

# CHAPTER 1

Meredith slowly opened her eyes and looked around. Her eyelids felt heavy and sore, her mouth was bone dry and her throat felt so swollen that she was terrified she might choke.

‘Water,’ she croaked to a blurred image of a nurse in a white coat.

‘Welcome back,’ said the nurse, leaning over to reach a glass of water. She gently lifted Meredith’s head and helped her take a few sips. ‘I’m Audrey from the nursing team. How are you feeling?’

‘Like someone’s run over my head,’ Meredith groaned, reaching up to feel her heavily bandaged face. But the strapping around her swollen breasts stopped her from lifting up her arm properly.

‘Ouch, shit! And that hurts!’ said Meredith, quickly dropping her arm back down.

‘That’s normal, don’t worry. Try not to lift your arms up,’ said the nurse. ‘I’ll go and get you something for the pain.’

‘Better make it a large one,’ Meredith muttered as

the nurse left the room.

She laid her head back down on the pillow and closed her eyes. Twenty-eight-year-old Meredith had been born with a big nose and small breasts, but thanks to a certain Doctor Cassidy at the Beau Street Group, they were now the other way round and a new chapter in her life was about to begin. She was in the middle of three months' leave before starting a new job in London with prestigious investment bank Clinton Wahlberg, giving her plenty of time to complete her well-planned transformation.

Once the painkillers had kicked in, Meredith decided it was time to look in the mirror. Images of her previously prominent nose and non-existent chest danced before her eyes, like over-exposed 'before' photos from some cheap cosmetic surgery website, and a mixture of fear and excitement washed over her as she tried to imagine what might now replace them. She lifted herself gingerly onto the side of the bed and shuffled like an old lady into the bathroom. She'd been warned that she'd look pretty bruised and swollen, but even so, the sight that greeted her in the mirror took her breath away. Her half-shut eyes were puffy and bloodshot and the concentric circles of bruising around her eyes were a scary-looking rainbow of red, deep purple and blue. She had a huge plaster-cast over her nose, held tightly in place by sticky tramlines of white bandage across both cheeks that made the sides of her face look like a trussed-up Sunday roast. Her black curly hair was matted and sticky with what she guessed was a mixture of blood and sweat. She carefully undid her pyjama top and peered in the mirror at the

sight underneath, trying to get a sense of her new shape. Her implants were hidden by the mass of gauze dressings spread liberally around her swollen chest, making it hard to tell exactly how big they were. Meredith sighed heavily and did the buttons back up on her top. She would just have to be patient; it would be several days yet before she could begin to get a proper idea of her new look.

There was a knock on the bedroom door and a friendly-looking lady in a blue frock coat came in holding a tray of food.

‘Meredith Romaine?’

‘Yes, that’s right,’ said Meredith, poking her head out of the bathroom.

The lady had mad wiry hair and big glasses that she tried to push back up her nose as she balanced the tray on one hand. She peered at the piece of paper on the tray.

‘Your dinner for the evening – pork loin with cabbage,’ she said, placing the tray on the wheelie table at the end of Meredith’s bed. ‘I’ll be round again in a jiffy with tea and coffee.’

‘Thanks,’ said Meredith, looking suspiciously at the plate of anaemic-looking food swimming in an oily sauce. She pushed the wheelie table halfway down her bed and carefully lowered her tall frame back onto the bed, propping herself up with several pillows. She picked up her knife and fork, but the simple act of trying to cut up a piece of rubbery pork loin was agony. Every inch of her ribcage ached and leaning over the plate was making her head pound like mad. When she did finally get a mouthful, the pork tasted like a damp trainer insole. She

spat it back onto the plate in disgust, reached into the drawer in her bedside table for her mobile phone and dialled her parents' number.

'Hi, Mum, it's me. I'm back in my room now, so thought I'd just give you a quick ring.'

'Darling, how are you? How did it go?'

'Fine, Mum, everything went fine. It's a bit bloody hard to tell, though, to be honest. I look like I've just done ten rounds with Muhammad Ali.' Meredith gingerly touched her face and winced.

'Oh gosh, don't say that. Your father can't bear the idea of you all battered and bruised.'

'Well, tell him it was his fault for giving me that nose in the first place,' said Meredith, smiling ruefully.

Meredith's mother was half-English, half-Iranian and was tall and elegant with naturally long, slim limbs, straight black hair and pale, dewy skin. Her father was French and a giant of a man with thick, stubby fingers, huge shoulders, dark curly hair and strong Gallic features. As a result, Meredith was tall, lean and rather exotic looking with ebony hair, smooth honey-toned skin, vivid green eyes and, until now, a large Romanesque nose that she had hated since childhood.

'We should be there with you,' said her mother, still clucking with worry.

'Honestly, Mum, I'll be fine. I'm just going to rest and watch TV tonight. My apartment is all sorted and I've got plenty of time to recover before I start work. Much better that I had the surgery here in London, you know that. It's not far from the office and all my check-ups will be here.'

‘Well, if you need me to come, you just have to ask. I’ll be on the next Eurostar.’

Meredith’s father was a successful artist and her parents had met in London, where her mother had been working as an art importer. That was where they had settled, until the pull of her father’s roots finally became too strong. Four years ago, the family had moved back to Paris, so that her father could ‘paint where he belonged’. Although Meredith had loved living and working in Paris, it had never really felt like home, and when she got a job offer with Clinton Wahlberg back in London, she’d jumped at the chance.

‘I know that,’ said Meredith gently, ‘but I do need to stand on my own two feet, you know. I couldn’t live with you for ever and this job’s such a fantastic opportunity for me.’

‘I know it is, darling, but I still can’t help worrying about you. How are you getting home?’

‘I’m going to ring Daisy in a minute and see if she can come and get me.’

Daisy Roberts had been Meredith’s best friend since childhood. Daisy’s father had been a sculptor working with the same art gallery as Meredith’s dad. Unlike Meredith, who’d abandoned the ‘lovey’ art world for a real job at the first possible opportunity by taking a business studies degree and joining an investment bank, Daisy had clung to her childhood dream of becoming a successful artist and now owned a small gallery in Pimlico.

Meredith finished the call with her mother and rang Daisy.

‘Meredith! Oh my God, how are you, has it all

happened?’

‘Yes, it has, all done. But you have to come and rescue me from this hell. I’m bandaged up like the bloody invisible man, the food’s awful and I feel like shit.’

