

the real thing.



NIGEL CARLYLE

This is the original manuscript.

Unedited. Unfiltered. Not intended for publication.

This is the version that went too far.
The one that should have stayed in the drawer.

The one I kept.

—

You weren't supposed to read this.

It wasn't written for you.

—

Some things only make sense
when you don't look too closely.

—

If you're still here,

keep going.

*For those who were rejected
for being themselves.*

'Desire is the root of all suffering.'

—Buddha

ELENA

IN THE BEGINNING was a word-thirsty writer, hell-bent on climbing the insurmountable mountain of literary success, and you, my first-choice literary agent.

Dear Kate Finlay,

It all started so innocently, with so much hope squeezed into an email of less than five-hundred words.

It's me again! God, that was so unprofessional; as true as it was, how did you make it past those three cringe words?

Please find attached the first fifty pages and synopsis of my psychological thriller with a horror edge.

I'm sure you took pity on me. My perspiration palpable from the very words I sent you. Desperate, but hopefully, not overbearing.

I don't need to tell you how committed I am to being an author, you've probably lost count of how many submissions I've sent you!

Your eyes probably glazed over my attempts at humour, my desperate gimmicks.

I feel like I'm Doctor Strange, and you're Dormammu, and I've come here to bargain, again and again and again!

But I'm here to make you an offer you can't refuse!

And I promise, my novel is not as derivative as this letter!

I agonised on whether to keep all the exclamation marks or remove them, but I thought, *They convey excitement!* And if I wasn't excited about my novel, why would you be?

I didn't forget to blow your trumpet a bit, too, *I'd love you as my agent, you're verifiably the best of the best: the sales, the accolades, the endless endorsements from happy, million-aire clients!*

When your reply finally arrived, a good eight weeks after I sent you my submission, well, you'll forgive me for thinking the worst.

A rejection was obvious, the email preview teasing your apology, literally ending with the words *I'm sorry* screaming at me from my phone, sending me to bed in a crying heap until my tear ducts dried up like a river bank ravaged by climate change.

I got angry. Angry on behalf of nature and all those poor fish, and angry at you.

I told myself, *Fuck the email, I just won't open it.* I imagined you spending a couple of minutes, no, *five whole minutes*, wasting your time writing an email to me which I

wasn't gonna fucking read. It's petty I know, but I was grasping at anything that would allow me to regain control of the situation, and control of my life.

In my defence, it only took me the best part of a year to write my novel, you know, the novel I imagined you so cruelly dismissing, like I had sent you a book written on toilet paper with a cover made from human excrement. *This novel is the shit, I shit you not!*

I ignored your email for three days. *Three whole days.* Do you know how hard that was? I knew I was simply delaying the inevitable, a truth already registered inside my head.

I'd love to say I plucked up the courage, rolled up my sleeves, told myself that this was merely the latest rejection in a long line of rejections. Stephen King pinned his rejections to a wall, I *literally* wallpapered mine with yours alone.

If people could see it, they'd think me insane. But I'm a self-professed writer. Aren't they both one and the same?

No, during what would be the most fortuitous dump ever taken, my period dripping into the bowl, dual-symbolism if there ever was any that I was bleeding for this shitty life, scrolling through unread emails from the past three days, my finger slipped, opening up your obviously heartbreaking rejection.

Except maybe it wasn't. When I took in what your apology really was, I couldn't wipe my arse quick enough.

I'm sorry—for the delay in replying to you! You didn't

add the exclamation mark, but with context, it really should've been there.

Forgive me, when you've waited eight weeks for a reply to a submission, you get a little paranoid. You think the worst. You over-react. Like a circle unbroken, you just can't see history ever not repeating itself. Will you ever get published? Will you ever get a literary agent? Will you ever write again?

Because, from the moment I sent you my submission to the moment I finally read your reply, I had not written a word. Not a single word. *For. Eight. Weeks.* They always talk about the bricklayer who doesn't stop laying bricks, as a metaphor of how to get over the alleged fantasy that is writer's block.

But what about writer's *intentional* block? The self-perpetuating hatred of one's entire self. The bipolar experience of sending of your literary baby in written form out into the world with all the hopes in the world, to the crushing depths of despair when twenty-four hours pass and you hear nothing back.

Your baby has missed the cut-off to be a potential best-seller. Your baby isn't gonna win a prize, your baby is ugly, *motherfuckingly ugly*, why did you even think it was a good idea to shit that baby out and force its ugliness upon the world?

Come on, be honest, you hear this story all the time. Literary agents say they're really busy, and I do know that to

be true for you, but how many new writers—boasting on X, Instagram, TikTok, you name it—talk about nabbing their agent and say they waited eight weeks for the initial reply?

It's a minority. Those who nab the big agents like you, well, they hear back within twenty-four hours, don't they?

Something in their subject line makes you take notice, something in their cover letter gives you butterflies, their writing sample ends with a cliff-hanger that has you on tenterhooks, you find yourself writing a reply before someone else does.

You don't wait eight weeks to do all that.

All those agented writers, now dreaming of submitting their book to the big five publishers, tell the rest of us to keep hope—*out of the seven agents who replied to me in the first week asking for a full manuscript, only four offered me representation, honestly it was so hard to choose one*—while the rest of us swim in rejection, form rejection because sometimes it's just too time-consuming to write a personal reply, isn't it?

But you're not like most agents, are you?

You made me wait eight weeks.

You, the gatekeeper to the publishing world, along with all your brethren, had—until that moment—tortured me, abused me, treated me like shit on your shoes.

How many times had you previously rejected me? You can't remember, can you? My wallpaper attests to the true, horrifying number.

At least this time you were personal. Using my name. Well, a near approximation of my name. Helena, rather than Elena. Were you in a rush? You know I wouldn't get away with writing *Dear Katie*.

But I'm not the one with the power, am I?

You included a quick line about my book as if you had actually read my sample in its entirety. Giving me false hope that someone else might see the *majestic brilliance* that had eluded your senses. You didn't use those exact words, but that's how I felt about your reply.

But as I got to the end of your short reply, the truth was apparent.

IT WAS ANOTHER FUCKING REJECTION!

This moment had replayed itself so many times before. I'd drown my sorrows, smash a few things, slash at my own arms.

But why should I hurt my liver, hurt my bank balance, hurt my body for you? Why should I do that for a person who doesn't give a fuck about me?

As a wise singer once sang, *Love hurts*.

It doesn't make sense, Kate, I wish it did.

I'll admit, in a sea of literary agents, you were nothing special. *Until you were*. Just a means to an end. *Not like the others*. There were so many of you to choose from. *But you were different*.

Which is why I have a letter for *you*.

Dear Kate Finlay,

I am pleased to inform you that you have been successful in your attempts to gain me as a client. Let's meet soon.

Best wishes,

Elena Cartwright

P.S. We should be together too.

KATE

HAVE you ever had the feeling you're being watched? Being followed? Eyes burning into the back of your head as you go about your daily commute.

I've felt like this recently.

I find myself thinking of chance encounters, strange incidents. You've made me like this. Made me paranoid. The strange woman who bumped into me outside the office, the one who brushed against me in the supermarket, the old lady who chatted to me at the bus stop asking personal questions.

Was one of them you, Elena Cartwright?

Even worse, could you be a man in disguise? Hiding behind your fake name, your fake existence. From the charlatan to the chivalrous, have we already met? Have we already fucked? Wishful thinking on my part, I've shut up shop in recent months.

I try to picture you in my head. A hundred or more fictional Elena Cartwrights have haunted my nightmares, and worst still, my waking thoughts.

Sometimes you're overweight, socially awkward, a mother to ten cats, never had a man in your life other than the father you cared for, who sadly died shortly before you had the epiphany to become a writer.

Other times, you're glamorous, a manager's favourite, a father's princess, a weak husband's queen, used to getting your own way, which is why you can't bear the thought of cold, hard, impersonal rejection.

In rare moments, I try to think of you as what I hope you really are. A normal person, trying to make a difference in the world by writing a novel; perhaps you rise in the wee hours to write your drafts before waking the kids for school, dropping them off on the way to work, picking them up at the end of the day, playtime, dinner time, shower, and then you'll have a quick hour of writing before you too hit the hay.

But then I remember that your emails arrive in my inbox during all hours of the day and night. Unless you're writing novels in work, editing whilst driving, and submitting to me in your dreams, then my rare imagining of you cannot be true.

My marriage is in tatters, thanks to you. My husband, once thought of as loyal and docile, touches himself more than he touches me. I almost don't blame him. I've

neglected him. He tries to touch me and I bat him away. I've done so for longer than I care to remember.

How many genres have we been through together? Your latest being psychological. It suits you. I imagine there's an autobiographical element to it, more believable than you marrying a billionaire Arab prince.

You told me, *I read about a literary agent who was happy to accept an author's ideas, willing to read them before giving a green (or red) light to the idea. I think that's a great idea, saves me writing a whole novel which I know you'll hate within the first ten pages, might as well just send you the ten pages and see if you like it first before I write more.*

I understood where you were coming from. I know how time-consuming it is to be a writer, how soul-destroying it can be to work on a novel for a year or more and then have someone judge it merely from its premise, synopsis and ten page sample—though to be fair, I always read fifty pages, as you'd know, considering you know so much about me—and for all that effort, hope, and praying to go to waste when you receive an impersonal rejection.

