tell you in private, but I happened to speak to Dad this afternoon . . . and besides, I didn't want to spoil Christmas.'

'No, really. It's great.'

'We should go and celebrate.'

'Not back in there, though. Not at that table,' she said quietly.

'You have to ignore them,' he said.

'They hate me.'

'They don't hate you. They're just a bit old-fashioned.'

'Old-fashioned? Daniel, they were just rude. Rude about what I do, rude about my ambitions . . .'

'I didn't know it was a tango.'

'Don't say *you* have a problem with it.'

'My mother went about it in the wrong way . . .'

'But you agree with her,' said Amy, trying to read between the lines.

'Come on, leave it, lighten up.'

'Lighten up! This is my career, Daniel. Perhaps you could try taking it seriously for once.'

'I do take it seriously. Very seriously. In fact you can show me your moves later,' he said, a smile pulling at his lips.

'You do agree with her,' she replied, flinching. 'You think it's slutty.'

'Amy, come on . . .'

'Admit it,' she said, feeling her hands shake.

'No, I don't think a tango show is slutty,' replied Daniel slowly. 'But you've got to admit it is pretty racy, and maybe . . .'

'Maybe what?'

He hesitated.

'Maybe you should think about whether you want to be seen performing in something like that.'

She shook her head in disbelief.

'Daniel, this is a good show. You know how long I've been out of the game. This is a great opportunity for me.'

'A great opportunity for people to look at you in a certain way,' said Daniel more sharply.

He rubbed his temples as if he had a headache.

'Look, ever since we've been together and I tell people what you do, I've got friends, family all wanting to come and see you in a production. But I'm not sure I fancy them watching you all dressed up in fishnets and some tarty leotard cut up to the wazoo, as much as I'd privately like to see you in full costume.'

'Tarty?' she said incredulously, suddenly imagining herself in black hose and lashings of red lipstick. It was a good job Daniel had never seen her in the K Double Swagg video.

'You know what I mean.'

He offered a placatory hand, but Amy felt stung.

'Well, it's a good job you're going to be in Washington then, where you don't have to see me looking tarty.'

'About that . . .'

She heard something in his voice. Apology, awkwardness, and something he'd said just moments earlier began to resonate.

'You didn't want to spoil Christmas,' she said softly,

remembering why he hadn't wanted to tell her about his promotion. 'How long is the posting for, Daniel?'

'Eighteen months.'

It was shorter than she'd thought – many diplomatic gigs were for two or three years or more.

'Well, that's not so bad,' she said, trying to calm herself. 'In fact it could be good: I could move back to New York, get something on Broadway, and it's just a short hop on the shuttle to Washington. I was so worried it was going to be somewhere like Africa or South East Asia, but at least I've got the right passport, huh?'

She gave a weak smile, willing him to speak, desperate to hear him insist that he couldn't possibly be away from her for so long, how they should get a little flat together on Capitol Hill, just the two of them, how he wouldn't even consider taking the stupid job unless she came with him. There were dance companies in Washington, weren't there? But he didn't say any of that. He just took a step away from her, looking uncomfortable.

'Listen, I don't want you to uproot yourself because of me. Not when you've got this brilliant opportunity here.'

She looked at him, her eyes meeting his intense blue ones.

'So now it's a brilliant opportunity . . .'

'I have never led you on, never made any promises,' he said quietly. 'You know this is my job, that I was always going to get posted overseas.'

'But there's no need to write our relationship off the second a plane ticket arrives in your in-tray.'

She waited for him to say something.

'Come on, we don't want it to end like this,' he said finally.

'The end . . .' she whispered, realising what was unfolding in front of her. She thought about the Tiffany gift box in his drawer, remembering that she had come here hoping, believing, he might actually propose. She laughed out loud at her own stupidity.

'I should leave,' she said with as much dignity as she could muster.

'Amy, stop. Let's discuss this . . .'

'Leave me alone,' she roared, shrugging him violently away from her.

She began to run, the heels of her shoes wobbling as they hit the carpet.

Outside, she inhaled the cold night air and closed her eyes, glad to be out of there, glad, for once, to be alone.

Hot tears prickled in the cavity behind her eyes but she blinked them away as fiercely as she could.

Shivering, she realised that her coat was still in the cloakroom.

She turned and walked back to the Pavilion, stopping in her tracks when she saw a familiar figure standing by the exit. It was a moment before she saw that it was not Daniel, but Stephen Lyons.

'Going without saying goodbye?' he asked, lighting up a cigarette and putting the packet back in the pocket of his dinner jacket.

Arrogant bastard, she thought to herself. Stephen Lyons was in his late fifties but he clearly thought he was a character out of *Mad Men*. She didn't like to admit to

herself that it wasn't too far from the truth. The lines of his jacket were sharp, his cold, hard eyes were the same icy shade of blue as his son's, his arrogance worn with the confidence of someone with millions in the bank who no longer needed to prove himself.

Behind her she could hear the voices and the laughter from the party. A band was playing now and she imagined those crusty old couples getting up to dance politely, arms held out straight so as not to touch each other too much.

'Goodbye, Mr Lyons,' she said, not even meeting his gaze.

'Stephen,' he replied casually, exhaling a line of smoke through his nostrils.

'Goodbye, Stephen,' she said, feeling goose bumps pop on her forearms.

'Do you need a car? Or money for a taxi?'

'I don't want your money,' said Amy. 'I never did,' she added more quietly as he stepped towards her.

'I know this must be hard for you,' said Stephen Lyons, his expression changing from mock concern to something more businesslike. 'But you have to be realistic. This is about Daniel's career, not your relationship.'

'Quite clearly the two are linked,' said Amy, hating the bitterness in her voice – but why hide it? They both knew that she had just been dumped in favour of a job.

Stephen tilted his head to one side – a gesture of sympathy, mixed with condescension.

'I'm sure Daniel cares for you,' he said. 'But you have to understand he is devoted to achieving his potential.

Always has been, ever since he was a little boy. Always put in that little bit extra to keep ahead of the pack.'

'And I'd get in the way of all that?'

Stephen pulled a face.

'Amy, Daniel's posting to Washington is just the start of it. *Entre nous*, there's talk of an ambassadorship for him within three or four years. Do you know how unusual it is for anyone to snap up a senior diplomatic post under thirty-five?'

He crushed his cigarette stub under his shoe and continued.

'Daniel wants to go all the way. We *know* he can go all the way. HM Ambassador to France, hell, even the US ambassadorship itself. And for that to happen, for him to do the job as well as it can be done, he needs the right partner by his side.'

'And you're suggesting that I wouldn't support him?'

'Not wouldn't,' said Stephen. '*Couldn't*. The wife of a senior ambassador is a very specific role. You need to understand etiquette, procedure, small talk, how to handle delicate situations. It's not for everybody. And not everyone can do it.'

'This is about the artichoke, isn't it?'

Stephen laughed, his eyes lingering on her body just a fraction too long.

'No, it's not about the artichoke.'

He reached into his pocket, pulled out a card.

'I should go back in,' he said finally. 'But perhaps we could meet again under more pleasant circumstances. I used to like dancers myself, back in the day. Old habits

die hard, as they say.' He said the word 'dancers' as though it was one step up from prostitutes.

'Screw you,' growled Amy, hot tears of humiliation threatening to fall.

'I'd say my son got off lightly. Can you imagine that sort of language at the embassy,' he said, and disappeared back into the Pavilion.