

# CHAPTER 1

Alex hitched up her strapless dress and frowned at the designer sink in front of her. It was a seemingly perfect slab of marble. Okay, so where's the tap? she thought. Clearly she wasn't alone in her inability to work it out, as she tried not to stare at the surprisingly supple girl in the hot pink number limboing under the hand dryer attempting to dry out her skirt. The last thing Alex needed tonight was also to look as though she'd wet herself; Emma would kill her. She decided to opt for e-coli instead and, leaving pink dress girl tutting to herself, she wrestled with the handleless door and escaped the bathroom with no knobs.

Alex was almost thirty years old and had attended enough industry award dinners to know the form. The PR Industry Awards had all the usual ingredients: egos, alcohol and cleavage – in that order. It was the regulation cavernous ballroom from a bygone era lit with blue up-lighters and with a local radio host doing his best to add some showbiz to an industry back-slapping exercise.

She nodded to the waiter to refill her glass as she sat back down to resume pretending to be on the edge of her seat over who would win Best Internal Communication Leaflet of the Year.

‘Congratulations!’ she said to the man sitting next to her, pointing to his Perspex runner-up trophy for Best Communicator of the Year.

‘Thanks,’ he grunted while shovelling down his passion fruit cheesecake.

Alex rolled her eyes at Emma, who was on fine form this evening. With immaculate blow-dried hair and carrying off a beautiful champagne satin dress, she was the perfect hostess. When Emma had been let down at the last minute by the global head of communications at Clinton Wahlberg, an investment bank, Alex had agreed to fill the empty seat at her table. The only downside was that Alex, a lawyer, knew nothing about PR, and it showed.

As the final award was announced to the strains of ‘Simply the Best’ everyone stood up, whooping and cheering, and Alex was able to escape the social imprisonment of the table plan.

She headed for the bar, leaving Emma to schmooze her clients. It was easy to shuffle to the front of the queue: everyone else knew everyone else and was deep in conversation. She surveyed the row of optics. Vodka? Bacardi? Wine? Or should she play it safe with a soft drink?

The bartender interrupted her deliberations. ‘What can I get you, miss?’

‘Erm, not sure.’ How difficult could it be to decide

what to have? She smiled at him as he pretended he had all the time in the world. 'A vodka and tonic, please. Er, no, a gin and tonic. Thanks.'

'You're sure about that?' he asked, holding the glass up under the optic and looking back at her before he pressed the glass against it.

'Absolutely,' she said.

She was squeezing her way through the crowd with her glass aloft when she was almost taken out by an impressive pair of breasts artfully displayed on a shelf-like structure attached to an otherwise petite woman.

'Whooooaaah!'

'I'm so sorry!' said the pneumatic-breasted woman as she grabbed on to Alex to avoid crashing to the floor. 'These heels are just ridiculous.'

Alex smiled. Fortunately her G&T had survived the collision. Then she saw him: tall, attractive in a slightly worn way, and with that familiar asymmetric smile and eyebrow combination... it was Rob, an early encounter from university.

Rob had been a permanent feature at the student union. A medic, he'd taken even longer than Alex to qualify (vets took the longest, followed by dentists, then doctors, then lawyers). Alex had always thought it strange that it took more study to care for animals than humans. Anyway, Rob certainly knew how to care for humans, especially the female variety. She'd spent three years almost getting off with him, but somehow it had never happened. Looking at his well-endowed companion she could see he'd certainly settled for the cliché. Perhaps her instincts had been

right all along: there were no hidden depths to his shallowness.

‘Rob! Hi!’ she said.

‘Hello, stranger. You look fantastic!’ He kissed her on each cheek and appraised her slender frame. ‘So you’ve met my wife?’ he said, gesturing to the top-heavy girl. ‘Annabelle, this is Alex. Alex, Annabelle. We were great friends at uni, weren’t we, Alex?’

‘Of course we were.’ She raised her eyebrows. ‘So how are you? How’s the world of medicine?’

‘It’s great. I’m a surgeon now at a cosmetic surgery business.’

‘Oh.’ Alex was surprised but realised that she probably shouldn’t be. ‘So the African AIDS work? Did that happen...’

‘Well, I did the whole qualification thing in London and realised while working in a burns unit that my true vocation was in plastic surgery. Then I met Annabelle and the rest, as they say...’

‘... is history!’ Annabelle giggled.

‘What about you? What are you up to?’ Rob asked.

‘I’m at MacArthur Warren in the City specialising in corporate law, for my sins.’

‘Well done you! Knew you had it in you. So are you on track for partnership?’ Rob knew from many a night of career planning that Alex had always aimed for fast-track partnership.

‘Ever hopeful. Could really do with another deal in the bag before the end of the financial year. They need to know I can win work as well as do it, so I’ve got my ear to the ground for opportunities. Apparently I need

to be more commercial and decisive. Anyway, it's why I keep turning up to events like these,' she said.

'Well, you certainly don't come for the food and the entertainment value, do you?' said Rob, scanning the room.

Annabelle, who Alex suspected had more impressive boobs than intellect, had already disappeared, and Rob and Alex sat down in a corner of the bar. He was carrying a bottle of red wine and kept topping up his glass. He nodded to Alex. 'Want some?'

'Don't mind if I do,' she said and drained her G&T so he could fill her tumbler with wine. It was that time of the evening.

'You really do look bloody fantastic. Did we ever?' He left the question hanging.

'No! We didn't! What are you like? I can't believe you can't remember,' she laughed.