‘When are you allowed home?’

‘Tomorrow. Can you come and pick me up? I don’t want to stay here a moment longer than I have to.’

‘I’m working at the gallery tomorrow.’

‘Can’t you take the day off?’ said Meredith. ‘I thought you said things were really quiet?’

‘I sold something yesterday, as it happens,’ said Daisy.

‘Wow, hold the front page. I can see the headline now, *Woman Running Shop Makes Sale.*’ Meredith cut short a laugh when she realised it hurt too much.

‘Not funny,’ said Daisy. ‘And hardly likely to get me rushing over to mop your fevered brow.’

‘Swollen and blotchy brow, more like. Sorry, I didn’t mean it. That’s great news. But will you come, please? I can’t face getting in a taxi – far too humiliating.’

‘Okay, okay,’ said Daisy. ‘Finn can manage on his own for a bit, I guess. I’ll need to be back by lunchtime, though.’

Finn was Daisy’s first ever assistant, having joined her straight out of the local art college. He was full of creative ideas and passionate about the gallery but, as Meredith had happily pointed out to Daisy as soon as she’d met him, about as useful as a pair of cardboard wellies. The gallery was struggling to make any money and what Daisy needed was someone with business

savvy, someone who could sell, not another arty type like her.

‘Yeah, yeah, no problem. That’ll be fine. Thank you, life-saver. Look, park right outside, will you, and just text me when you’re there. I’ll come straight down,’ said Meredith.

Having hung up, she lay back on the bed, exhausted by the effort it had taken her just to make two phone calls and thought about the weeks ahead. A new look and a new job; she couldn’t decide which she was most excited about. But her excitement soon drifted away and was replaced by nagging pain and a fitful night’s sleep.

The next morning, Meredith arrived in reception wearing a navy felt hat pulled down over her eyes and a cream silk scarf wrapped around her face, in a desperate attempt to add some semblance of style to her otherwise dreadful appearance. Daisy was standing in reception talking to the elderly security guard who’d come out of his small room next to the entrance.

‘You can’t park there,’ he was saying as Meredith approached and he pointed through the revolving glass doors at Daisy’s dark-green Mini parked on very brightly painted yellow lines.

‘I’ll be gone in less than five minutes,’ said Daisy, running her fingers through her cropped blonde hair. She was wearing her usual eclectic mix of vividly coloured clothes that looked like they’d come from the local jumble sale, which, much to Meredith’s amusement, clashed beautifully with the muted tones of the Beau Street reception.

‘Heard it all before,’ said the security guard, shaking

his head at Daisy. ‘Have you any idea how many people get picked up from here every day, and if they all parked on the double yellow lines then where would we be?’

‘We’d be somewhere that took good care of its patients,’ Meredith answered from underneath her scarf. Daisy and the security guard both turned to look at her. Meredith saw the fleeting look of shock on Daisy’s face, which she quickly reset into a wide smile.

‘Look, here she is now,’ said Daisy to the security guard and gently grabbed Meredith’s arm. ‘Come on. Let’s go, before we get towed away.’

‘You’re lucky it’s not raining yet. Look at that sky,’ said the security guard.

Meredith and Daisy looked outside. The sky did look ominously dark.

‘I think a bit of rain is the least of my worries,’ said Meredith.

‘You don’t want to be getting that plaster on your face wet now, do you?’ said the security guard, his wizened face creasing into a cheeky grin.

Meredith glared at him.

‘Don’t worry. We’re prepared for every eventuality,’ said Daisy, waving her yellow polka-dot umbrella high in the air and guiding Meredith through the revolving doors. ‘Bye now!’

They got into Daisy’s car and quickly drove away towards Meredith’s flat.

‘So let’s have a proper look at you,’ said Daisy as she drove.

Meredith took off her hat and unwound the scarf around her face.

Daisy glanced sideways at her and gasped. ‘Wow, that’s some bruising.’

‘I know. I can’t believe how terrible I look. I so hope it will be all worth it,’ said Meredith, in a shaky voice, wrapping her scarf back around her face. She looked out of the car window and bit her lip as she watched the smart Georgian houses on the roads around Harley Street, with their white stucco fronts and shiny, black railings, give way to the green, open spaces of Regent’s Park. After a few moments, she took a deep breath and forced herself to smile at her friend. ‘They did say that this bit was always going to be the worst,’ she said, trying to sound chirpier than she felt.

‘So did the surgery go okay?’ Daisy asked.

‘Yes, I think so. Doctor Cassidy seemed happy anyway. I went for the smaller implants in the end, so I should be a full C-cup when all the swelling finally goes down.’

The size of Meredith’s implants had been the subject of much debate between them over the last few weeks.

‘I’m sure that was the right decision,’ said Daisy. ‘Nice and natural looking.’

‘God, let’s hope so. I don’t want to go through all this again,’ said Meredith.

Ten minutes later they arrived outside the mansion block where Meredith lived. She had recently moved into an enormous open-plan apartment on the top floor with panoramic views of Primrose Hill. It was evidence of Meredith’s success during her time in Paris. Fluency in both French and English, combined with spending most of her waking hours in the office, had paid serious

dividends.

‘I’ll help you up with your stuff,’ said Daisy.

‘Thanks. I’m not supposed to lift my arms up yet, which makes carrying things a bit tricky,’ said Meredith.

They went into the building and up in the lift to the top floor. Meredith knelt down and carefully took her keys out of her handbag. She tried to lift the key up to the shoulder height lock, but as she did the dressings under her arm yanked her skin upward, making her cry out in pain.

‘Let me do it,’ said Daisy, taking the key from her and opening the door.

‘God, I hate being so useless!’ said Meredith, stomping into her apartment.

Daisy grinned. ‘I’d have thought you’d be used to it by now.’

‘Ha ha.’ Meredith slumped down onto a vast, cream, L-shaped sofa.

‘Wow, this place looks amazing,’ said Daisy. The apartment had been an empty shell the last time she had seen it, but the huge expanse of luxury living space was filled with beautifully arranged cream furniture, punctuated by the occasional splash of colour, and the polished dark-wood floor gleamed against a totally impractical, deep-pile cream rug that looked like it had never been walked on.

‘Thanks. I had an interior designer that the agents recommended pick it all out for me. She had beautiful taste, much better than mine,’ said Meredith, laughing.