But that doesn't change the way I work. You said, *I've watched every webinar you've ever taken part in, read every article you've written, read and watched every interview.*

And yet, you still sent me over thirty novel extracts in one year, admitting you hadn't written past the first ten pages, asking me to take you on with nothing more than a

hope and promise, *The ending will blow your mind when I get around to writing it, I assure you!*

Was it my fault, rejecting you within days, allowing you to move on to another agent or another idea?

To be fair to you, some of your ideas had potential. But that's all they had. Anyone can have an idea. Not everyone can turn that idea into a tangible reality. How many people think, *Oh, this is a great idea for a video game*, and not take into account the reality of turning that singular idea into a multifaceted media; storyline, artwork, level design, game-play. I say this from watching my husband spend all his spare time playing *Call of Duty*.

But the same rules apply. An idea is not a fully formed novel. It is not a voice, a plot, a subplot, a twist, apart from your ideas which were simply twists alone, unearned ones at that.

What did you say? *At the end, she's actually the bad guy, but the brilliant thing is, it comes out of nowhere, totally surprising the reader. I hate novels that have all that foreshadowing shit in them, can see the twist coming a mile off!*

Your twist is what's called a *deus ex machina*, and had you been alive during Ancient Greece, I've no doubt history would have you alongside Aeschylus, the father of tragedy. But the real tragedy is, you missed that boat by two-and-a-half thousand years, and publishing, as you will know, is all about timing.

I hate that you make me feel this way. Hate that you have

tainted how I work, how I treat others. I've gone from a person with very good intentions, to a shallow, insipid, excuse of myself, who walks the path to Hell without a care.

You did that to me, Elena. You and your relentless pursuit of me. It's amazing that a person I've never seen *in person*, never seen a photo of, can't find anything about her on the internet, can have such an effect on my wellbeing. Other Elena Cartwrights are certainly not you—they have jobs and lives.

But you've done nothing wrong, legally speaking, have you? You haven't threatened me. You haven't turned up at my home professing your love. No one at the agency has seen you appear with a bunch of books in tow.

You once said, *I know what your favourite sandwich is!*

And then you sent an actual sandwich to my office. Well, forgive me for binning it. I don't know who you are Elena. You might be who you say you are, or you might be a man, a pervert, the mayo on my favourite sandwich something quite different and altogether disgusting.

I spoke with a friend of a friend, whose hubby is a policeman, and she said *that he said* I should block you wherever I find you, and move on with my life. Yes, it's all my fault, because I won't let you win so easily. To block you completely means you won, you got to me, you stopped me from being the open person I am, who only got into this career because I loved reading and loved championing voices that were not heard.

If I blocked you, where would it end? Would I start blocking every writer who I rejected, fearful in the knowledge that they might take rejection to heart and begin stalking me? No. You've affected me enough as it is. I will not allow you to poison my mind against those who merely want to be published.

You haven't done anything sinister to me, and perhaps in your mind, all the unwanted gifts are just you putting it out there, paying it forward, sharing your happiness with others.

But things have ramped up in the past year, haven't they? How else to explain comments you make in your submissions, your twisted version of personalisation, where you state your love for shops and foods that I frequent and buy, certain things and places I've never once mentioned on social media.

Either we're twin-flames living out parallel lives, or you only know this from *actually following me*. Perhaps it's coincidence or I'm simply paranoid.

I'm wary when I go out, constantly looking over my shoulder, wondering if you're the woman behind me, or the man in front.

Then there was the email you sent, saying we'll meet in person, hinting at some kind of relationship that borders on more than a professional union.

Yes, Elena, I've listened to Eminem, too.

Were you upset that I hadn't replied to you within a week like I had done for all your previous submissions? That

I took the minimum eight weeks I ask for on the agency's website? It's not like I was rejecting a novel that you had actually finished, not when I'd already rejected another of your submissions a week prior.

What worries me to the pit of my stomach, more than your words, is the thought of what would happen if we met. That two of us will walk into a room and only one will re-emerge alive. Hyperbole? Perhaps.

As I pour another glass of wine, because really, only a bottle a night will help me sleep, a question turns my stomach at how sick my existence has become since you entered my life.

Do you think of me, Elena, as often as I think of you?

LORRAINE

IT WOULD BE nice if aspiring writers, hoping and dreaming of literary stardom, looked past the established agents and gave us junior agents a try.

I get it, they don't want to take their chances with the untested, but isn't that what agents do every day? Unless we're taking on a mid-career author who has a background of book deals, sales, a fanbase, and looking for a change of scenery after a breakup with another agent—reasons ranging from messy divorce, to agents retiring or changing jobs—then every writer we take on is untested, we all have to start somewhere, don't we?

I can't complain, though. Although I'm still Kate's assistant as such, I'm now an Associate Agent, which is a fancy way of saying Junior Agent. And that means I can have clients of my own, of which, I currently have two.

My first ever client admitted she submitted her query

package to over seventy literary agents, and I was the only agent to offer her representation. But that doesn't matter. I believe in her work. I know there's a market for what she is writing.

My second client had me on tenterhooks. She had another offer from an established agent, someone from a large agency with a client list numbering in the fifties.

It was a gamble. I loved her writing style, and I knew her manuscript had potential, but it'd take work.

However, she said, 'Your vision for my novel blew my mind. And blew the other agent out of the water!'

She could have taken the easy option. The other agent, the established agent, said it was fine as was, ready to send out into the world. What writer wouldn't take that and run with it?

'I don't think she read it all,' she said. 'It was obvious she just liked the idea. Plus, I was a bit concerned by the rumours.'

Ah, rumours, a staple in this industry.

'She was representing one of my online friends, and let her go when the novel wasn't picked up by an editor.'

That would never be me, and I don't mean it in a naive way. I wanted to find writers, not just books. If I love your writing, and I'm going to put in all the time helping you make it better, time I don't get back nor am I paid for as I'll be doing it at the weekends, then I'm investing in your career as a writer, not looking for a one-off deal.

So, for the past few months, I've been helping my two clients shape their novels to the best we can achieve before I send them to editors, hopefully ensuring we have the best chance of success. It's a slow process, but we're all on the same page, knowing that we have a shared goal.

Kate's style of agenting is, different. To put it politely. And that's okay, we're all under pressure to succeed. In fact, everyone at the agency has their own way of dealing with clients.

Take Tom. Everything he does has a hint of the flashy. His client list is cool, as in, full of young, hip writers. Many of his writers haven't written a second book, but he doesn't dump them. Their profiles just kind of stay there in a literary purgatory of sorts, their photos unchanging, forever young.

Christine on the other hand, her list has clients she's known for over twenty-five years. Brands whose books have titles in fonts smaller than the author's name.

Whereas Tom is sometimes standoffish and obnoxious, Christine is quite the opposite, sometimes over-friendly, though not always in a sincere way.

Tom will give you his opinion by bashing you over the head with it, Christine takes the passive-aggressive approach.

Take the moment when, celebrating gaining my first client, Tom gave me his unsolicited advice as to my chances of landing a deal with one of the big five publishers. He walked up, stared through me and in a monotone voice, said, 'Dead. On. Submission.' He then cracked up,

and giggling, said, 'I'm kidding. You'll smash it. No, honestly.'

Seeking a second opinion, I asked Christine, who congratulated me, saying what a wonderful premise the book had, and with a stretched smile, said, 'It probably won't sell, but we all have to start somewhere. Perhaps you'll find an indie who's willing to take the risk?'

Was this sage advice from an honest, been-there agent? Or a snide comment from someone who was jealous? With all her best-selling clients, surely she couldn't be jealous!

But I suppose the face you wear for the world isn't always the same one you see in the mirror.

And that's natural. We all do it. Especially Kate.

Often, words will come out of Kate's mouth which don't match the facial expressions she's giving out. Like when she's on the phone to a client, bigging them up in an effort to keep them on track with their revisions. Words like *brilliant*, *talented*, *persistent*, come out of her mouth, but her face seemingly doesn't believe what she's saying.

I'm not saying she's two-faced, but, then, what am I saying? *She doesn't believe in her own bullshit.*

Perhaps I'm being unfair. Times have been tough recently. The psychological thriller market has saturated, it's so difficult to sell in the genre Kate loves most. It's been a while since her name graced *The Bookseller*, and twice as long since her name graced *The Bookseller* with a six-figure deal.

All the nonsense with Elena Cartwright doesn't help either.

Kate doesn't like to talk about it, but the toll shows on her face. She told me once, 'I mentioned all this to the others, but the general consensus was, suck it up.'

I get where she's coming from. When I first applied for a job at this agency as Kate's assistant, my first job in the industry, I had rose-tinted spectacles on. I believed the online hype, the agency photos portraying a boutique workplace that offered more than a simple nine-to-five job. *There's more hours working for free, for starters.*

My cousin in Scotland tried to warn me. Told me all workplaces are the same. *Ye'll get yer nice people, ye'll get yer cunts.* And don't get me wrong, it's not like this agency is horrible, of course not. It's just not what my imagination conjured, and that's on me.

Take my 'welcome to the agency' drink. Of the five people, excluding me, who work at the agency, only two turned up. That being Kate, because she organised it, and Tom, because he needs little excuse for having a drink and any associated drugs that may be in his pocket at the time. *I'm not judging, Tom is Tom.*

Debbie thought it prudent to keep space between herself and her underlings, which kind of contradicted the whole *Manning Agency is family* thing she wanted the world to believe, and all I could think was she'd been watching too much *Fast & Furious* but would never be the next Dominic

Toretto, though in fairness, she often came across as a scary version of Vin Diesel. Malcolm couldn't attend because he was meeting up with the boys, which annoyed Kate as he only committed to this half-an-hour before. Christine said she was looking forward to it, even reminding me before we left the office, and then didn't turn up and never offered an apology or excuse the next day.