'All a bit of a blur, those uni years. So many women, so little time. Actually in my case about six years. Anyway, I'm a changed man now I'm with my ideal woman. I met Annabelle two years ago. Never been happier. She was a patient of mine actually,' he whispered conspiratorially.

No shit, Sherlock, she thought.

'So, looking for a deal, are you?' he asked.

'Always, Rob. Why? Got one for me?' Alex asked.

'You know I might just have. Ever heard of the Beau Street Group? Specialists in BA and BR?'

'I'm not that up on the transport sector,' she said, racking her brain.

'It's not transport, you idiot! Breast augmentation

and breast reduction. My line of work. Between you and me, the finance director is a contact of mine. I bumped into Tom at a conference last week and apparently a major US player is showing them some interest. Looks like they want to expand into the UK market now us Brits aren't as squeamish as we used to be about the odd nip and tuck. He said something about getting advisers in place. Give him a call. I've got his business card somewhere.' Rob put his glass down, pulled out his wallet and extricated a card.

Alex looked at it and smiled. 'Thanks, Rob. I'll call him.'

'You owe me one.' He raised his glass.

'Still catching up on old times?' It was Annabelle again. She was carrying a sparkly jacket that looked a bit like the tin foil wraps they put round marathon runners. 'Come on, Rob, some of us have got jobs to go to in the morning. I need my beauty sleep. Sorry to drag him away, Alex.'

'Not at all. Be my guest. So what is it you do?' Alex couldn't imagine glamour models had to be up at too ungodly an hour of the morning.

'I'm an analyst on the Japanese desk at Bergelman Sykes. I have to be in before the Nikkei closes. Anyway, it was lovely to meet you, Alex. Good luck with the partnership.'

'Yeah, uh, thanks. You too,' Alex stammered.

'Bye, Alex. Give my best to Tom when you speak to him,' Rob said. He turned back as Annabelle walked on ahead of him. 'Told you she was the full package,' he mouthed.

Alex looked at the business card in her hand. Rob had always had the capacity to surprise and she felt rather ashamed about the judgement she'd automatically passed on Annabelle. She looked up again and smiled as she saw Emma striding towards her with a bottle of champagne and two glasses.

'Let's celebrate!'

'What are we celebrating?' asked Alex.

'All my guests have gone home, they're all happy and my dress has stayed up all night.'

'That's good enough for me.' Alex took a glass. 'I'm celebrating too. I bumped into Rob Sweeney. Remember him?'

'Of course. I invited him tonight. He was on my boss's table. We do the PR at his practice.'

'Well, thanks to Rob it looks like cosmetic surgery could be my route to partnership, power and money. He's tipped me off about a deal that might be going down at a cosmetic surgery business.' Alex raised her glass and giggled. 'What shall I get done first? Boobs, nose, lips?'

'Let's finish this bottle of champers and consider your options. We've got all night,' said Emma.

Alex scabbled about in the bottom of her black hole of a handbag. Somewhere amongst the lip glosses, Oyster card, mobile, perfume, keys, Blackberry, chewing gum and assorted receipts was her purse. She smiled at the cabbie, who was staring at her in his rear-view mirror.

'It's okay. It's in here somewhere.'

'Been here before, love. I've got to earn a living, you

know. What'm I supposed to do? Dump you on your own in your state at the mercy of whatever nutter's out there?'

'It's fine, really, my purse is definitely in here somewhere. Definitely. Shit!' She lurched off her seat onto the floor as the cab braked suddenly.

'I'm not a bleedin' charity, you know. If it's not the missing wallet it's puking City boys,' he continued.

'Please, it's in here. I promise,' she said from the floor of the taxi. 'Anyway, there's always the Chinese jar.'

'The what?'

'Don't worry, I've got a jar at home with stacks of cash in. All my loose change.'

He groaned.

She emptied her bag onto her lap and there it was. She waved it at the cab driver and he shook his head.

As she stuffed the detritus of her bag back she saw the card Rob had given her. 'Aha! My ticket to fame and fortune!' she remembered. Now was as good a time as any, wasn't it? She was supposed to be more commercial, more decisive. She grabbed her phone.

'Hello, this is Tom Duffy from the Beau Street Group; please leave a message after the tone,' the voicemail message monotoned.

Had she not had the last two glasses of champagne, she might have hung up then. Had she not had the first seven, she wouldn't have made the call in the first place.

Alex sat at her desk warming her hands on her

polystyrene coffee cup. She was feeling lousy but was doing a great job of hiding the fact. As always she was dressed immaculately; today in a navy pencil skirt and neat tailored jacket. She and Emma had had a blast last night, but she was good at hiding her hangovers under smart suits.

Alex had experienced an epiphany nine years ago when she and Emma had been backpacking in Indonesia. After seven months of living on five pounds a day, wearing the same old washed-out t-shirts and generally delaying life, she'd been sitting at a roadside cafe when the most amazing woman had walked past. She may in fact have been an unremarkable woman, but at that time to Alex she was the biggest wake up call of her life. The woman was wearing a Chanel suit, had a sharp bobbed haircut and was carrying a briefcase so shiny you could see Alex's gob-smacked face in it. But that wasn't what threw Alex. It was the woman's stride, her sense of purpose, her apparent efficiency and her ability to make Alex suddenly look at herself and see a washed-up hippy thirty years too late for the hippy trail. That afternoon she'd booked her return trip to London. She'd started her training as a solicitor six weeks later.

Alex's mobile rang. It was Elliott, her fiancé.

'Hi, babe, how are you?' he said.

'Hi. I'm feeling dire.'

'What time did you get in? I stayed up watching some documentary about the Stones but crashed about two.'

'No idea. It was a monster night. What are you up to today?'