The apartment was costing her a fortune, much more than she’d been paying in France, but she was determined

to get something back for her years of hard work. And Clinton Wahlberg was a great opportunity for her – hopefully one that would pay off.

‘Are you all unpacked?’ Daisy asked.

‘Yes, completely. I wanted to make sure I was totally sorted before I went in for the surgery. Nothing else for me to do now but lie around and recover.’

‘You’re so organised! How long until you start the big new job?’

‘Not until the end of next month, so I should be fine by then. Plenty of time to get some serious shopping in as well; make sure I make the most of my new assets,’ said Meredith, gently patting her chest.

‘Meredith, you work in a bank, not the bloody Moulin Rouge! Plus you have more clothes than most department stores; you can’t possibly need any more.’

‘Ah, but lots of them won’t fit me any more, will they? I’m bound to need a few new things.’

Daisy laughed. ‘Any excuse. Right, is there anything I can do before I go? Make you something to eat maybe?’

Meredith shook her head. ‘Thanks, but I’ll be fine. To be honest, I’m just looking forward to some time on my own.’

‘Well, if you’re sure. But if you need anything, you just ring me, okay, and I’ll be straight over,’ said Daisy. She leant down to give Meredith a hug.

‘No, don’t do that!’ said Meredith, sliding away to avoid any painful contact.

‘Sorry, didn’t think.’ Daisy sat on the sofa and put her arm around Meredith instead. ‘You take care, okay?’

Meredith nodded. ‘I’m not doing anything for the

next week, except recuperating.’

‘Good. And it’s great to finally have you back in London, by the way,’ said Daisy, rubbing her hands together. ‘We’re going to have some serious fun. I see cocktails, I see dancing, I see men – well, for you anyway. I’m still taken.’ She winked mischievously at Meredith.

‘It’s great to be back, really great actually,’ said Meredith, smiling fondly at her friend’s enthusiasm. ‘When the headhunters first rang me about the job, I knew straight away that I wanted it. I didn’t tell them that, of course. I told them it would take a big offer to persuade me to move back to London, and luckily that’s what they got me! I can’t wait to start now.’

‘Well, I’m expecting big things,’ said Daisy. ‘And plenty of new clients for my gallery. Is that clear?’

Meredith grinned. ‘You’d better get some decent artists in then.’

‘If you weren’t such an invalid...’ said Daisy, raising her fists in mock anger.

‘Joking, joking,’ said Meredith, starting to hold up her hands. ‘Ouch! Look, stop making me laugh and go sell some pictures, will you.’

Once Daisy had left, Meredith walked slowly into the bedroom, lay down on her king-size bed and within a few moments had drifted off to sleep. She woke up a few hours later feeling dreadful. Her arm had gone numb from where she’d been sleeping on it and the painkillers she’d taken had worn off, leaving what seemed like every part of her body in pain. She got up and went over to her bag in which she’d put her aftercare notes. The

nurse had tried to talk her through them, but she'd been so desperate to leave that she hadn't been listening properly. What she really wanted to do was have a bath, but it was pretty obvious from her mountain of bandaging that wasn't going to be possible. She skimmed through the notes. Beau Street held a walk-in clinic every morning for patients where they could get advice about any aspect of their recovery. Not a bad service, thought Meredith, if you don't mind wandering around in broad daylight looking like something from a kid's game of doctors and nurses that went horribly wrong.

She went into the kitchen and heated up some chicken soup, which made her feel like a proper invalid. As she sat on the bar stool at the end of the large island covered in grey granite, the immaculate modern kitchen with its handle-less doors and stainless steel appliances suddenly felt rather sterile and lonely. She picked up her soup and moved into the sitting room, tucking herself into the corner of the L-shaped sofa and flicking on the TV to break the silence. It was going to be a long week.

Two days later, Meredith was still feeling awful. She'd taken as many painkillers as she was allowed but her head was pounding and her bandages were itching like mad. She rang Daisy.

'Hey, babe, how are you doing?' Daisy asked cheerfully.

'Not great actually,' said Meredith. 'Really struggling with the pain across my chest and I've got a blinding headache that I can't seem to shift. I'm also finding it pretty hard to sleep.'

'Do you want me to come over?' Daisy sounded

concerned.

‘No, it’s okay. I don’t think there’s much you can do. I just wanted to hear a friendly voice, that’s all, and I can’t ring my mum – she’ll just panic that she’s too far away,’ said Meredith. Her voice broke as she spoke and a few tears slid down her cheeks. She wiped them away and took a deep breath.

‘Paris isn’t that far away,’ said Daisy.

‘I know. I think I just need a decent night’s sleep and to stop feeling sorry for myself,’ said Meredith.

‘You’re bound to feel pretty rough. What did the doctor say you should do?’

‘I’ve got some notes, but mainly it just says to come in and see them if I’m worried. And I can’t face doing that yet. This is probably just how everyone feels.’

‘Why don’t you have a look online?’ Daisy suggested. ‘There’ll be loads of chat forums and stuff that you can read from people who’ve done the same thing. They might give you some good tips to help you sleep a bit better.’

‘Maybe,’ said Meredith, not convinced. Online chat rooms weren’t really her thing – far too much vacuous nonsense being spouted by people with no real friends, in her view.

But later on that evening, when she was still pacing her bedroom in despair at how bad she felt, it suddenly didn’t seem like such a silly idea. Studiously avoiding all the ‘after’ photos – she had no desire to stare at other people’s scars – Meredith began searching around online. She was overwhelmed with sites offering advice and tips on recovering from cosmetic surgery, but as she clicked around

one advert caught her eye. *Chat with a doctor online now*, the advert offered. If she was going to take advice from anyone then a doctor seemed like a better option than some other random patient. She clicked on the advert. It took her to the website of the Equinox Practise, a cosmetic surgery business based in Chicago that offered aftercare advice online. Meredith had a look at the options. Equinox offered a platinum aftercare plan that provided twenty-four-hour access to a doctor online. It was outrageously expensive and included so many disclaimers that Meredith nearly gave up. But the thought of being able to chat to a doctor now, right this minute, and without leaving her flat was just too tempting.

She put in her credit card details, grimacing at the total that presented itself, clicked *I Accept* on the outrageous terms and conditions that gave her no rights whatsoever and then waited for an email to arrive with her login details. Two minutes later, the email arrived in her inbox. She wrote down the details and then logged on to Equinox's website. A screen popped up in the corner of the welcome page: *Experienced surgeon Ryan Miller is online and available to chat to you.*

Meredith clicked on the message and a dialogue box opened up on her computer screen.