Thus, Kate and I made small talk because we had little to say to each other after spending the whole day together, and Tom became increasingly delirious as the night went on, and since that welcome drink, we haven't gone for drink together again, save for the annual summer party or the Christmas party, which suits me fine as we're work colleagues, not friends, and we're only family when Debbie forces us to take selfies of each other and post them to social media.

But life in Manning Agency is rarely so harmonious.

Kate's been in a foul mood all day. When she finally confessed, I was taken aback.

'I'm sorry,' I said, truly meaning it. 'I thought—I thought you only wanted me to intercept Elena's submissions if they were of no value to you.'

I'd seen many of Elena Cartwright's submissions. The majority were time I'd never get back.

But the one that arrived yesterday showed rare promise. Had it not been her name at the bottom of the email, I wouldn't have thought twice about forwarding it on to Kate.

I was about to send a form rejection when I remembered

what Kate told me back when she was a mentor to me, *business is business and never cut off your nose to spite your face*. Elena's submission had a wicked one-line pitch, a sample that begged to be read, and a personalised cover letter, which quite possibly was too much personalisation, but had she sent it to me, I'd have been impressed. Perhaps Kate needed a reminder of her own advice?

'You should give it the once over,' I suggest, 'and if you don't see anything in it, fair enough.'

Kate's face is unmoving, and I'm unable to work out her true feelings. 'I'll think about it,' is all she says as she packs her stuff and walks out without a goodbye.

Kate's a nice person, nice enough, but she can be a cold fish when she wants to be.

WHEN YOUR NEXT submission arrived in my inbox only a week after your insidious email, courtesy of Lorraine's inability to do one simple fucking task properly, it became so clear to me, Elena. I needed to buy time from you. I'd sell my soul to the Devil if it meant removing you from my life, if only for a while.

What was a soul compared with a little peace of mind?

Like *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, my outer appearance was pristine and as ageless as Insta-filters would allow, whilst a self-portrait of me rotted in my attic, a price worth paying to get a moment's peace from your incessant need for attention.

It might sound ridiculous to you, but I scoured YouTube and the web, looking for ways to contact Satan directly. Surely, if he was eager to collect souls, he wouldn't be so difficult to find?

There were plenty of videos, tutorials, articles, all prefaced with the warning that inviting the dark one into my life would change it, and not necessarily for the better.

But I thought, *Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.*

I even took up knitting. Not only did it allow me to de-stress, it facilitated the production of a doll, one which I named Elena Cartwright. I spent the entire night sticking pins all over its body, and in every orifice I had made for it.

Did you feel anything, Elena? Are you capable of feeling?

I went to work and took a call at reception—Malcolm was in the toilet, no doubt doom-scrolling *or doing other things...*

Our agency founder, who you know as Deborah Manning, was calling in sick. *I'm aching all over, Kate, I'm talking projectile vomit and projectile diarrhoea. I must've been a right bastard in a previous life.*

I'd have suggested she'd been a bastard in this life too, but I wasn't brave enough, and in any case, it would've elicited her well-worn justification, *When I entered this industry, it was male-dominated, they didn't take me seriously, and I had to fight tooth and nail to give all you younger women a chance in later decades!*

When I got home, I realised my voodoo doll had an uncanny resemblance to Debbie, *as I know her*, and I hated myself for it, because in spite of her tough demeanour, she

gave me my start in this career and supported me since day one.

No good deed goes unpunished.

I had subconsciously used Debbie as a template for the doll, because I had no idea what you looked like. But for unfathomable reasons, I'd become suspicious of Debbie. Her emails started and ended with the exact same words you would send to me.

Was my boss fucking with me? A joke taken too far? Was she punishing me for losing my mojo, the paltry deals I got for new authors, ever reliant on existing authors who were leaving our stable because, *reason*.\$.

They were too polite to say the truth, that their agent was there but not all there, *I owe my career to Kate, but she became distant to the point that I missed out on a publishing deal because she forgot to reply to the editor.*

How could I have forgotten? Until you came into my life, I was on top of everything, my mind the sharpest of tools. I now use a spreadsheet, because I'm distracted, forever in my own head, never knowing one day from the other.

Yes, it was obvious, my boss was punishing me, giving me a deserved kick up the arse.

And then I remembered her webinar, the one where she gave an example of the perfect cover letter, written in the style she used herself. I pulled up a recording of it on YouTube and surprise, surprise, amongst the Zoom atten-

dees was you, hiding behind your turned-off camera, only your name showing.

Debbie wasn't pretending to be you, you were appropriating her, and I'd made a voodoo doll of my own boss's likeness because of it.

So I went back to the Devil I knew, anything had to be better than living with you in my life. I did the spells, the incantations, the seances, anything to bend the ear of the one entity I felt could deal with you.

But much like God, the Devil wasn't listening.

I may have inadvertently invited other, less helpful demons into my sphere, but that's a story for another day.

The point is, Elena, metaphysical beings—whether they existed or not—were not going to get you out of my life. I had to think with a pragmatic mind, use the tools and skills available to me.

What was I good at? *Agenting and editing*. What did I have that attracted you so much? *Keys to the locked door*. How could I leverage this to my advantage? *Give you what you want*.

Yes, Elena, it became so clear to me. The only way to get you out of my life, at least for a while, was to give you a little taste of the life you so craved.

You wanted an editorial agent? *Then you'd get one and more*. You wanted a career in publishing? *Then I'd have you work for it*. You wanted me as your agent? *Same rules applied*.

It wouldn't involve giving you my phone number, there wouldn't be any reason for you to contact me directly. You'd have a task to accomplish, one not quite insurmountable, but one that kept you at arm's length.

I made plans, Elena. Plans to enjoy life while I could. You could watch it all, stalk it all, I didn't care.

For an indeterminable amount of time, my life would be my own, and you'd be too busy to give a shit.

ELENA

I THOUGHT I was dreaming when I opened your email, the one asking for a Revise and Resubmit, though you did preface the request with, *Only do this if you agree with my suggestions.*

And plenty of suggestions you had, my manuscript sent back to me, with line tracking and editorial notes. By the end of this revision, I had the sneaky feeling I'd have written an entirely new novel.

You then added the disclaimer, because I suppose you had to, even though you knew it inapplicable to our situation, *Please remember, this is not an offer of representation. Only agree to this if you are certain you want to make the changes of your own accord.*

You said it like I had a choice, like I was ever going to throw away my one chance at securing your services. Okay, rewriting the novel according to your exact specifications

would take *months*, but all I had to do was keep the destination in mind.

I would follow your notes to the letter, giving you no excuse, *no excuse at all*, to reject me upon resubmission. Rejecting me then would be to reject yourself, and as humble as you are, I know you'd never do that.

In the months it took me to complete your request, your online persona transformed; what was once a wilted flower, your petals opened and blossomed like I hadn't seen in so long.

It was because of me, wasn't it? I had finally lived up to your expectations, given you hope that there was still untapped potential out there, and this in turn, had put a pep in your step. You were posting photos at a phenomenal rate, taking in the wonder and splendour of life, treating the world to selfies of your gorgeous face.

I fell in love with you all over again, but at the same time, I didn't have time to procrastinate. My own flower would remain untouched on the promise of a marathon rubbing session once my R&R was completed.

Your photos offered plenty of material to work with, an absolute gorge of a feast, I'd have trouble lasting till the end. That would be a nice little treat, should I finish the R&R to your exacting expectations.

I even paid for a proofreader to check it all, I didn't want one singel speling mistak to be an excuse for you to reject me.

See what I did there?

I wouldn't eat much that week due to lack of funds, but that's okay. Writing is to sacrifice, and my heaving jeans would thank you for it later.

Completed manuscript in hand—*okay, it was actually on my laptop, but my laptop was in my hands*—I was ready to send to you.

I was so nervous, sick to my stomach, sweating like a pig in an oven. I had pressed send to you literally hundreds of times in the past, but this time felt different. This was the click of the send button that would change my life, bring me one step closer to being a published author, all but guarantee a long *working* relationship with you for the next ten or twenty years. *The rest was simply a bonus.*

But I couldn't do it. I just couldn't press send. I was terrified!

I spent the rest of the day scoffing a week's worth of biscuits, because I didn't have any real food to eat. I binged YouTube videos, scrolling through countless astrology—*or horoscopes as I like to call them*—and tarot predictions, trying to find one that would give the green light to send you my R&R.

But they all talked of retrogrades, blocked energies and past life atrocities. I'll bet you didn't know that in a past life, I was a scribe who was killed for my beliefs? I thought about adding that to my author bio for a future cover letter, but

there was no need, was there? I could simply tell you this during *The Call*.

It might sound creepy, though I like to think of it as romantic, but I fantasised about our first meeting long before you'd ask to meet me in person.

I imagined us meeting for a drink, in a swanky bar in London. You'd tell me that this bar was a haunt for literary agents, but I'd secretly not believe you, preferring to believe you took me to a bar where no one would know who *you* were, keeping me all to yourself, not giving anyone else the chance to steal me away from you.