‘Got a meeting at the record company this afternoon. Hoping they might let us record our own stuff instead of the sixties covers. We might make some cash then. Oh and then we’ve got a gig tonight in Acton at The Duck. You going to come and see us?’

Alex frowned. She’d hoped to have a few drinks after work with the guys from the office but it looked like she was going to be a groupie instead.

‘Of course. You know I’ll be there. Good luck at the record company.’

‘Thanks. See you later.’

Alex had met Elliott on an island in Indonesia. Alex, Emma and Elliott had been part of a gang of Brits and American students who’d all landed on the island at the same time. They had a chilled week sleeping and snorkelling by day and drinking, singing and playing dominoes by night. Alex loved the whole vibe. For the first time in her life she actually started to like Bob Marley.

Elliott had been just one of the guys. He spent most of the time strumming a battered guitar and listening to the others. But he had a wit that took her by surprise and Alex found him engaging. They spent hours playing Scrabble and despite the fact that she had a frightening competitive instinct and he had an ambivalence that both fascinated and frustrated her, he beat her every time.

When she and Emma left the island on the glorified canoe that the locals called the ferry, he was one of the few who came to wave them off. Three days later in the crash pad in Singapore she was sorting through her

rucksack when she found a note. It was short and to the point. He was intrigued by her and thought she was amazing. He'd scribbled his address and mobile number and said he'd leave it up to her if she wanted to contact him.

They came back to England as Alex and Elliott the couple, and rented a flat together while Alex did her training contract and he scraped a living as a musician. They would probably still have been renting that place if Alex hadn't bought the house where they now lived in Chiswick.

Alex jumped as the office phone rang this time.

'Alex Fisher, corporate department,' she recited.

'Ah Alex, good morning. This is Tom Duffy from the Beau Street Group.'

Oh my God, thought Alex. She tried to remember the contents of the message she'd left last night.

'Hello. Thanks so much for returning my call,' she said, composing herself.

'I must say I was very impressed that you took the trouble to call me at two thirty in the morning and from what you said your experience in the healthcare and beauty industries sounds very impressive,' he said.

What the hell had she said?

'Not at all. Obviously I was very keen to make contact with you when Rob Sweeny mentioned you to me,' Alex said.

'Well, you called me at opportune moment. We've been approached by the Equinox Practise in the US and they seem very serious about buying us. I need advisers in place as soon as possible and the one area I

don't have tied up is the legal side. I need to hire a law firm in the next week or so. I've heard of MacArthur Warren, of course, but would be interested in meeting some of your lawyers. I need people who are commercial and sensible. I can't be doing with ivory tower types who look like Harry Potter – I want real people to work with.'

'Tom, I'd love to put together a team to meet you. Look, I can promise you we're not boffins here. We're commercial lawyers who want to facilitate your deal, not put obstacles in your way. When can we come and see you?'

'Would next Tuesday at eleven suit?' Tom said.

'Of course,' said Alex without even glancing at her diary.

'Well, that's great. I look forward to seeing you then. I think everything you need to know about us is on our website, but if you need anything further just give me a call. Preferably during daylight hours!'

'Of course. Thanks.'

'Oh and Alex, I'm not sure that having your colours done qualifies you to work for us. Just focus on your legal skills,' said Tom.

'Er, yes, of course. See you Tuesday,' she replied.

What on earth was he talking about?

## CHAPTER 2

Alex grabbed her coffee and headed for the corporate department's weekly team meeting, where they discussed current deals and what they were doing to win new work for the department. As a senior associate Alex had to demonstrate that she was not just a clever technician who could do the work but someone who understood the business of being a lawyer in a big commercial firm. This meant she had to be able to negotiate fees, manage the lawyers on a deal and most importantly keep the deal flow coming so the department was busy and making money.

She walked into the room on a high. It was a large corner meeting room on the top floor of the firm's offices with panoramic views across the City. It was uber modern with glass tables and electric everything. There was even a button on the table you pressed to call for refreshments. Alex loved it up here. She always felt more glamorous somehow in the meeting rooms. This was more like the lawyers' offices in a movie. It

was the lawyer's equivalent of a stage, where they showed off in front of their clients while all the real work was done downstairs in airless rooms with views of the next door office block.

Truman Barry, the revered head of the department, was already there, presiding over his team.

'Good morning, Alex.' He nodded at her as she sat down.

'Morning, Truman. Am I the last one?'

'Just Dan to come,' said Truman as a lithe thirty-something man jogged into the room. Dan was an American who'd joined the department on secondment from New York three years ago. He'd become an anglophile and had ended up staying with them at the end of his secondment. Technically Alex's junior, he was about her age and a good ally.

'Okay, morning all. Let's start with new business. Margaret, what have you got for us?' said Truman, turning to the woman next to him.

Margaret Kemp was the first ever female partner in the team. Phenomenally bright, she'd thrown everything into her career. Alex respected her but was also petrified of her. She was one of those career women who'd broken through the glass ceiling and pulled the ladder up after her.

Alex surveyed the room as Margaret spoke about the upcoming department away day when the team would get together for 'bonding' and training. Theirs was one of the strongest teams in the firm. Ross, Alex's trainee, was next to Dan. He was twenty-two, fresh from law school and would spend the next two years

training as a solicitor. He shared an office with Alex and it was her job to supervise his work and educate him in the philosophy and politics of the corporate department. Ross already had the makings of a star. He was a quick learner, not afraid of hard work and tenacious. Alex liked him and already considered him an asset. She'd want him on the Beau Street deal if she won it. Who else? she thought as she scanned the room? Dan maybe?