*Hey there. This is Ryan Miller. How can I help you?*

An hour later, Meredith was feeling much more cheerful. Following Ryan's instructions, she was back in bed propped up by an elaborate construction of pillows supporting her arms and neck. She'd also made herself several cold compresses using flannels dipped in iced water and was rotating them around her forehead, neck

and chest. The pounding was beginning to subside, and although she was still in plenty of pain she felt much more in control. What a great service!

The next morning, she woke up feeling a little better. It had been rather weird trying to sleep with so many pillows, but she'd eventually drifted off and had slept for six straight hours – the most since she'd got home. Ryan had asked that she let him know how she was. He'd told her that he wasn't back online until late afternoon, so rather than deal with one of the other doctors in the team, Meredith decided to wait. She made herself breakfast of wholemeal toast with honey and a large glass of water – Ryan had also recommended small, easy-to-digest meals and plenty of fluids – and settled down for a day of reading glossy magazines and working her way through the TV box sets she'd stocked up on.

One minute after Ryan had said he would be back on the 'desk', as he called it, Meredith logged on to the Equinox site. The corner of the welcome page showed that Ryan was online but that he was busy chatting with another patient. Meredith registered to talk to him and was told she was third in line. She wandered impatiently around her flat, stopping every few minutes to check her computer, until a dialogue box popped up on her screen. Ryan was free. She jumped back onto her chair and smiled as she saw Ryan's message pop up.

*Hi, Meredith. How are you feeling today?*

Meredith and Ryan chatted for ten minutes, and like the day before, he told her when he would be next online.

Over the next week, Meredith logged on to speak to Ryan every day. They talked about her recovery, but also about her new job, why she'd had the surgery done, what the weather was like – all sorts of stuff. Ryan turned out to be great 'virtual' company, and before Meredith knew what was happening, talking to him became a welcome part of her daily routine. He reassured her that she was recovering normally and, as they talked about what she would look like once the bandages were off, she felt an increasing sense of excitement and confidence that the more feminine look she'd been longing for was just around the corner.

## CHAPTER 2

Three weeks after her surgery, Meredith was out shopping. As she perused the rails of her favourite Bond Street boutique, she caught sight of her profile in one of the mirrors and for what seemed like the hundredth time, her heart jumped with delight. Her prominent nose had been replaced by a dainty ski-jump shaped one and the final traces of bruising were now easily covered with makeup. Her breasts were still sore and held in place by the most hideous support bra Meredith had ever seen, but she was thrilled with her new shape. She picked up a soft, cropped leather jacket and tried it on. Her curves helped the jacket hold its shape, and for the first time in her life, her athletic shoulders looked in proportion: it fitted her perfectly.

‘That suits you,’ said one of the shop assistants standing nearby. ‘It makes your waist look tiny.’

Meredith smiled happily at her new hourglass figure. ‘Yes, you’re right, it does,’ she said, turning around and around to look at herself from all angles. ‘I’ll take it,’ she said, ignoring the ridiculous price tag. She was

celebrating.

That evening she logged on to tell Ryan about her new purchases. At first they'd just chatted using the Equinox aftercare site, but as their conversations had got longer and longer, Ryan had given her his email address. As she was typing him an email, Ryan's profile on her instant messaging program turned green. He was logged on too. Meredith clicked on his name.

*Hi! Was just typing you an email.*

*Cool, what about?*

*Been out buying new clothes.*

*Good for you. The team are looking good then?*

'The team' was Ryan's expression for her new breasts.

*Yeah, they look great actually.*

*Why don't you email me a picture?*

Meredith stopped and stared at the screen. A picture? She knew what Ryan looked like as his picture was up on the Equinox website, and to be fair, the fact that he looked pretty damn handsome hadn't escaped her notice. But send him a picture of her? Was she ready for that?

*No one here to take one,* she replied quickly and sat back in her chair, waiting for his reply.

*What, you've got no friends?*

*That's not what I said!* Meredith laughed as she typed. Cheeky sod.

*Ask your boyfriend then.*

Meredith paused. There had been a few men in Paris, but none had made his way across the Channel.

*Not got one of those either.*

*Interesting.*

Meredith grinned. He was flirting with her. *I'll see what I can do*, she typed.

After she'd finished chatting with Ryan, Meredith rang Daisy and invited her over for supper the next day.

'I'll give you a fashion parade of my new stuff,' Meredith promised.

'Nothing I'd rather do more,' said Daisy. 'I'll cook; just make sure you've got some decent wine in.'

'Don't worry, I've got about fifty bottles I had shipped over from France.'

'That might just about do us,' said Daisy, laughing. 'See you tomorrow.'

The next day Meredith spent ages getting ready for supper with Daisy. She tried on at least five different outfits, settling finally for a fitted white shirt with a ruffled front and a black pencil skirt. She pulled her long, dark, curly hair into a simple ponytail and then opened a bottle of red wine, pouring herself a glass.

'You look very smart,' said Daisy in surprise when she arrived. 'I look a right scruff in these old jeans.'

'No different from normal,' said Meredith.

'Hey! I look smart when I'm in the gallery,' Daisy protested.

'Daisy, your idea of smart is wearing a pair of dungarees that don't have paint splashed on them. Anyway, I want you to take some photos of me.'

'What for?'

'Oh, you know, send to my mum, that sort of thing,' said Meredith casually.

'Alright, but can we eat first? I'm starving.'

Meredith sat on a bar stool sipping her wine, amusing

herself at the chaos that Daisy was creating in her previously immaculate kitchen. ‘I think there are a few pans in that bottom drawer that you haven’t used yet,’ she said, pointing to a drawer under the cooker.

‘You’d better be careful that I don’t tip this over your head,’ said Daisy, energetically stirring the contents of a small saucepan with one hand and wiping her face on a tea towel with the other.

Meredith grinned. ‘Anything I can do?’

‘You can get me a top-up for starters,’ said Daisy, nodding towards her nearly empty glass. ‘And this is nearly ready – do you want to get some plates out?’

Daisy poured her sauce out into a small jug and then served up: steak with homemade béarnaise sauce, roast potato slices covered in sea salt and rosemary, and a salad. She’d made a chocolate mousse for dessert that she put in the fridge to chill.