You spoke to me about being fair to myself. You urged me to send my manuscript to other agents, to give myself the best chance of making an informed decision. You would not ask for exclusivity, unknowing that I would demand it of you. Now that you'd read my full manuscript and asked to meet, my stock would be high; submissions sent to other agents, notifying them of your interest, would in-turn pique theirs.

But I didn't want them, did I?

I wanted you, and I did all this fantasising before you sent me your first rejection, all those many moons and suns ago, all those submissions ago. I didn't even have grey hair when all this shit first started!

And now we'd be having *The Call*, not in person, but online, like we were scared we'd infect each other with love and covid.

All I could think about was having the opportunity to ask you all the pertinent questions any un-agented writer would ask. *Before I commit and sign the contract, I need to know the following: What's your star sign? Do you have a boyfriend? If I call you in the wee hours, will you actually pick up?*

I wasn't going to bore you with questions about what your vision was for my novel, which publishers would we send it to, to submit to the London Book Fair or not, how do you deal with breaking up with an author?

I mean, that last one was never going to happen. *Never ever.*

I was never getting rid of you, and why would you want to get rid of me when fifteen percent of me would surely buy you a new kitchen at the very least?

Oh fuck it, I thought, just send the damn thing out.

But I refreshed the inbox first. I don't know why I did it. I'd love to say I had a gut feeling, or some kind of intuition, but I didn't. I just wanted to refresh my inbox, maybe open a new email, even a junk email, something that could waste some time and delay the inevitable.

A new email had arrived—

from a literary agent who wasn't you.

Asking for the full manuscript.

It was a wind-up surely. I had to double-check with my own brain that this wasn't one of my own fake email

addresses, with an email scheduled for this particular time, a wee pick-me up to deal with the mountain of rejections.

I remember doing that one time with your colleague's name. Christine sent me an email offering representation without even looking at my sample, and it was the biggest thrill, I was high as a kite for the rest of the day.

Then I felt dirty, like I had cheated on you, stabbed you in the back and fucked your workmate on top of your desk.

How could I do that to you? *Answer: I couldn't.*

Which begged the question, who the fuck was this email really from?

I opened it, and it all came back to me. A couple of days ago, with the finish line for the R&R in sight, I sent my new sample pages and improved synopsis to a carefully chosen list of seven agents, *Lucky number seven, though including you made eight, which lucky for me, was lucky in China.*

I told them all that I had a full request from another agent, an R&R from the great, editorial, Kate Finlay.

You didn't realise, did you? You gave me all that work to do, possibly thinking I wasn't up to the job. But I was, and your suggested edits made my novel immeasurably better, *Like, agents are creaming-over-this better.*

Okay, it was maybe inadvisable to tell them all that the full request came from you directly, I mean, I've been doing this for a long time, but I still don't know the etiquette for this.

Your name, short-listed Literary Agent of the Year, agent

of million-seller authors, even if this was all in the past tense, if you thought it worth a look, so did they.

Everyone in the business knew your editor background, knew that my manuscript had been given a once-over for free, why would they not at least take a look at the by-product of a golden, not-yet past-it, goose?

I even took your suggestion for a new title, though you did warn me it was very likely the publishers would change whatever title we came up with. It felt like you knew my story better than I did, knew me better than I did.

Isn't that another reason why I love you?

It probably took you by surprise when I finally hit send, my email stating that *five* other agents had requested the full manuscript.

Yes, Kate, when we started this whole shebang, over the course of a year I had a two-in-five-thousand chance of securing your services.

Now *you* had a one-in-six chance of securing me as your client.

The question was: what would you do about it?

I HAD to laugh when your email finally came—after downing half a bottle of wine and sobbing into my shirt, wiping mascara on my sleeve.

My revise and resubmit plan had bought me months of peace and tranquillity. *Four, whole, months.*

Would you let me sucker you a second time, allow me to ask for another round of edits? This time I'd rip your novel apart with a fine-tooth comb, like I was looking for nits on a mountain of dandruff, and give you twice the notes.

I chided myself for helping improve your novel. *Why did I do that?*

I couldn't help it. It wasn't in me to make a novel worse, and how could I make your ramblings any worse than they were? No, I gave you serious feedback, hoping the job to be a bridge too far.

But as I indulged your resubmission, I found myself

thinking something unfathomable. *This is actually quite good.*

Perhaps I was tipsy, yes, I'd had too much to drink. I would read this in the morning with sober eyes and see it for the steaming pile of shit that it obviously was.

Yes, it was Triceratops shit up to the height of Jeff Goldblum. *That is one big pile of shit!*

I kept reading, unable to take my eyes off your pages. It wasn't amazing, but neither was I able to put it down.

Who fucking knew it, Elena? Maybe there was a writer in you after all? You just needed the right editor, someone to trim the flab from all your meandering musings.

Elena Cartwright, the next Raymond Carver. Myself, the next Gordon Lish. *Who fucking knew?*

As I read on, immersing myself in this world you had seemingly created by your own hand, I remembered that I hadn't read your cover letter. The answers would be in there, along the lines of, *I'm sorry it took me so long to get back to you, but my aunt doesn't write so quickly these days!*

Yes, this aunt you occasionally mentioned over the years, I wondered what her literary achievements were? Perhaps she was the writer behind the pen? I just couldn't believe it was you.

I read your cover letter and shook my head with laughter. I mean, come on, Elena. If you're going to lie about how many Full Requests you have, at least keep it realistic. I've known of writers having six or seven

requests, but you having more than one seemed far-fetched.

Yet here you were, telling me you had five. *Oh*, I thought, *I better get my skates on and set up The Call, huh?*

That's what you wanted me to think, but there was no way I'd—

Well, if I were to give you the benefit of the doubt, I'd at least want to know who really requested your manuscript. Lies usually wrapped an element of truth, which meant that of your alleged five full requests, you might have at least one; two might be stretching it.

At the very worst, catching you in a web of deception could have its benefits. *I don't know why you lied, Elena, but I have to draw the line here. I simply cannot work with someone I don't trust. Good luck finding the best advocate for your work.*

It could've been the get out of jail card I'd always hoped to stumble across.

I wrote you back, congratulating you on your little successes, promising to get back to you with my thoughts within a couple of weeks.

Then I asked you a question which was incredibly unprofessional of me.

Who are the agents who asked for your fulls?:)

It's not like I could blanket email every agency in the UK, *or maybe I could?* You might have submitted to agents in the US, too; who knows, you may have submitted to

hundreds of agents. Time was a demanding lover without asking for more to chase-up all that.

No, it wasn't feasible.

Being unprofessional was the only way to find out what I needed to know.

Despite having played this game for more years than I can remember, you still didn't have the business nous, you didn't know what agents wanted, never mind publishers.

You would open your guts and spill, and thank me for asking.

Except, you replied, *I'm sorry, I don't feel comfortable sharing that information right now.*

I had another laugh at that. Of course you didn't feel comfortable, because had you mentioned any names, I would've found out you were lying through the fat, little fingers I imagined you had.

And yet, I found myself drawn to your novel. What had been a slow, turgid burn, was now—thanks to my editorial input—well, not fire, but certainly heat. It seemed to get better as it progressed, and when I sat down to read, sunlight pouring through my blinds, and looked up to find the only illumination in my room was the light emanating from my laptop screen, well, I felt paranoid.

Maybe you *were* telling the truth about the five requests. Your novel wouldn't set the world alight, but it was good. *Really good.* Good enough to make me forget concepts like time and daylight. It grew on me the more I

read, and all I could think of was, *This needs to be published tomorrow.*

Goddammit!

I had to know who these other agents were, which left me with little choice.

If I wanted to know the elusive answers, I would have to give you what you wanted, another taste of the life you craved.

The Call.

Yes, Elena, we'd set up a Zoom meeting, chat about your novel, chat about your literary future.

This would be my one chance to look you in the eye and put the fear of God into you.

ELENA

YOU WANTED to chat with me via Zoom, saying, *It would be great to put a face to your name, Elena.*

Oh, I would have loved that, Kate, I really would have. But my camera wasn't working properly, was it? I know I'd have to show you my face one day, because I'd be in your office signing on the dotted line.

But until that day, I wanted to keep a part of me secret, harking back to my need for you to love me for my books, not just my looks. I even put on a hoarse voice of sorts, making myself sound less like me, like I was a northerner from Manchester, rather than a southerner.

If we ever met in person, I'd blame the strange voice on having a cold or something, *I was bunged up, mate.*

You, on the other hand, had no such qualms about showing your face.

I have to admit, Kate, you looked gorgeous, even though

the video was blocky, due to an absolutely shit internet connection. But sometimes, when you didn't move, it allowed the connection to fill in the details, and I wanted to pause you and lick you all over, which I've done before but a laptop screen is no substitute for the real thing.

This time I'd have to contain my urges. Yes, my camera was off, you wouldn't see my face contort in sexual ecstasy, but there was no way I could contain the grunts, nor could we blame it on a man, because obviously only men did these disgusting acts.

I kept my sweaty palms on the desk, watching them twitch every time you played with your hair, licking at my dry lips whenever you smiled. God, you were such a tease.

But sex is sex, and the call is The Call.

I had to focus; self-pleasure could come later, *and I could come later too*. You'd forgive me for recording our chat but needs must.

You asked me the same question you asked in your email, the one I thought a bit unprofessional at the time, along the lines of, *who else is interested in your manuscript?*

Now that we were doing the call, it wouldn't hurt to show you my cards, maybe have you sweat a little at the thought of competition.