'Alex?' said Truman, interrupting her thoughts. 'What have you been up to this week?'

She sat upright and instinctively smoothed her already poker straight hair.

'Well. I attended the PR Industry Awards last night and met a contact who's put me in touch with a cosmetic surgery business.'

'What are you getting done then?' asked Lisa, a fellow associate, to sniggers from the trainees and a frown from Margaret.

Alex smiled. 'Actually it's a major UK practice, the Beau Street Group. You may have heard of it, Lisa? They've been approached by a US business, the Equinox Practise, who are considering buying them. I'm meeting them next Tuesday to try to secure the deal for us.'

'That's excellent work, Alex. Exactly what we need. Well done. Who are you taking with you?' said Truman.

'Initially I thought I would take Dan with me, if that's okay with you, Dan?'

Margaret raised an eyebrow at this.

'That's cool. I'm just finishing up on the magazine

deal.’ Dan had been working on the acquisition of a popular gossip magazine by a European newspaper group.

‘And Ross of course,’ Alex continued.

‘Hmm. I think I should be there too, Alex. I think we need a partner there as this is a potential new client. Though obviously you’ll lead it,’ Truman said.

Alex nodded. She’d expected Truman would want to come and she was happy for him to lend his gravitas to their pitch.

‘Well, if you pull this one off the department could hit our year-end target, which is good news for all of us,’ Truman continued.

His comments resonated with everyone. Times were tougher but if they hit their target then they would all get bonuses.

As the meeting ended Alex caught up with Dan. ‘I’ll brief you on Monday about the deal. In the meantime check out the website and do some internal research. We need to know if anyone else in the firm has any experience in the cosmetic surgery field. We need to sound like we understand their sector. Speak to anyone you know who’s had work done. Wendy in Accounts had a boob job; find out where. Anything. We need as much info as we can get.’

‘Sure. And thanks, Alex, for putting me on the team,’ he said while he jotted down notes in an awkward left-handed pose.

‘No problem. Tom Duffy wants commercial people not stiffs, and your approach should suit him perfectly.’ Alex knew that Dan’s down-to-earth, businesslike

attitude would be ideal. She also thought his US background would work well for them when they were dealing with the US lawyers who'd be working for Equinox.

'Er, and Alex? Maybe you could speak to Wendy?' he pleaded.

'Yeah sure,' she laughed.

'Okay then. See you Monday.'

He waved before getting into the lift, and held her gaze as the doors closed.

After work Alex made her way to Elliott's gig in West London. The Duck and Drake was an unsophisticated pub with green leather chairs, a stone floor and a vast selection of real ales. Alex was self-conscious in her work suit. She knew no one here apart from the band. The rest of the audience had a high beard count and seemed oblivious to any developments in fashion or music since early Status Quo. She cradled her half of lager and gazed in what she hoped was a supportive way towards Elliott as he sang Bob Dylan's 'Just Like a Woman' for what seemed to her like the millionth time. She adored Elliott but she couldn't help thinking that he'd been born in the wrong era. He would have been so at home in the sixties.

She felt her phone vibrate in her pocket. It was a text from Lisa at work: In Bar Q. All here. Wine? Alex sighed. She'd much rather be with the rest of the gang but she knew Elliott appreciated her support. Her thoughts drifted towards their wedding in three months' time. Everything was pretty much booked and

organised, although her mother was still stressing about it. She phoned her at least once a day in a panic. The latest drama had been whether the colour of her outfit clashed with the wallpaper at the hotel.

Alex gazed at Elliott as he thanked the audience. She did wonder about their relationship sometimes. Elliott had been her boyfriend for such a long time and for years they'd complemented each other so well, but now she increasingly wondered if their differences were driving them apart. She'd gone from hippy chick to corporate chic. She wasn't sure Elliott was too keen on the transformation.

'Hiya, babe,' Elliott said as he joined her. His guitar was slung across his back and he was holding a pint of Guinness. 'What did you think?'

'Fabulous as always. Wembley arena doesn't know what it's missing!' She kissed him on the cheek and held his hand.

'I was talking to Barney before.' Barney was the drummer in Elliott's band. He was in his fifties, wiry and had a good line in leather waistcoats. 'He's off to Goa on a twelve-week tour in July. He's got some gigs booked. Andy and Rory are up for it too.' Elliott looked at her pleadingly.

Alex stared at him. She couldn't believe him. The wedding was booked for the end of July. Had he forgotten or was he hoping she could change the date? She dropped his hand.

'Elliott. We're getting married on the twenty-second of July.'

'I know, babe, of course I know.' He nervously

flicked his fringe from his eyes. 'But I thought maybe we could bring the wedding forward to the beginning of the month and then we could both go to Goa. Like a honeymoon?'

'What, for a romantic break with the rest of the band? Elliott, what planet are you on? Do you have any idea how long ago the church and the hotel were booked? Don't you understand that there's zero chance of either of them being free any other Saturday in the next twelve months? And you promised me you'd booked us a honeymoon. Don't tell me you haven't? Don't you understand how important this is to me?' She lowered her voice as she realised people were starting to look at them.

He stared back at her, confused and taken aback by her reaction. He raised his hands defensively, almost spilling his pint. 'Okay, okay. I just thought...'

'But that's just it, you didn't think. You haven't thought about the wedding since the day you proposed. Do you have any idea how much effort I've put into this?' Her voice softened as she registered his bewilderment. He really didn't get it. 'Look, you wrap up with the band and I'll see you at home. We can talk about this then.'

He nodded. 'Love you, babe,' he said, squeezing her hand.

She turned her back.