‘Wow, this is delicious!’ said Meredith, stuffing a huge mouthful of steak and béarnaise sauce into her mouth. ‘You can come again.’

‘Thanks. And don’t talk with your mouth full,’ said Daisy.

After they’d eaten, Meredith and Daisy sat chatting and working their way down the bottle of wine.

‘How’s Dougie?’ Meredith asked. Dougie was Daisy’s boyfriend. They’d been dating for more than two years and Meredith expected it wouldn’t be that long before they were engaged. He worked in his family’s construction business as a project manager.

‘He’s in great form, thanks,’ said Daisy. ‘You know him – always cheerful, always chatty.’

‘You’re so lucky. I could do with someone like him. Someone steady, reliable...’

‘Oh, stop! You’re making him sound like a pet Labrador,’ said Daisy, laughing.

Meredith laughed too. ‘Hardly. But you know what I mean.’

Daisy nodded. ‘I’m sure you’ll meet the right guy soon. You’ve got a whole new country to choose from, not to mention a whole new look!’

‘Do you think it looks obvious, you know, that I’ve had something done?’

Meredith turned her head from side to side so that Daisy could look at her from all angles.

‘I guess that people who know you well will probably notice that your nose is smaller. But anyone else won’t be able to tell a thing. And your chest looks natural to me.’ Daisy grinned mischievously at Meredith. ‘But I guess that they’ll feel different. So it depends how closely you let people examine them!’

Meredith sighed and peered down at her chest. ‘The general view seems to be that most men will notice implants, which does worry me a bit. I mean, when do you bring that up? On the first date? At the undressing moment? Or only if he spots that they’re not real? And what if he doesn’t like, well, you know, the feel of them?’ She shook her head and gave Daisy a ‘solve that one’ look.

‘I hadn’t really thought about that,’ said Daisy.

‘Well, I have. And I don’t think there’s an easy answer. I’m hoping that somehow when it comes to it, I’ll just know when the right time is.’

‘I’m sure that’s right,’ said Daisy, squeezing her friend’s arm. ‘Don’t worry; it will all just fall into place.’

‘I hope so,’ said Meredith with a sigh. She tried to put the thought of taking her clothes off in front of someone to the back of her mind. No point worrying about it now. ‘Right, enough of that, I think it’s photo time.’ She got up and fetched her camera. ‘Where do you think I should stand?’

Daisy looked around. ‘Against a plain background would be best. How about against that piece of wall over there, next to the sideboard?’

Daisy pointed at a patch of bare wall between a huge bay window and a beautiful baby grand piano.

Meredith walked over and stood awkwardly in front of the wall. ‘Here okay?’

Daisy lined up the image through the camera viewer. ‘Yep, there’s fine. Come on, relax and smile!’

Meredith forced a rather false smile.

‘Terrible,’ said Daisy. She began to give a running commentary as she took more pictures: ‘And here we have the lovely Meredith Romaine from London. She’s thirty-six, twenty-six, thirty-six, loves to travel and cares deeply for small children and all animals. Her ambition if she wins Miss World is to learn how to become the perfect hostess. Right after she learns her three and four times tables.’

Meredith laughed loudly.

‘Better,’ said Daisy, capturing several shots.

They both peered at the shots in the tiny camera viewer.

‘They look great, thanks,’ said Meredith.

‘Do you want some profile ones?’ Daisy asked, seemingly enjoying her photographer moment.

Meredith took a large gulp from her wine glass. ‘Do you think we should take one, well, you know, with my shirt off?’ she asked Daisy, feeling increasingly bold.

‘Hell, yes! No point spending all that money if you’re not going to show them off a bit.’

Meredith unbuttoned her shirt.

‘Not wearing that, though!’ said Daisy, looking at Meredith’s ugly, flesh-coloured support bra.

‘Yeah, good point. I’ve bought some new ones. Hold on a sec.’ Meredith dived into her bedroom and put on a pretty, dark-red lace bra instead. ‘I’m not supposed to wear these yet, but it can’t hurt for a few minutes,’ she said, coming back into the sitting room.

‘How about this for a pose?’ she said, sitting provocatively on the arm of the cream sofa. She tucked her long legs neatly underneath her skirt and leaned back, pushing her chest upwards. Daisy snapped away until she leaned too far and fell off the back of the sofa, causing them both to laugh hysterically.

‘I think that will do,’ said Daisy, looking through the final shots. ‘You can get dressed now, madam.’

They sat reminiscing about old times until well past eleven o’clock, when Daisy eventually decided she really had to go home. Once she had left, Meredith uploaded the pictures from her camera onto her computer and examined them closely. Daisy had done well. Her ‘team’ did look pretty good in that new bra. Meredith opened the pictures up on full-screen view and looked at them

proudly. ‘Nice,’ she said, nodding to herself in satisfaction. Maybe she would email them to Ryan; what did she have to lose? Before she could think about it for too long, she chose two of the best shots – one dressed shot and one bra shot – and emailed them to Ryan, wincing as she pressed the ‘Send’ button. That was it. She’d done it now! She wandered wearily towards her bedroom, got ready for bed and was soon in a deep red-wine-induced sleep.

The next day, Meredith woke up feeling rather dodgy. The combination of steak and red wine after the ‘light, easy-to-digest meals’ she’d been eating for the last three weeks had given her heartburn. She chewed some antacid tablets and then made herself a breakfast of milky porridge and black coffee. As she sipped her coffee, she rubbed the back of her neck and stared out of the window. She couldn’t quite believe that she’d actually sent Ryan those photos of herself. What had she been thinking?

She logged on to her computer and checked her emails. As she expected, Ryan had replied already. The time difference meant that he got any late-night emails from her in the afternoon his time, so he’d had plenty of time to reply. She clicked tentatively on the message, closed her eyes for a second and then opened them to read his reply.

*Wow, wow, wow! he’d written. You look stunning. Not that I expected anything else, mind you. Seems like those Brits over there did a damn fine job. Why don’t you come over for a visit so I can inspect your progress first hand?*

Meredith jumped back from the screen in shock as

she read the last sentence. Visit him in Chicago? Had he gone mad? He could be a total lunatic for all she knew. Mind you, that was pretty unlikely if he was genuinely a surgeon. She clicked on his profile on the Equinox website and studied his photo again. He did look pretty good, but the picture could be years out of date. She should ask him for some more pictures of himself first.