I listed the names, and I smirked as your eyebrows rose in surprise. Yeah, Kate, you didn't expect *him* and *her* to request, did you? Big-hitters weren't in your assumption, were they?

Then I hit you with a bigger revelation, one that had you speechless for longer than I imagined possible.

‘I have to tell you, Kate, I have received an offer of representation.’

You even coughed, making your apologies as you left our chat to grab some water. *Holy shit, Kate, you were flapping at the thought of losing me, weren't you?*

When you returned, you pulled at your shirt collar in an attempt to straighten up and compose yourself. ‘*So sorry, something caught in the back of my throat.*’

Yeah, I thought, a dildo called Representation.

If only you could see my face, the joy written on it, I was mere moments from all I had ever dreamed of. Because hey, this was it, wasn't it? You couldn't play it cool, ask for some time to think about it. You couldn't even let *me* have some time to think about it, you had to let me know how much you wanted me.

Now was the time for *you* to sell yourself to *me*, sum up your pitch in one sentence, show me that you knew the market, and humble yourself, like all those countless times the shoe was on the other foot.

I was half-minded to take your offer of representation and metaphorically shove it up your shapely rear, allowing you to enjoy the look on my face as I drank your tears and—

Well, I remembered the camera was off, so there went that wicked idea!

No, Kate, unlike you, I have unconditional love for my

fellow human beings. And for you, all is forgiven, water under the bridge, a floater long since flushed.

Except, you made your excuses, asking for time to think, and said you'd get back to me as soon as possible, and I thanked my lucky stars that you couldn't see the tears streaming down my face.

I spent the rest of the night refreshing my email, checking my phone for missed calls; though, considering you had already read my full manuscript, you wouldn't be emailing or calling me with an offer of representation at half-three in the morning, *I just got to the end, oh my god, I need you, I need you now!*

I made it until sixty-forty-two in the morning, and crashed on my armchair, eventually waking two-and-a-half hours later with a crooked neck.

Six emails lay in my inbox, from you and every other agent who had requested my full. Talk about lining-up all your ducks in a row. And you, Kate, you were my fattest, most juiciest duck, I would to leave you till last.

In any case, a couple more offers of representation wouldn't go amiss, especially when it came to bargaining with you, *Oh powerful Dormammu!*

I opened the four emails that would be full manuscript requests now asking for The Call.

One was a form rejection. I knew because it had the oh-so-familiar wording that had accompanied every form rejec-

tion sent out to other writers, as relayed by them on QueryTracker comments.

The next one was personalised, *I'm sorry, the manuscript didn't quite align with my vision*. In moments like this, I was tempted to suggest a visit to Specsavers, but I knew not to take the rejection too personally, other than to scream her fucking name into the wind along with all the horrible things I wanted to do to her.

The third and fourth were what I called, *sucker form rejections*, written as if they were personalised, but very much not, *The voice of your main character was strong, yeah, like you haven't cut and pasted that before...*

This was turning out to be a ridiculous, terrible morning. But I still had your email and the email from the agent that *had* offered representation.

I opened his email first, though I was somewhat perplexed that there was no contract attached for me to peruse before visiting his office to sign the official version.

I'm very sorry, Elena, I've had second thoughts about what I can offer you as an agent, and I now believe I'm not the best fit to take this novel further. Good luck with it!

All became still. I had to remind myself to breathe, manually telling my mouth to suck in and blow out; I couldn't tell my nose, because it was blocked with tear-induced phlegm.

This was worse than a one-night stand, you know the

kind, where you meet the man of your dreams, and you wake up and he's actually still there, and though he seems a bit uneasy and perplexed to see you, he says all the right things, even takes your phone number and promises to call and make another date, and you sit by the phone for hours, days, weeks and months, until you find his Facebook and realise he had a girlfriend before you even met, and you ruin his life, because hey, if karma ain't up for it, you certainly are, and—

Well, I wouldn't be doing that now, would I? As I've said, I've learned from my mistakes, and I know this type of behaviour won't fly in the publishing world, and barely flies in the real world.

No, I'd stay positive. I had lost the battle, all five of them, but the war was yet to be won. All was not lost. I still had you, Kate. It was written in the stars. I wasn't meant to be represented by anyone else, not even to simply use them as a bargaining chip to get to you.

No, we were more than that, we didn't need to be underhanded to get each other. Our collaboration would be effortless, the perfect union of divine timing and predestination.

And then I read your email.

You'd copied-in your correspondence with all five agents who were interested in me. You spoke of me in *very* unflattering terms. Your email to them was the equivalent of a dust-jacket blurb from a very famous author telling the reader how much he hated the book and its creator.

The new sensation of psychological horror writing! This author is horrific...literally!

You lied in your email. Accused me of falsifying interest in my manuscript. Said I used artificial intelligence to write my manuscript. Attached a screenshot of an email you allege I sent, one where I call you the C-word fifty-seven times, an email I didn't fucking write, you cunt!

You fucked me over, Kate. You really, *really*, fucked me over big time.

DEAR ELENA,

You didn't really think I would allow you to ruin another agent's life, did you?

Best wishes,

Kate

ELENA

AS WE'VE ESTABLISHED, you fucked me over, Kate. Still, your latest email was up there with being told Santa wasn't real, God might be a figment of my imagination, and an ugly motherfucker telling me I was a five out of ten with beer goggles, at best.

You betraying me was a scenario I never once thought possible, certainly not in the manner you did it. Reject me in all manners possible, yes. Fuck me over, so blatant and purposeful? A resounding no.

I had to buy a new laptop after mine learned how to fly out of the window and crash-land on the tarmac below. Thankfully the window was open, saving me buying a new one of those too.

I had taken so many rejections from you Kate, so many. Taken it with good grace. Crying in the privacy of my own home.

I never once took it out on you, did I? Not directly, not publicly, never. I knew the rejections weren't personal. You always said that, and every agent I've ever read about said that too.

But this was something else, Kate. This was personal. You not only ruined our chances of being together, you robbed me of my chance to be agented, to be another step closer to being published.

Why would you do that, Kate, why?

I love you—no, I *loved* you.

There was something in this manuscript, wasn't there? Perhaps it was raw when I first sent it, perhaps you did take pity on me for whatever reason, but with your expert editing skills, your detailed feedback, I made some magnificent wheat out of the chaff, didn't I?

How to explain five full requests and an offer of representation?

Before you ruined it all!

It's obvious. You can't bear the thought of seeing me with another agent, the one who got away, the one who will be a best-seller on someone else's client list.

Yes, Kate, you didn't want to live with the regret; the screenings of my major film adaptations that you would only find out about on Instagram; watching a movie with your husband, only to find it was an adaptation of my book, the same book you saw at the airport which had acknowledged-

ments thanking the agent who wasn't as stupid as you to let me slip through their butter fingers.

You're obsessed, there's no other way to look at it, you're obsessed—

with me.

It's funny how in moments of madness, sudden clarity can wash over a person. The side of my mouth twitched, something was forming on my face.

A smile.

You're obsessed with me!

But now I had a problem. You'd burned my bridges with five agents. I'd no doubt you'd do your best to nullify my attempts at getting *any* agent to represent me. Even if I managed it, in secret, no social media call outs of being *vague* and teasing the possibility of having an agent, you'd eventually find out once they plastered my face on their client list, or you'd read *The Bookseller* and find out about the seven-figure deal they secured for me, and slapped yourself with one-hundred-and-fifty-thousand reasons for regret.

Sure it would be annoying for them to have to back-out of the contract, but maybe there was some kind of morality clause or such likes, along the lines of, *We reserve the right to terminate this contract if we find out you're a bit of a cunt.*

As always, Kate, you held all the power. Redemption for my writing aspirations could only come with forgiveness from you. You were my lover, my muse, my nemesis, all rolled into one.

A sobering thought entered my mind. This was it, the end of the road, *but I can't let it go*. I couldn't send you more manuscripts, it was obvious you were taking the piss out of me. I couldn't send to other agents, you were closing every door I knocked on.

I had the mind to relay this embargo verbatim on all my social medias. I mean, you were brazen enough to send me your email with all the conversations attached.

I'd make a youTube video entitled, *What really goes on at literary agencies: A tale of treachery*.

But I didn't do that, for many reasons, one being, I couldn't ruin you. I couldn't let those sycophantic, lecherous wannabes show their true colours and cancel you.

And we all know what happens to whistleblowers. Pulling back the curtain would certainly enlighten all who would see, but it would leave me back at square one, the pariah who no agency, nor publisher, would touch with a bargepole.

No, it would be better for my own interests to look the other way, turn the cheek, allow you to ruin my life like you were untouchable, because that's how monsters get away with it, isn't it?

What next, a Damehood?

You'd be in great company. Sir Keir Starmer, *ruined Britain*; Sir Sadiq Khan, *ruined London*; Sir Gareth Southgate, *ruined the English national football team*.

Yeah, Dame Kate Finlay, *ruined the next Karin Slaughter.*

I'd never give up on my writing career, but I knew the timing wasn't write, *get it?*

But when it came to making you mine, there was no timing, no need to make it happen before a certain date, no chance of having missed any cosmic boat.

I'd just have to change my approach, up my game, come out from the shadows that I perpetually hid in.

So what if I was a vampire who'd melt in the sun? I'd do that, Kate, do that for you.