She walked out of the pub in tears. He was adorable and frustrating in equal measure but this time she was hurt and angry. She'd been planning her perfect wedding since she was a girl and to him it was like a

dinner date that could be rearranged on a whim. He had no idea how long she'd agonised over the font type for the invitations, never mind the venue, the dresses, the menu. She drew her jacket around her and hailed a cab as she felt her phone vibrating again. It wasn't Lisa this time; it was Dan: Have great weekend. Looking 4wd 2 Beau St job with u.

Alex didn't know what to say to Elliott when he returned home. She was already in bed so she pretended to be asleep. She heard him stumbling around in the kitchen. He'd obviously had a few drinks after she left him. It could wait until the morning.

She was up first the next day. She sneaked out of the house in her pyjamas, ski jacket and trainers and bought croissants, bread and coffee at the local deli. She reran the previous evening in her head while she set everything out on a tray and then took it upstairs to Elliott.

'What's this?' he croaked, rubbing his eyes and brushing his unruly blonde hair from his face.

'Breakfast. We need to talk.' She got under the covers.

'Before you say anything, I'm sorry about last night. I got carried away after talking to Barney. The Goa trip is off,' Elliott said, reaching for her.

Alex looked at him. He seemed sorry. 'Look, let's start the weekend all over again. I hate it when there's an atmosphere. I've had a great week at work. The wedding's twelve weeks away. Let's be nice to each other.' She cuddled up to him.

'I know. I'm sorry. I've got no idea what you've

been working on with the wedding but I'm sure it's taken loads of effort.'

'Why don't I talk you through it?' Alex said excitedly, sitting up. She was thrilled to be able to share everything with Elliott. He was finally taking an interest.

'Some other time, babe,' he said, grabbing a croissant from the tray as he got out of bed. 'I need to be at Rory's for rehearsal by ten. We've got that wedding gig tonight and we need to brush up on a couple of slushy numbers.'

Her face fell.

'And don't worry, the honeymoon is under control.' He kissed her on the forehead.

She mustered a smile, then pulled the covers up to her neck and sighed. She stared out of the French window of their bedroom, past the miniscule Juliet balcony, at a supermarket carrier bag that was being blown across their postage stamp of a back garden. Another Saturday to herself. She decided to call her mum.

Two hours later and Alex was on the train to Hertfordshire going through her wedding to-do list. Okay, just the table plan and canapés to do. How difficult could it be?

She saw her dad's blue Jaguar as soon as she walked out of the station. He was always on time. She felt a pang of affection as she looked at him reading his *Daily Telegraph* in his chain store v-neck. She tapped on the window.

'Hello, darling. What a lovely surprise. Your mother was thrilled when you rang this morning.' He beamed at her.

After the usual performance where he insisted on putting her bag on the piece of old carpet laid out to protect the boot – ‘Got to think of the resale value, Alex’ – they set off for home.

‘How’s Mum?’ she asked.

‘She’s good. She’s really enjoying her aromatherapy course. Keeps her busy. But I’m bloody sick of those damn burner things she’s got all over the house. It smells like a Moroccan souk.’

Her mum was waiting for her at the door in an unstructured floaty linen number.

‘Alex, darling! You’re as skinny as a bean pole. Are you eating? Is it stress?’

‘Mum, I’m fine. Please, I’ve just got here.’ Alex hugged her.

‘Well, I’ll feed you up. You work too hard. We can’t have you wasting away. Come and have some tea and cake.’

‘Ooh, I’d love a cup of tea. Normal tea, please, Mum. None of that fruity nonsense.’

‘Are you sure? I’ve got some lovely rosehip and chamomile.’

‘No thanks. Builder’s tea is good.’

They sat in the conservatory, which hadn’t changed a bit since Alex had left home. The same school photos were on the windowsill next to the same pot plants.

‘So darling, the marquee. I thought it would be wonderful if we had some aromatherapy burners. A soothing bergamot and patchouli mix would be nice, don’t you think? And Beryl says she can get them in bulk for me from the wholesaler.’

‘Er, great idea, Mum, but what about Elliott’s grandma? You know she has respiratory problems. I’m not sure she’ll be able to cope with them.’

‘Oh, no. I suppose not.’ Her mum looked crestfallen.

‘Maybe we could have a couple by the entrance where there’s plenty of ventilation?’ Alex conceded.

‘Ooh yes. That would be nice. Something welcoming. Ylang ylang perhaps. I’ll see what Beryl thinks.’

‘Great. Now what about the table plan? I’ve done mine and Elliott’s friends but I really need you to help with family and yours and Dad’s friends.’

‘Darling, it’s a minefield. You’re absolutely right, I must be in charge. Heaven knows what could happen. Imagine if Uncle Gerry ended up on Bridget-from-next-door’s table! Aunt Janet would never forgive us.’

‘Well, I was more concerned about Uncle Bill. Is there anyone left he hasn’t offended?’

‘Put him with the vicar and anyone who’s a bit deaf.’

‘And Victoria from the golf club?’

‘With any single men who are coming. She’ll hunt them out wherever they are so we might as well make it easy for her.’

‘I think Elliott has got some single cousins.’

‘Ah yes, Elliott. He’s going to have to sort his family, darling. I only know his parents and obviously they’ll be on the top table. Oh and you must find out what his mum is wearing. It’s getting quite urgent. I don’t know what I’ll do if we clash. Though Beryl says I have

priority as the mother of the bride so she'll just have to get something else.'