*I've shown you mine, so you show me yours before I start leaping on planes,* she typed in reply. *You could've put on a hundred pounds since that photo on the website was taken!*

Later that day, Ryan emailed her back several photos of himself, mostly with his arms around various mates in typically American looking bars and one with him wearing a tuxedo and standing by a fireplace. He looked gorgeous!

*The one of me in a tux is from my sister's wedding two months ago,* he wrote. *So, will you come?*

Flying to Chicago to meet someone who up until now had been giving her online medical advice seemed a totally bizarre thing to do. But something in the back of her mind was telling her to go for it, and it had been clear for quite some time that their relationship had moved beyond that of doctor and patient. She wasn't doing anything until she started work, and if by any chance they did end up liking each other, at least he wouldn't be shocked to find out she had implants. She'd expected to have to wait several weeks until her scars had totally healed before she even thought about dating, but Ryan already knew she had them. In fact, he wanted to see them. How amazing was that! Okay, she was

being ridiculously impulsive, but the thought of being able to throw caution to the wind was just too tempting. She'd never had the confidence, or the opportunity for that matter, to do anything like this before. A gorgeous man wanted to meet her and to hell with it, she was going to say yes!

It was over two weeks until she was starting at Clinton Wahlberg. Plenty of time for a few days away. She emailed Ryan back.

*Okay then, why not! I could come out for a few days this coming weekend, if that works for you?*

She typed out various flight options that she'd looked up and then headed out for a walk as she waited for a response. Getting some gentle daily exercise was also part of her recovery routine. Back in Paris, Meredith had gone to the gym or out running pretty much every other day, but it would be a few weeks yet before she could get back to that type of exercise. She had expected to miss the adrenaline rushes but instead had found the pace of walking surprisingly calming. As she sauntered slowly towards her local park, she contemplated what she'd just done. She tried not to think of it as a blind date with someone she'd met on the internet. Ryan was a successful, gorgeous cosmetic surgeon who wanted to meet her. Her instincts were telling her that he was worth a gamble.

The next day, Daisy was much less convinced.

'You're doing what?' Daisy stared at her incredulously. They were sitting in a coffee shop round the corner from Daisy's gallery.

'I'm going to meet him in Chicago,' repeated Meredith, crossing her arms.

‘When?’

‘The day after tomorrow.’

‘What if he’s some sort of nutter? You could end up being chopped into pieces and being dumped in a huge garbage bin like you see on those US cop shows!’

‘I think you’re overreacting slightly. Don’t forget he’s a qualified surgeon.’

‘How the hell do you know what he is? He might be a total fake, making up advice based on what he’s seen on TV, working out of some dingy bedsit,’ said Daisy, shaking her head.

‘Well, I’m staying at a hotel and meeting him for the first time in a very public bar, so I’ll have plenty of time to check him out.’

‘Have you checked him out with the US register of surgeons or whatever their equivalent is?’

‘No, I haven’t, and please stop fussing,’ said Meredith. ‘Look, I’ll keep you posted every step of the way.’

‘And what am I meant to do if you don’t ring me? Telephone the hotel and say, “Excuse me, but I think my friend has been abducted by a rogue cosmetic surgeon”?’

Meredith laughed.

‘It’s not funny, Meredith. I think you’re mad,’ said Daisy.

‘Maybe, but come on, Daisy, why not? The whole point of me having my surgery was to give me a confidence boost, have a fresh start with men. I’ve had years of undressing in the dark, worrying that I’m not sexy. Well, now that’s behind me and it’s time for an adventure,’ said Meredith, jutting out her chin defensively.

Daisy smiled at her kindly. ‘You’re right. Why not have an adventure? But you have to promise to be careful and not to leap into anything. And I want all the details: hotel, name, rank, serial number, the lot.’

‘Done, and I promise I’ll be super-careful. We’ll just be getting to know each other, nothing more than that. Now, I wonder what the weather’s going to be like? Will it be hot, do you think? I want to make sure I pack the right clothes.’

‘You’re impossible,’ said Daisy, smiling ruefully at her. ‘This Ryan bloke has no idea what he’s in for.’

No, he doesn’t, but maybe I’ll get to show him, thought Meredith excitedly.

Later that evening, despite her protestations to Daisy that Ryan was bound to be on the level, Meredith couldn’t help having a quick look to see whether she could find him on some sort of official register. It didn’t take long. His name appeared on pretty much every website she looked at, and he had so many letters after his name he would’ve made a great hand in Scrabble. Meredith jumped up from her computer and headed to her bedroom to pack. This was going to be fun!

# CHAPTER 3

Meredith looked at her watch. Shit, she only had ten minutes left before she was meeting Ryan downstairs in the bar. She threw off the hotel's deeply luxurious bathrobe and jumped into a short white sundress and a pair of strappy sandals. All traces of the bruising on her face had now gone, and she'd abandoned her support bra for something far sexier, promising herself that she would change back into it later on. Her curls were piled neatly on top of her head, creating a perfect resting point for a ridiculously expensive pair of sunglasses. She checked her makeup for the tenth time, dabbing her face with a touch more powder and adding an extra slick of lip-gloss. Eventually satisfied with her 'no effort' look that had taken nearly two hours to create, she took a deep breath, picked up her handbag and headed out of her hotel room.

The hotel had a long, curved, bar that was gently lit from above by a series of oversized, sparkly pendant lamps and from below by a long, thin strip-light hidden under the overhang of the bar top. The immaculate area

behind the bar was covered in smoked glass, giving the room an aura of old-fashioned glamour. Meredith loved it immediately – just her sort of place. She sat down on a bar stool covered in dark-brown faux-suede, ordered a glass of champagne and sent Daisy her next obligatory text: *In the bar waiting! Not long now.* Although Meredith knew she looked good, she couldn't help being unbelievably self-conscious and nervous. It felt like every person in the place knew she was on a blind date and was looking at her. She sipped her champagne, trying to look nonchalant, and waited.

A few minutes later Ryan walked into the bar. She recognised him instantly. A massive wave of relief swept over her as she saw that he looked exactly like his photos – better, in fact. He was tall and athletic with short brown hair, blue eyes and a light suntan, and very good-looking. Meredith got off her bar stool and held out her hand as he approached her, grinning widely.

‘Hello, you must be Ryan,’ she said, smiling too.