It was obvious. You needed saved. Saved from yourself. How else to explain your carelessness with those emails? I could have ruined your career with one tweet. You weren't thinking straight, you lost your ability to discern reason from madness.

I would not give up on you, Kate.

Never.

Once you'd forgiven me and all was good in the world once more, maybe I'd scratch that itch and write that novel, and you *would* ask to represent me, because hey, considering all you'd done to me, you'd be a fool not to.

And yet, forgiveness and traditional publishing seemed so far away. Life is short and I wasn't sure I could wait any longer. As my old aunt said, *'Elena, you absolute waste of space, if you want something in life, you've gotta go out there, grab it by the bollocks and crush them!'*

In spite of what you did, I didn't want to crush you. I wanted to caress you. Tell you that everything would be okay. You just got me wrong is all. You didn't really know me.

It was the internet's fault. The thing that enabled our relationship, was the very thing that was causing our communication problems. An online relationship was no substitute for the real thing. No longer could I be your Nigerian princess promising you a better life from a multitude of fake email addresses.

It was time for you to meet the real me.

In person.

I WAS TEMPTED, Elena, so, so tempted. All I had to do was keep my mouth shut.

Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil.

But the agent who offered you representation wrote to me, a kind of courtesy email, along the lines of, *Just a heads-up, darling, I know you had an R&R submission, and I really liked it and offered representation. No hard feelings, though, okay, and may the best agent win.*

I had nothing against him, nor did I have any fond feelings for him. I could've remained impassive, indifferent to the fate he had offered himself to.

But as you know, at least back when I was free to have an opinion without worrying about you stalking me, I was always preaching to anyone who'd listen about the evils in the world, and how standing by and doing nothing was as bad as the evil itself.

How could I live with myself if I handed him over to you on a platter? *In peace and tranquillity*. How could I sleep at night knowing you were ruining someone else's life? *Soundly, on a pillow filled with contentment*. If the poor man committed suicide, how would I have felt? *Relieved that it wasn't me!*

I couldn't do it. I couldn't do that to another person. So, I gave him a heads up, in the only way I knew possible: frank, to the point, *brutally* honest.

As for you, I intended on simply sending you my four-sentence email. It was short and sweet. Then I remembered, you don't do hints, do you? You'd get my email and reply, asking all sorts of questions, not putting two and two together.

I had to bludgeon you over the head—*now, there's an idea*—with the truth, copying in my correspondence with all five, poor souls who had been taken-in by your folly, minus their replies of course. It was one thing to incriminate myself, quite another to throw everyone else under the bus.

What would you have made of their replies anyway? *Dodged a bullet, darling...a pity, there was real promise there, setting aside the artificial intelligence element...I'll be sure to let everyone else know about her.*

A part of me, a *teensie, eensie-weensie*, part of me wondered if it was my place to ruin your dreams. In all fairness, you had written that novel yourself; you had proven

yourself by taking my feedback and making an incompressible mess a, *dare I say it*, publishable book.

In any other scenario, you'd have had my blessing and all the luck in the world.

But then something inside me rose to the surface, an aspect of my personality that I had swallowed down for so long. The insatiable need to gain revenge on those who had done me wrong.

I hadn't let this particular genie out of the bottle in so long, pretty much since I started my career in publishing and quickly learned that such behaviours were not welcomed, nor tolerated.

If someone did me wrong, I swallowed it down, kept my dignity. I never broke the illusion, like the publishing industry was the wrestling industry back in the 80s/90s and kayfabe was expected of us all. *Didn't you know, everyone in the publishing industry is a darling, lovely and full of sunshine and rainbows?*

It was a gamble, sending you the correspondence; you probably thought of exposing me, setting me alight on social media. But then you'd have remembered, all the harassment, the fake profiles, the unwanted gifts. I kept records of it all. *I always keep receipts.*

And I created a receipt of my own, copying and pasting the word 'cunt' over and over. You've never swore at me in correspondence, ever, and that was a problem. People don't

understand the strain of having a *nice* stalker, but they do know what it's like to receive written abuse.

You could easily screenshot the real email, the date and time showing the same as the one I used, but who would the baying public believe? Me, a well-known, not-quite super-star, literary agent? Or you, a desperate, sad excuse for a wannabe author? Who seems the more likely to have falsified an email using Pixelmator Pro?

I doubt the public would believe I intervened at all.

Of course, the other five agents would know the truth, and one of them, if they were feeling particularly pretentious, might've spoken-up in your favour, tipping the scales, *Kate contacted me behind the scenes, warning me off the alleged psychopathic writer. I'm ashamed to admit, I allowed her to decide for me.*

But even that wouldn't wash away the documented years of insidious torment, and, shock horror, you might have to reveal yourself fully. There must a be reason for you hiding yourself away.

Are you grotesque, covered in boils like a modern-day victim of the plague? Perhaps you're just ugly, which isn't a sin, but it's obviously something you find difficult living with.

Or maybe you're someone I knew, though I was quite fed up with feeling paranoid about workmates and acquaintances.

I took my chances, sent you what I wrote to my industry

colleagues, and the silence afterwards was utterly deafening, leaving me stewing on one particular thought: *I wish I had done this sooner!*

Yes, Elena, although you still lived in my head rent-free, it was good knowing you were finally out of my life.

Oh, how ignorance could truly be bliss. But as I was soon to find out, you weren't my only problem.

MALCOLM

I JUST DON'T KNOW, different day, same old shit. There's nothing worse than feeling dissatisfied with life. Going through the motions. Munching on a baguette, supping on sugary tea, day in, day out.

Working in the publishing industry is a dream for many. I count my lucky stars that I don't have to work a normal job as such. When my wife Kate found success with her authors and climbed up the agency ladder, a whole new world of opportunity presented itself.

'You could work with us. You'd be good at it. And we could spend more time together.'

Ah yes, time, that commodity worth more than gold. As if spending time with Kate after work wasn't enough, we could see each other 24/7, live out of each other's pockets, yes, the ball and chain would never be off with that arrangement.

‘Better watch your back,’ I said, my head inflating at the very thought of returning balance to the force of our martial status. ‘Literary Agent of the Year, here I—’

‘It’s an admin job.’

‘Sounds like a plan!’ I said, ever eager to take the easy way out. Plus I’d always wondered what goes on behind the scenes. I’m not ashamed to admit, I had literary dreams of my own. Might’ve even wrote a novel or two which I sent to a few agents and got nowhere with.

Well, I understand the realities, especially now. When I sent out those novels, I didn’t realise the odds were stacked against me, what with me being a man and all.

The publishing landscape was changing, and what had been taken for granted by men for years, was soon to be a thing of the past. Curse my bloody luck to be a fella who missed the train!

Don’t get me wrong, this job has its moments, as I sift through the digital slush pile, baguette in one hand, iPad in the other, hoping to find a rare submission that I can pass on to Kate.

This is Lorraine’s job, really, but one time I found a golden nugget before she did, and Kate gave me a thank-you blowjob that night, which is rare these days, because Kate’s too bloody selective with taking on new clients. I’ll bet aspiring writers don’t realise when Kate says she takes on two or three clients a year at most, that number represents the treats her poor hubby gets too, assuming he can find

these potential clients before her assistant does. *We're all suffering, dear wannabe authors!*

When looking through Kate's submission box, I start with the subject lines first. Sure, I could be fair and look at each submission, one-by-one, in order of date starting with the first one that came in.

But again, time, you see. It's always of the essence.

Before I know it, my baguette is mere crumbs, I'm ready to quit when I see an email that piques my interest, from an aspiring writer who has submitted to the agency before.

Ah, some sort of romance novel. Not really my thing, but if it's a romantasy, Kate will be creaming down to her knees and she'll most likely offer me a suck without me having to beg for it.

I bypass the cover letter. If I can't get past the first line of the writing sample, then it would've been a waste of time reading five-hundred words of a cover letter that promises more than it can deliver.

I read the opening line. *His name was Buck, Buck with a B, and he whipped me with his snake, my nipple clamps threatening to snap with the pressure of two bullets that would take out his eyes.* I spat out my tea. Holy shit, this was so bad, it was good, like E. L. James back when she was rightly considered fan fiction.

Should I be an agent one day, I'd sign this writer up immediately, at the very least have her write novels for my own amusement.

I was in a mind to send this to Kate immediately, just for the shits and giggles, but I knew it would piss her off, considering who wrote it. Besides, I couldn't stop reading. Was the humour intentional? *I slid down his greasy pole like a flag made of flesh and bone, making it only to half-mast, a symbol of mourning at my inability to take his majestic length.*

This not-quite romance, more-like porno, was having quite the effect on me, my own flagpole standing to attention. *Welcome to the Kingdom of Mal-cum.*

Okay that wasn't written, but I was certainly thinking it.

Before I knew it, I had my free hand on a baguette made from my own meat, tugging vigorously whilst laughing my head off. *Buck told me, sex is always best when it's fun.* It really is, dear wannabe author, it really is!

This is war, he said, and his instrument of destruction promised the coming of a hundred-thousand soldiers. I get it, I totally do!

I barely made it to the cliff-hanger ending before erupting. A pity, as I really wanted to know whether the bag over his head covered a handsome prince or a grotesque goblin!

Totally spent, my own soldiers dying on a tomato-ketchup-stained napkin, I exhaled with glee, before noticing my office door was wide open without anything such a knock.