They spent ages writing and rewriting the table plan. Her mum was right: it was a minefield. It was like a complex family tree working out who'd fallen out with who, who'd shagged who, who'd been missed out of whose will, who had to be near the loo and who would take mortal offence if they were one metre further from the top table than their arch enemy. In the end it took them two bottles of elderflower wine and two packets of vegetable crisps to get it done.

'Darling, it's going to be worth all the effort. Who'd have thought it? My little girl marrying the man of her dreams.'

'That's not how it felt last night,' said Alex, and despite herself she told her mum all about Elliott and the trip to Goa and the unbooked honeymoon. Her mum looked more confused and upset than she had. She immediately wished she hadn't said anything.

'Oh darling, that's dreadful. You poor thing. You know what men are like, though. Take your father. He never remembers anyone's birthday, including mine. I had to buy my own present last year. But he is good in so many other ways.'

Alex tried to think of all the positive qualities that Elliott possessed.

'But you do love him, don't you?' her mother continued.

'Of course.'

'Well then, everything's going to be just fine. Come on, let's go and have some fish pie with organic carrots.'

That will fatten you up. Yes, comfort food, that's what you need.'

For once her mum was right. Tucked up in her old bedroom feeling absolutely stuffed Alex felt sure everything would be fine. She stared at a poster of a muscle-bound man cradling a tiny baby and thought of Elliott. It was just the pressure of work and the wedding. Everything would work out; she was sure of it.

## CHAPTER 3

Alex was excited to be back at work. She'd done her research with Dan and Ross and they'd discovered that the firm had done some litigation for a couple of other cosmetic surgery businesses defending claims of shoddy workmanship. They'd spent most of Monday morning picking the brains of the lawyers who'd worked for those clients. They had endless tales of boob jobs gone wrong, lumpy liposuction and botched nose jobs. Ross had ended up having the conversation with Wendy from Accounts, who'd regaled him with tales of the benefits of a teardrop implant and how her boyfriend loved her new look. They'd also put together a glossy document to leave with Tom Duffy that made them and MacArthur Warren sound like the best, cleverest, most experienced cosmetic surgery sector specialists and talented lawyers in the universe.

It was Tuesday morning now and they were ready.

'Good morning. Truman Barry, Alex Fisher, Ross Livingstone and Dan Furtado to see Tom Duffy,' barked Truman at the receptionist at the Beau Street Group.

‘Please take a seat. I’ll let Mr Duffy know you’re here.’

The four of them sat down in the plush waiting area. It was more like a country house hotel than a medical practice. Copies of *Horse and Hound* and *Plastic Surgery News* lay juxtaposed on the large upholstered ottoman.

Alex tried not to look at Ross and Dan. They’d all noticed the receptionist’s immobile waxen face and Dan and Ross were trying hard not to stare at the before and after pictures that hung in ornate frames on the walls. There was an undercurrent of hysteria. Only Truman seemed oblivious to the fascinating tableau before them. Alex’s team were on the verge of giggles and all the other people in the waiting area were there to have something enhanced, removed, tightened or tucked. The well-groomed forty-something woman next to her looked coquettishly at Dan over her copy of *Country Life*, clearly unembarrassed by the large dressing on what was presumably her now-perfect nose. Another woman browsed a bizarre catalogue containing pictures of what appeared to be feet. Perhaps she was having the foot narrowing surgery that Alex had read about that enabled women with wide feet to wear Jimmy Choos? Ross’s eyes were like saucers as he listened into the conversation another static-faced woman was having with her daughter about the boob job her father had bought her for her birthday. Alex noticed that the daughter had a rat-sized dog in her Louis Vuitton handbag that was glaring at Truman.

‘Mr Duffy is ready to see you,’ the receptionist said.

The four of them left the waiting area and followed her to a lift that took them to the management floor where Tom Duffy's office was situated at the end of a luxuriously carpeted corridor, decorated with more before and after pictures. It was a large wood-panelled room containing a traditional mahogany desk behind which he stood as they entered the room. Tom was in his fifties and had a stocky ex-rugby-player's physique and creased intelligent eyes.

'Good morning! You must be Alex, the night owl.' He smiled as he extended his hand towards Alex.

She introduced the rest of the team.

'Good to meet you. Call me Tom,' he said. He motioned towards a circular table in the corner of the room and then hurriedly removed the literature spread in a fanlike display on the table, advertising everything from Botox to penis enlargement.

'Mr Duffy, er, Tom, we're delighted to be given this opportunity to present to you today. Needless to say, we'd be delighted to represent the Beau Street Group,' Truman opened.

He proceeded to give his standard MacArthur Warren pitch. Alex had heard it so many times she could recite it in her sleep.

'... and most of all, what you get with us is a hundred and ten per cent commitment to you and your business,' Truman finished.

'Thank you, Truman,' Alex said. It was her turn now. 'Now Tom, what we thought might be useful would be for you to hear about our experience in your sector and what we think the issues might be for you

on the acquisition of your business. Our firm has acted for a number of other cosmetic surgery providers and we understand that you'll need to demonstrate a breadth of offering, which as we see from your literature is already quite impressive. The businesses that can only do breast augmentation aren't enough for the US buyer. They want buttock lifts, penis enlargements, labioplasty, ear lobe reshaping, mouth lifts.' Alex didn't dare look at Truman. 'They want to know you can follow US trends into the UK market. So we need to help you present your experience and expertise in a way that demonstrates your safe track record but that also deals honestly and commercially with any negative issues such as litigation you may have faced. On the back of the strength of your business and brand we'll help negotiate you the best deal we can get, and one that won't come back and bite you two years down the line.'

Alex continued to discuss the firm's strengths in tax, medical negligence, employment law and everything else under the sun she could think of that might be relevant to Tom. She was desperate to win the deal and hoped it wasn't too obvious.