‘Yes, good to meet you at last,’ said Ryan, looking her up and down approvingly. He shook her hand vigorously and then jumped onto the bar stool next to her. ‘Large beer, please,’ he said to the barman who was hovering discreetly next to them, then he spun around to face Meredith. ‘So how was your flight?’

‘Fine, very easy, in fact. I’m pretty used to travelling,’ she said.

‘I bet you are! You investment banking types probably spend half your lives on planes, don’t you?’

‘Not quite half, but yes, we do have to travel a fair bit.’

‘Well, it’s really great to see you. I feel like I’ve

known you for ages even though we've only just met.'

'Me too!' Meredith smiled. There was a definite spark between them; she could feel it. 'So tell me a bit about yourself,' she said. She'd promised Daisy she would check out his background.

Ryan told her all about where he grew up, how he'd become a surgeon, his family, his friends, why he loved his work – it all sounded very normal.

'So, what about you? I don't know very much about investment banking. What is it you do exactly?' Ryan asked when he'd finished.

'I advise clients who are buying or selling businesses. We do acquisition searches, build valuation models, help with negotiation tactics, that sort of thing.'

Ryan looked impressed. 'Do you like it?'

'Mostly,' said Meredith. 'Like most jobs it has its moments, but I love trying to make things happen, you know. There's nothing better than when you find a client the perfect business to buy. I guess it's the thrill of the chase that I enjoy the most.'

'I know that feeling,' said Ryan, moving towards her slightly and raising his eyebrows, making her stomach flutter like mad.

'Were you thinking we would eat here?' Meredith asked. She'd promised Daisy that she wouldn't rush into anything.

'No, not my type of food here; it's a bit fussy. I was thinking about this great steak place just a few blocks away, if that's okay with you?'

'Sounds perfect,' said Meredith.

The steak house was a typical all-American grill,

servicing the biggest steaks, burgers and racks of ribs that Meredith had ever seen.

‘That can’t possibly be for one person!’ she remarked as a waitress walked past carrying a plate of ribs smothered in barbecue sauce that was about the size of Meredith’s satellite dish back in London.

‘Probably is,’ said Ryan, laughing. ‘You know us Americans: we don’t do anything by halves.’

After they’d eaten, Ryan ordered them a jug of Long Island iced tea: alcohol-laden rocket fuel that tasted like fruity lemonade.

‘This stuff is dangerous,’ said Meredith, already halfway through her second glass.

‘Yup, tastes just like soda right up to the moment you lose control of your legs,’ said Ryan, grinning. ‘Cheers!’

Meredith lifted her glass and clinked it against Ryan’s. They held each other’s gaze for a few moments.

‘I’m so glad you’ve come,’ said Ryan eventually. ‘I had a feeling about you, right from the beginning.’

Meredith smiled. ‘I have to admit that I was a bit surprised when you asked me for a photo. That’s not the sort of thing I normally do at all. I’ve never met anyone over the internet before.’

‘Our aftercare service is hardly your average dating site!’ said Ryan. ‘You were on it for a good reason. Maybe it was just meant to be that we met.’

Perhaps Ryan was right. Maybe they were just meant to be.

By the time Ryan walked Meredith back to her hotel, her head was spinning from the several glasses of Long Island iced tea she’d drunk. She also felt slightly giddy

with excitement. It had been a brilliant evening; she and Ryan had got on so well. She'd sent Daisy a text reassuring her that he wasn't some crazed axe murderer and that he was in fact a quite gorgeous, charming, funny guy – and that her instincts had been right.

As they approached Meredith's hotel room, Ryan pulled her towards him and kissed her gently on the cheek.

'Thank you for a lovely evening. Would you like to do something tomorrow? Maybe I could give you a bit of a tour of the city?'

Meredith paused, her heart thumping and her mind racing with possibilities. Did she dare to invite him in? Was she ready for that? In the past, she'd always followed the slow and steady approach, making sure that she felt really comfortable before she allowed herself to let go. But maybe it was time to make a break with the past.

'I think I'd like to do something now, actually,' said Meredith. She stepped towards Ryan and gave him a long kiss.

'Would you now,' said Ryan, smiling in amusement. He pushed Meredith gently against the wall and kissed her back, holding her hands above her head as he did. His lips were warm and soft but his body felt taut with desire. It was a heady combination.

'I think you'd better come in, before someone walks past,' said Meredith.

Ryan stepped back and ran his hands slowly down each side of her body. 'Well, I do need to check those scars of yours, don't I? Just make sure that they did a decent job. You might need some oil rubbed into them,

or something.’

‘You’re right, Doctor, I think I need a very thorough check-up,’ said Meredith, smiling. She took Ryan’s hand, opened her hotel room door and led him into the bedroom.

The rest of the weekend passed in a bit of blur. After a tour of the city, during which they mostly just laughed, held hands and fed each other disgustingly unhealthy snacks from the army of street vendors that seemed to occupy every corner, they ended up in a sports bar watching America football and drinking beer. At the end of the night, much against Meredith’s better judgement, they went back to Ryan’s apartment. It was a typical bachelor pad: minimalist furniture in greys and blues, expensive-looking TV and hi-fi equipment in every room and a kitchen full of unused gadgets.

‘Very smart,’ said Meredith, peering around a half-open door leading into Ryan’s bedroom as he stood behind her. ‘Where’s my room?’

‘There’s only one bedroom, I’m afraid.’

Meredith pretended to look shocked. ‘My mother warned me about men like you.’

‘Did she,’ said Ryan. He put his arms around her waist and pulled her back towards him so that his body was pressing against her back and his mouth was close to her ear. ‘What did she say?’ he whispered, his breath warm on the back of her neck.

Meredith turned to face him and starting unbuttoning his shirt, her fingers gently caressing his chest. She put one hand inside his shirt and slid the other hand slowly down towards his belt. Ryan took a sharp intake of

breath and gazed at her intently, his body rooted to the spot.

‘She said I should grab you with both hands,’ said Meredith, holding his gaze.

‘I’m all yours,’ said Ryan.

Meredith woke up on Sunday morning to find a large cup of coffee on her bedside table with a note next to it: *On the desk. Didn’t want to wake you.* Ryan had laid a blue silk dressing gown over the end of the bed. Meredith put it on, picked up her coffee and wandered into the sitting room, where Ryan was sitting at his laptop dressed in just a pair of shorts. She walked up behind him and put her arm around his shoulders.