Lorraine Centofanti, Kate's assistant and ambitious associate agent, peered into my office. She saw me in my half-naked state, and her almond eyes became saucers. I didn't

know where to look as she stepped fully into my office, adjusting her top to show more cleavage.

‘I can see you’re busy,’ she said, and then she left, leaving me wondering if I’d missed a trick.

When she closed the door behind her, I cleaned myself up and deleted the porn that would never appeal to Kate’s sensibilities.

And then I was caught between two thoughts.

One, I would have to put a lock on that bloody door.

Two, I could leave it as is and hold off a bit longer next time.

LORRAINE

I CLOSE Malcolm's office door and hurry back to my own—well, the one I share with his wife, Kate, and her dog, Poe—unbelieving of what I've just seen.

'Are you okay?' she says. 'You look...haunted.'

I take out my make-up mirror from my handbag. My face is whiter than usual, like blood-drained white.

I want to tell her. Surely that's the right thing to do? But I don't want to cause any trouble. I'm the newbie here, relatively speaking. Tom always says if they have redundancies I'll be first out the door, as I was last in it. They took a chance on me. If I speak up, I'll ruin things, quite possibly for myself.

It's my fault, isn't it? I mean, Malcolm was in his own, private office. What he does there is his business, and—

I heard laughter, and I knocked on his door. I didn't

enter until he said, 'Come in!' Or with hindsight, did he say, *cumming*?

As I opened the door, I heard him grunt, but I thought he was lifting a box of books, like the arcs for a client's new novel. But he wasn't. He was slouched on his office chair, knees akimbo, trousers and underwear at his ankles.

Something squirted from the flesh-coloured object held in his hand, and it certainly wasn't the baguette he came back from the shop with. *Wasn't big enough.*

I should've backed out as quickly as I came in, but I was frozen on the spot, fear overriding my flight or fight response.

And Malcolm would be mortified to be caught in such a situation, surely? Except, the look on his face was not one of embarrassment. It was a smirk, as he leered at me. I instinctively pulled my top a bit higher, anything to hide any sign of cleavage.

And then he said those words.

'I'd ask you to give me a hand, but...' When he licked at his bottom lip, my flight response finally kicked in.

I turn to Kate. 'I think you best sit down.'

'Me? Why? I'm fine, it's you I'm worried about.'

I get off my seat, and guide Kate to hers. Somehow, I find my courage and tell Kate what happened, only leaving out Malcolm's words, because this is messed-up as it is and I don't want to ruin their marriage.

‘I see,’ she says, which is not the response I was expecting. She looks away, staring into space.

‘Are *you* okay?’ I ask.

Her head snaps back. ‘Yes, yes. Of course.’ She places her hand on mine. ‘This is totally unacceptable. I will speak with Malcolm. He’s—been under a lot of pressure recently.’

‘You mean, he likes to masturbate when he’s stressed?’

Her eyes open wide. ‘No! No, no. I don’t mean—I just mean, this is obviously a one-off, a totally out of character occurrence.’ She squeezes my hand tight. ‘It won’t happen again.’

It’s not like we have a dedicated HR to complain to, which is perhaps a good thing considering my previous employer’s HR department had a habit of sacking the whistleblowers.

‘You’ll need to inform Debbie,’ Kate says, catching me by surprise. ‘Tell her everything. Every detail.’

I swallow hard. Debbie, the founder of this very agency. If I tell her, she’ll surely send Malcolm packing. Though Kate wants to do the right thing, I’ll be left with the aftermath. She might eventually resent her moral fibre, blame me for fifty percent of a family income gone in an instant.

‘Do you think that’s a good idea?’

Kate sighs. ‘It’ll mean the end of Malcolm’s publishing career. Debbie will blacken his name throughout the industry.’ She tries to smile. ‘But perhaps that’s what he deserves.’

I don’t mean to sound uncharitable, but it’s amazing she

believes me so readily. It's quite the allegation, and let's be honest, women are rarely believed initially. Unless it's caught on CCTV then people say we're asking for it, exaggerating, lying through our teeth to get one over a man. Even when it is on CCTV, commentators will blame our clothes, our manner, a kiss means we gave the green light to rape! And the worst part is, it's often other women who don't believe us.

'Don't worry,' I say, 'I'm not going to tell anyone about this. I think Malcolm deserves a second chance.'

I'm not sure I believe the words I'm saying, and Kate looks disappointed rather than relieved, which is leaving me conflicted and wishing I hadn't opened my mouth in the first place.

No, I'm not to blame, he shouldn't have tugged on his todger in the first place!

Though there's a sickening feeling I can't quite shake.

Despite her words, when I first told Kate about what happened, the first look she gave me suggested this was not a surprise at all.

ARE YOU MARRIED, Elena? Or have you been married in the past? I think back to when I said, 'I do.' Little did I know, that the man standing next to me, the one I had promised my life to, in sickness and in health, till death do us part, would not quite live up to the billing he'd had me believe in.

'Pleasuring yourself in the office? Again? This time in front of Lorraine!'

Malcolm's sheepish, like a child who hasn't brought his homework to school. 'Is that what she told you?'

'It doesn't matter what *she* told me. I want *you* to tell me what happened.'

He looks to the side.

'Don't think about it, just tell me the truth.'

He waffles, stumbling over his words, whining on about having made a mistake. 'She didn't even knock!'

Lorraine is polite, always asking before doing. I find it hard to believe she'd barge into someone's office, much less stand there, gawping.

'Look, I don't want to get her into trouble,'—ah, Malcolm, forever drowning in chivalry—'but I think she liked what she saw.'

I remind myself, men are different. They are visual creatures. How else to explain the unnecessary need to send a woman a photo of their erect penis. Whether they want to admit it or not, men like to look at erect penises and naturally think we women do so too.

'Trust me when I say, seeing you splayed over a chair, your manhood dripping and shrinking post-orgasm, is the last thing Lorraine would have enjoyed seeing.'

Malcolm's voice takes on a haughty tone. 'You're judging me, humiliating me.'

'You do that to yourself.'

Malcolm switches tactics. Being a victim isn't working, so he tries shifting the blame.

'As my grandmother always said, if you want to keep a man happy, fill his belly and empty his balls.'

'Your grandmother said no such thing!'

'Well, so what if I just read that somewhere, it's true, isn't it? I wouldn't need to chug in the office if my wife took care of me at home!'

Malcolm has a point. I'm not taking care of his sexual needs, because in all honesty, a whining, pitiful excuse for a

man does not turn me on in the slightest. When I reluctantly blow him after a week of being badgered, gaslit, and guilt-tripped, he doesn't seem to mind that I'm more interested in reading *Publisher's Marketplace* on my phone than the inches of Malcolm in my mouth.

'You won't even let me cum in your mouth! You used to let me do it all the time. Back when you gave a shit. What sort of wife makes her man cum in a tissue like he's some kind of horny teen?'

The sort who didn't realise what she was signing up for! In sickness and in health, with cum squirted down your throat on a daily basis. Retrospectively, I don't!

Back when we were in the throes of passion, and Malcolm reciprocated the love, I did what pleased him. I don't remind him that he rarely, if ever, goes down on me, that he's turned into a selfish lover. But hey, I don't have desires and wants and needs, I'm simply a frigid, fridge, whose main purpose in life is to sexually satisfy the man I made the mistake in marrying.

'You're lucky I managed to persuade Lorraine to not report you to Debbie.' I'm not above a white lie or two when it comes to the power dynamics of a failing marriage.

'Pfft. If Debbie was bothered, she'd have sacked me the first time around.' Yes, this is not our first rodeo on the bull called immoral behaviour. 'She knows I'm too important to the agency.'

I let out a laugh. A guttural, sarcastic laugh. There's

narcissism, and then there's Malcolm. I want to tell him that administrators are two a penny and the only reason Debbie hasn't fired him up until now is the fact she's allergic to drama. The mere thought of impropriety afflicting her agency is enough to bring her out in a rash. Debbie would rather destroy Lorraine's fledgling career than allow her precious agency to be tainted by scandal. Debbie looks the other way and the skeletons in her cupboard threaten to take the doors off their hinges.

'And you'd leave the agency and take all your clients with you if she did that to me.'

I sigh. The truth is a bitch and then some. Loyalty was not always rewarded, nor appreciated, but it was always demanded.

Malcolm smiles, and anger bubbles inside me. This time, I will not allow him off so lightly.

'You do this one more time and—I don't mean, you get caught again, I mean you even think of pulling out that little thing and we're done. You're on your own.'

'Little? You think my thing is—'

'Oh, fuck off, Malcolm!'

And he does, slamming the door behind him, *I'm off to the pub* his parting words because alcohol cures all ills.

Can you believe this, Elena? The shit I deal with every day. If you knew how messy this industry is, would you still be so desperate to be a part of it? I have my doubts. But then, maybe, like Debbie, you'll be happy to turn a blind eye to all

you see, too. We all do it. It's the only way we can survive and thrive. And so what if this industry's reputation is built on a lie? As long as readers are entertained, writers are living out their dreams, agents are making a commission, we're all happy aren't we? We're all inclusive, metoo, yoo-hoo!

Malcolm certainly has issues, but after what I did to you, am I really the right person to be judging him? I'm projecting my own guilt, aren't I?

Thank god it's Friday. In another lifetime I'd be in a bar, meeting up with old school friends, allowing Malcolm to do the same somewhere else. We'd both come home drunk and ravage each other.