'You're right about the US market, Alex,' Tom said. 'It's different to the UK but the gap is closing. Equinox want us to recreate their US practice in the UK. As I understand it, we need to produce a set of reports that show them everything we can do, how much profit we make and what legal and regulatory issues there are, and produce a business plan going forward. You guys would be responsible for the legal report, and from

what they're saying we'd need something fast. Maybe as quick as a month from now. Is that feasible?'

'If you let us into your offices with free access to what we need we'll work round the clock,' Alex replied. 'As you said, I'm a night owl.'

'I'm sure you want to know how we charge,' interjected Truman.

'Like a rhinoceros, no doubt, like all you lawyers,' Tom said to Alex.

She laughed politely.

'We'd be prepared to consider a fixed fee arrangement to secure the work on this transaction,' said Truman, taking Alex by surprise. Truman clearly needed this deal. Fixed fee deals were rarely offered, although many clients asked for them. Usually the firm charged an hourly rate. 'Although obviously if we got the deal away for you we'd be looking for completion uplift.' Ah, now she understood. Truman was gambling that the deal would be successful and MacArthur Warren would get an additional success fee.

Tom seemed to like Truman's proposal and they spent the next twenty minutes talking about the individuals on the MacArthur Warren team and the timetable of the transaction.

'Okay, guys. I think you've told me everything I need to know.' Tom stood up. 'I'll give you a call in the next twenty-four hours and let you know my decision. In the meantime, thank you for coming in.'

They said their goodbyes and the team of lawyers walked back through reception, leaving the building just as the rat-like dog spotted Truman, escaped from

the handbag and headed after them into the revolving door. As they got into the waiting black cab Alex looked back at the creature jumping up to see through the glass panel of the door, snarling at them, while its owner pushed the door, forcing the dog round and round and in and out of vision. A security guard was berating the woman angrily for bringing a pet into the clinic. It was a far cry from Alex's local GP's surgery.

'Alex, I have absolutely no idea what you were talking about back there but you'd obviously done your research and he seemed to like it,' Truman said. 'I have to say that if you pull this one off your partnership prospects are looking very strong.'

Ross, who was bouncing about in the cab's jump seat, looked at Alex with a new respect. Partnership at Alex's age was a major achievement.

'Thanks, Truman. Let's just hope we've done enough,' she said, trying to conceal her excitement.

An hour later Emma and Alex were having a late lunch at Bar Q, a riverside wine bar in the City equidistant between their offices. They were sitting outside in the spring sunshine near a patio heater trying to convince themselves it was tropical.

'Alex, that's so great. God, I hope the deal comes off for you. If it does you must remember it's all down to me. If you hadn't come to my PR do you'd never have got the tip-off from Rob.' Emma took a large slug of wine. 'It's so great having a long lunch, isn't it?' she continued.

'I know, this is fab.' Alex put her face up to the sun.

‘Don’t forget, you’re a potential client I’m wining and dining if anyone asks.’

‘Who’s going to ask? Chillax, as my baby brother always says.’

‘Anyway, if the deal does come off I’m going to bring you here and buy you dinner, champagne, whatever the lady wants. You’re right: I owe you. Which reminds me, that’s exactly what Rob said. Maybe I should invite him and that bizarre wife of his,’ said Alex.

‘Excellent,’ Emma said, scanning the menu. ‘I’ll make sure I order the lobster and the Krug then!’

‘Ha ha. Actually if the deal does come off maybe I could get you some discounted surgery.’

‘Thanks, Alex! Anyway, you know I’m perfect in every way!’

‘Seriously. Would you ever consider getting any work done?’ Alex asked.

‘Ooh, I don’t know. Still a bit young, I guess, but I know loads of girls back in the office who have Botox. Thin end of the wedge, I reckon. You start with a frozen brow and end up with tits like melons,’ said Emma.

‘Yeah, it’s like Botox is the gateway drug,’ Alex said.

‘What do we know, anyway? I reckon I’d think about Botox when I’m closer to forty. Maybe a facelift in my fifties. Who knows? By the time we’re that age it’ll probably be available on the NHS. What about you?’ asked Emma.

‘I’ve already had Botox,’ said Alex, watching Emma for a reaction.

‘What! You never told me. How, where, why!’

‘Not on my face; my armpits. And don’t you dare tell anyone.’

‘Why on earth?’

‘Oh, it was a tip from one of those bloody wedding planners. She told an apocryphal story about some girl sweating all over some designer wedding dress she was trying on and then having to buy it. She said it was becoming standard practice and I should consider it. I was in “buy” mode and fell for it. Some dentist friend of hers did it for me.’

‘Alex, you’re bonkers. She was probably on a kick-back from her dentist mate.’

‘I know. I can’t believe I fell for it. It does work, though. I have the most fragrant unwrinkled armpits in the City!’ Alex giggled. ‘But it really hurt.’

‘Would you do it again?’

‘No way. I’ll just buy deodorant. I’d probably get a lifetime supply for what it cost.’

‘So if Botox is the gateway drug what’s next for you, Ms Fisher?’ Emma asked.

‘No, that’s it. Really. I don’t want to look weird. You should’ve seen some of the people at the Beau Street Group. The receptionist was like a blow-up doll, for God’s sake. No, I intend to grow old gracefully but with beautiful armpits.’

‘While I’ll have a top lip like a sausage, cheekbones you can eat off, the forehead of a waxwork dummy and sweaty pits.’

‘They’ll call us Fresh and Freaky!’

The wine had kicked in and they giggled hysterically.