‘Morning,’ she said, nuzzling his neck.

He turned his head slightly towards her and reached his arm behind him, patting her leg. ‘Morning, won’t be long. Got about another forty-five minutes to go. Why don’t you grab a shower while I finish up?’

Meredith headed for the shower. They were lucky, all those people that he was giving advice to. He was a service well worth paying platinum rates for!

They spent a long time saying goodbye at the airport and Ryan promised that he would come and visit her next; hopefully in a few weeks’ time if he could swing the time off. He stood and watched her go until she passed through the departure gate and was finally out of sight.

As Meredith waited patiently in the queue for security, images of the weekend spun wildly around in her head. She couldn’t believe that she’d had such an amazing time so soon after her surgery. But it didn’t take

long for the bustling efficiency of the airport to bring her back to reality with a bang, when her carry-on bag was pulled to one side for a security check.

‘Did you pack this bag yourself?’

Meredith nodded wearily at the portly American security guard.

‘I need to have a look through it.’

Meredith watched as he zipped open the case and started to examine its contents, carefully taking out one item at a time: jumper, book, wash bag – nothing of great excitement. He placed each item down on the counter and ran what looked like a mini lightsaber over them, presumably testing for traces of drugs. Under the first layer of her clothes was a small parcel, delicately wrapped in soft pink paper and tied with black ribbon. Meredith stared at it in surprise. What on the earth was that?

The security guard picked it up. ‘What’s inside this?’

‘I have no idea. I’ve never seen it before,’ said Meredith without thinking.

The security guard looked at her suspiciously and she suddenly realised how terrible that had sounded. Ryan must have slipped it into her bag as they were leaving.

‘I’m sorry, what I meant to say is that it’s a gift from, err, a friend of mine. It’s meant to be a surprise, I think. So I haven’t opened it.’

‘I’m afraid I need to see what’s inside. Would you open it, please?’

Meredith put the parcel down on the counter and pulled open the ribbon. The tissue paper fell open to

reveal a white lace bra and matching pair of G-string knickers, both decorated with tiny red bows. Ryan had put a note on the top that simply read *Yes please*.

Meredith stared at the note in horror, her face reddening with embarrassment. The security guard looked up at her in surprise, a smile twitching at the sides of his mouth, and then did his best to look nonchalant as he carefully inspected the neatly folded underwear. Once he'd established that they weren't hiding some dangerous weapon, he tried to close the tissue paper. But it kept flapping back open, determined to display its deeply private contents for as long as possible, so he just moved it to one side as he checked through the rest of the bag. Meredith could hardly bring herself to look at it.

'That's fine, thank you. Have a good trip,' he said eventually, raising his eyebrows knowingly at her. Meredith stuffed her things back into her bag as quickly as she could and fled.

When she got back to London, Daisy came rushing round for a full debrief.

'Right, I want to hear everything. Start at the beginning and leave nothing out,' she demanded.

Meredith gave her a blow-by-blow account of her trip, including the mortifying underwear incident. Daisy sat listening, open-mouthed.

'You little minx!' she said when Meredith told her about the end of the first evening. Meredith just grinned and told her about the rest of her trip.

'So is it serious, do you think?' Daisy asked.

'No, I don't think so. Don't get me wrong, he's a

lovely guy, but he's miles away. Hardly the basis for a long-term relationship. And anyway, he showed me that I'm definitely ready to hit the party scene over here, now everything's in fine working order.'

Daisy shook her head, laughing. 'What are you like!'

Meredith smiled. 'Not long until I start work now either. Can't wait. Think I'm going to step things up a notch, make sure they know I mean business.'

Ryan had given her confidence a big boost, and her new look, along with a new job, provided the perfect opportunity to reinvent herself a bit.

'In what way?' Daisy asked.

'Oh, you know, just turn the dial up a bit. It's such a competitive environment, I need to make sure that I'm just that bit more successful than the next guy. *La poursuite incessante de l'excellence*, as my old boss used to say,' said Meredith.

'Relentless pursuit of excellence,' Daisy translated. 'Like it. It can be your new mantra. In fact, maybe it should be our new mantra. I could do with some of that too.'

It hadn't always been in Meredith's nature to be competitive. It was a skill she'd soon learnt when she started out in investment banking. She'd also learnt how to hide her emotions, behaving like a swan gliding across the surface of the lake while making sure no one could see how frantically her legs were paddling underneath. She'd been hugely successful in Paris, but if she was honest with herself, a large part of that was down to her father's contact base rather than her originating contacts of her own. With his guidance and address book, she'd

pulled in deal after deal and had soon gained a reputation as a serial rainmaker. That's why the headhunters had been after her. Over here, though, she was on her own, and Clinton Wahlberg was expecting big things of her. Meredith was pretty sure that she could do it, but it was still a scary prospect. She would have to work hard to make sure that she lived up to the reputation that had preceded her.

'It'll be fun – I hope,' said Meredith.

'Sure it will,' said Daisy. 'I wish I could say the same about the gallery.'

'Still no better?'

'No,' Daisy sighed. 'I'm just not selling enough. My paintings are doing okay but the sculptures are hardly moving. And I make so little money on the other artists' work I show that it's hardly worth it. My discounted rent period finishes in three months, and unless things pick up, I won't be able to pay the increase.'

'You need to charge the other artists a bit more then,' said Meredith. 'Make sure you're covering your costs.'

'If I do that they might go somewhere else and I'll end up with loads of blank space on the wall. Even I know that's not a recipe for success.'

'Do you want me to go through the books with you? See if we can work something out?'

'No!' said Daisy quickly. 'I'm sure I can figure a way through.'

Meredith could see that Daisy's pride wouldn't let her ask for help.

'Okay, okay, just asking, that's all,' said Meredith. 'Look, why don't you come and help me choose what to

wear on my first day? I need to create the right impression.'

'Alright,' said Daisy wearily. 'I better had, otherwise you'll just end up looking like a cheap tart.'

'Daisy, there's nothing cheap about my wardrobe!'

'Okay, an expensively dressed tart then.'

'I will not look like a tart at all,' Meredith protested.

'So why do you need me to check then, if you're so sure?'

Meredith hesitated. Sometimes her work look was a bit on the edgy side. Daisy was very good at helping her get the balance right.

'Well, I just like having a second opinion, that's all,' said Meredith. 'Come on, let's get on with it.'