‘What did Elliott say about it? The Botox?’ Emma asked when they’d calmed down.

‘He doesn’t know. Frankly I don’t think he knows anything about the wedding. I’m not sure he even knows where the church is.’

‘Hey, that’s not good.’ Emma wrinkled her unBotoxed brow.

‘Tell me about it. Honestly, I’m not sure he even wants to get married. The only bit he’s shown the slightest bit of interest in is the set he and the band are playing at the reception.’

‘Well, you know Elliott. His strengths lie elsewhere. I’m sure it will be all right on the night,’ said Emma.

‘I really hope so. I’ve spent more time talking to the guys at work than I have speaking to him for the past few months.’

‘Look, take him out for dinner. Get him on his own and talk to him,’ said Emma.

‘Yeah, I know. I will. It’s just getting hold of him in the first place and then cutting the umbilical cord between him and the band. They’re much worse than any in-laws could ever be.’

‘Alex, you need to do this. Marriage is for life not just for Christmas. Well, unless you fancy a messy divorce where he gets half that house that you bought with your money.’

‘He gave me some money towards the deposit,’ Alex said.

‘Yeah right, about fifty pence. How’s his record deal progressing?’

‘Hey, he’s doing fine. He’s really hopeful they’re

going to put out an album of his own material and then he'll get some proper royalties.'

'Assuming anyone buys it.'

'Emma, stop it. I know you think he's a waster but this isn't helping,' Alex said.

'Okay, I'm sorry. But it's only because I'm worried about you. You know I think he's a sweetheart but he's not exactly Mr Reliable, is he? I just think you and he need to talk, pronto.'

'We will. I promise.'

An hour later Alex was back at her desk feeling drowsy. She rested her head on a thick file.

'You okay?' said Ross from his desk across the room.

'Yeah,' she mumbled. 'Lesson of the day: never have more than one drink at lunchtime if you intend on using your brain in the afternoon. It's a well-known fact that your brain turns to mush and work is two hundred per cent harder. Save it for days when you're internet shopping, not for when you're drafting complicated business sale contracts.'

'Right, of course. You are wise, Obi-Wan,' he said, pretending to write it down. 'Want me to have a stab at a first draft of it?'

'God, would you? You absolute star. Yes, yes, why not – it'll be good training. Okay, let me talk you through the deal.'

Alex was deep in conversation with Ross, explaining the clauses that had to go into the contract, when the office phone rang. It was Truman Barry. He wanted to speak to her in his office immediately.

'Of course, Truman. I'm on my way.' She hung up.

‘Sorry, Ross. Got to go. Can you make a start on that for me?’

‘Not a problem. Good luck.’

It wasn’t often she was summoned to Truman’s office. It wasn’t often anyone was summoned to Truman’s office, for that matter. Truman kept a low profile but his presence was somehow pervasive. It was very much his team and his department and although he wasn’t one for fireside chats he was protective of his people. Being summoned to his office meant one of two things: either you were in big trouble or you’d done something very good.

Shit, shit, shit! Why did I have that third glass at lunchtime? Alex thought as she strode down the corridor, smoothing her skirt and her hair as she went. What could this be about? she wondered. Shit, had he heard about the completion party for the TV deal? She went cold at the thought of it.

She reached the door of his office, knocked and walked in.

‘Ah Alex, great, come in. Well, I have some excellent news,’ he said, beaming at her.

She immediately relaxed and smiled back at him.

‘Tom Duffy has already called. We’ve got the job. And for a sensible fee too. He wants you there tomorrow.’

‘Gosh, that’s fantastic news.’ Alex managed to stop herself punching the air and high-fiving her boss.

‘Well done, Alex. Really. Excellent work.’

‘Thank you, Truman.’

‘He’s expecting you and your team at nine a.m. sharp.’

‘We’ll be there.’

Truman’s phone rang and he was already talking to someone else. He nodded at her as she reversed out of his office.

As soon as she’d run back to her office she reached for her phone and called Dan. ‘Get here now! We’ve got the deal.’

‘Wow, that’s great,’ said Ross, turning round on his swivel chair to face her. His enthusiasm was written all over his face. This would be the first deal he’d worked on from start to finish.

‘I know, isn’t it?’

She smiled as she heard Dan’s heavy footsteps pounding down the corridor towards her door. He burst into the room, a pen behind his ear, his shirtsleeves unbuttoned and rolled up to his elbows.

‘Hey, look at you, Miss Rainmaker. Good job.’ He smiled at her and shook her hand enthusiastically with both of his.

Dan was tall and wiry with thick dark hair and beautiful American teeth. When he smiled it was like a toothpaste ad. Emma always said he had the ‘ring of confidence’. But he wasn’t in your face, which was why Alex liked him. He was generally quiet and kept his own counsel at team meetings, letting others show off and, often, take the glory for his own work.

‘Well, we’ve got the rest of today to clear our desks because we start in the morning,’ Alex said. ‘And guys, we need to suspend our judgement on cosmetic surgery. We don’t want to lose this job because we all wet ourselves every time we see the Beau Street receptionist.’

It's a serious business making serious money and there's clearly a market for what it does.'

'No big deal for me. I know plenty of girls who had nose jobs in high school. It's fairly normal in the States. It's just the more exotic stuff that freaks me out,' said Dan.

'Well, it all freaks me out really. I've got a needle phobia,' Ross said.

'No way!' said Alex.

'Seriously, I have. Embarrassing, I know. The thought of that Botox thing that celebrities have makes me feel physically sick.'

'Remind us to keep you away from the treatment rooms then,' Dan said.