But tonight, as is the way in recent years, I settle onto the sofa with a glass of wine, open my submissions inbox and hope to win the lottery, or at least chance upon something that will wile my hours away with a degree of entertainment.

Malcolm returns home early, hands behind his back. As much as it irritates me to know I won't have the night alone, at least I won't be subjected to drunken, unwanted advances mid-sleep.

'I thought you'd be out all night.'

'I thought so too, but then I thought, well, I didn't want us to be on bad terms.' With one hand, he pulls out of a bouquet of flowers. 'Your favourites.'

I told Malcolm roses were my favourite flowers when he gave me flowers for the first time and I didn't have the heart to tell him I hated them, always living the English way, that

is, to be polite and not really tell others how you feel. Thus, my inability to be upfront and straight to the point, has meant I regularly receive flowers I hate from a man I am growing to detest.

‘Flowers doesn’t change—’

‘I know, I know. I just wanted to say I’m sorry, that’s all.’ Malcolm offering an apology with no ulterior motive? There was a first. And I didn’t believe it.

‘What else is behind your back?’

I allow myself a moment of whimsy. Tickets to the theatre, cinema, bowling, another bottle of wine. Anything to get me out of the house or out of my mind, and away from the deluge of submissions that weren’t ticking my boxes at all.

‘I have a favour to ask.’

I would’ve rolled my eyes, but really, what was the point?

‘I’m not doing anything for you. You can forget about it. Go take care of yourself tonight.’ *You have plenty of practice with that!*

‘I don’t mean sexu—remember the novel I wrote? The one you gave me feedback on.’

How could I forget? Malcolm’s magnum opus. My husband, the wannabe writer. To be fair, he could write. It was just a pity he never had an idea worth writing about, never mind sell. Writing about what he knew was not what the majority of female readers wanted to read.

‘I listened to what you said about a man writing female

characters, and how, even though I didn't mean it to sound misogynistic, because you know me, I absolutely love women, it could look like that by having an all-female cast who were, to a woman, demented.'

He slaps down what looks like an A4 printed manuscript onto the coffee table. 'I remember you said you can't read too much of my work due to looking at screens all day. So, this'll be easier on your eyes. Plus, you can mark any revisions with a red pen. I printed it out this morning at the office, but, well, what with...yeah, I didn't think it the right time.'

At this conjecture I'd normally unzip his trousers, get out my phone, and then complain about a stiff jaw and tiredness, encouraging him to let go. Reading—and editing—his novel would take hours, a blowjob, as unappealing as it was, would take minutes. *Perhaps only three.*

But he doesn't even deserve that.

'I'm busy looking at submissions from real writers, hoping to find an actual manuscript I can sell.'

That had to hurt, Elena, it had to.

'Well, I'll, er, just leave it here, in case you change your mind.'

'Highly unlikely.' I don't even look at him when I say it, though I'm desperate to see the look on his pitiful face.

Malcolm goes to the kitchen, returns with a bottle of beer and slinks off to our spare room, the one that is allegedly a home office but where a box of tissues will not

last the week. *What is it with Malcolm and anything that resembles an office?*

I continue my fruitless search, a couple of promising subject lines taking me to cover letters that are complete opposites in professional execution. A two-hundred-word effort is sublime, concise and demands my attention. But I don't represent science fiction, which a quick glance at my bio would have enlightened her to. The other, a rambling mess in a genre I do represent, but it seems the author has no clue who the book is aimed at, and neither do I. *This book will appeal to anyone who enjoys reading!*

I'm about to quit for the night when I give the inbox a last refresh. A new email appears, though it's further down the list, like it was sent hours ago and only now decides to make itself known.

It's from you, Elena. Impeccable timing as always. This day just gets worse and worse.

Malcolm emerges from our office, no doubt a spoonful lighter. 'What's wrong? You look pissed off. *More* pissed.'

'I received yet another email from Elena Cartwright.'

'I thought Lorraine was filtering those out?'

'I thought so too.'

Malcolm gives a wry smile and wanders away, muttering as he goes, 'You just can't get the staff these days.'

ELENA

YOU CANNOT BELIEVE everything you read, see or hear, Kate.

Stalking someone is not like how they portray in the movies and television.

Let me illustrate some unrealistic scenarios. A guy sits in a car watching his subject leave her home and return to her home. All the while he sits there, not needing to eat, piss, shit, or even masturbate—*what kind of guy can survive the latter for any amount of time?*—and of course, she doesn't notice him with his binoculars or SLR camera with a zoom lens longer than his dick.

I tell you now, if I look out my window and see any stranger sitting in a car, I'm gonna notice it. No matter how inconspicuous the car, how innocent the person, I will notice. And if he even looks up at my window, never mind pull out an over-sized viewing device, I will fucking notice.

These guys on film and television, they don't even have tinted windows. They're not obscured by some kind of magic protective shield, no, they're protected by something far more effective. Plot armour.

Such defences don't exist in real life, and, it's not like I could park outside your office and test out this fictional theory. Thanks to Mayor Khan, the road was a low emission zone, a bus lane, a cycle lane, and the one parking space there costs five-hundred pounds per day, and I'm exaggerating but it's not far from the truth at all.

And, despite knowing where you worked, I didn't know where you lived. I checked the Companies House register hoping you might have a sideline business registered as a limited company, preferably with a home-based correspondence address; you know, an Etsy shop selling earrings shaped like little books, or an eBay shop selling signed books from your own client list.

Many literary agents only make money on their commissions, and recent years had been lean for you. I wouldn't want to suggest that all your webinars for the working-class were more to do with you needing paid, but we've all got to eat.

Anyway, there was nothing. You, Kate, were nothing but committed to your day job and relative poverty.

I looked to television shows for inspiration and found myself standing outside your office on a cold, wet afternoon, which turned into a colder, wetter evening, not realising that

you'd not come into the office that day, never mind have the opportunity to leave it.

In television shows, a stalker always knew where his prey was; I say his, it's usually men doing this sort of thing, isn't it? Maybe that's why I struggled. I was obviously shit at stalking and parallel parking. But hey, I'm a woman, one day I'd multi-task and stalk a few people at the same time, *put that in your pipe and smoke it, misogynists everywhere!*

I tried the direct approach again, except this time I would need to find somewhere realistic to commence my voyeuristic endeavours, a place where, if need be, I could piss, shit and eat, not necessarily in that order. Masturbation could wait for the night's reminiscence of the day before.

There wasn't even a bench for me to sit on, and the weather was awful. I couldn't wear oversized sunglasses in an attempt to disguise, if anything, what with the overcast-day forecast and the drizzling rain, I'd have looked like an idiot, bringing more attention to myself than without them. No, films and television lied, there was no easy way to stalk a person, in person, not if you wanted to remain undetected.

Thus, I sat in a small cafe across the street called Chilli Beans, the one business I could enter, and stay for a duration, with a view of your literary agency.

Okay, I had to wait two and a half hours for that stupid woman to get off her laptop so I could have that one seat with the required view. She'd been sitting there with an almost-finished coffee when I arrived and was content to sit

without purchasing anything else for the rest of her time there, and when I say her seat was important because of the view, I mean, even sitting in her seat, I would have to arch myself over to the window, almost pressed up against it, to see the agency's entrance.

Honestly, this woman, Instatag @meridan_shrivers would've been sitting there for the entire day, had I not sat near her and peered at her laptop whilst she was in the toilet. She practically asked me to do so, *Do you mind looking at this while I go to the loo?*

I did not mind, I did not mind at all. I think she meant looking *after* this, but if you're not clear in your communication, expect to be misunderstood, or in this case, taken literally.

Her moment of weakness opened a portal of opportunity for me. I forgot about my original idea, which was to notify the staff that this freeloader hadn't bought anything in the past two hours, hoping they would throw her out as it was obvious she had an aversion to spending money and supporting local independent businesses.

When she returned to my—*her*—table, I returned to my phone, my fake Insta account loaded up for perusal, I scrolled through the life and times of the stranger who would take my ideal seat.

She had over one-hundred posts, but not a single one featured her. *Advisable in the circumstances.*

Peppered throughout were graphics supporting BLM,

up with trans-rights, down with the far-right, vegan pride! The last one was a piss-take, given the cake slice she devoured two hours ago, the one which the menu explicitly said, *contains gelatin*.

Ending with today's post, a photo of her now gone cake and coffee, and the message, *In a cafe making the most of the free wifi to do work*. If by work she meant scrolling through other people's Instagram accounts and reading the Daily Mail and leaving scathing comments on every news article about transgender women taking part in women's sports, then by jove, she was a busy bee. *And quite the hypocrite!*

I typed a comment and looked over to her, pressing send and gauging her reaction.

The upturned eyebrows, the mouth slackening, soon to be covered by an obviously sweaty palm; she looked up and around, and for a moment I thought she might know it was me, but of course she didn't, because although I was a stranger, I was only moments ago the caretaker of her beloved laptop.

She had trusted me with that she held most dear, so of course it wasn't me who left a comment saying, *Get a job you fucking freeloading ginger-haired overweight speccy cunt!!!* Yes, it was a horrible thing to say, yes, I didn't use any commas to keep any wannabe detectives off my trail, and yes, I typed three exclamation marks to really emphasise my point!!!

How would @blahblahblah know of her physical appearance when her online identity gave no clues of such?

It was obvious to me that this woman, this Meridan, had lived in a bubble of sorts, managing to navigate the perilous world of social media without anything as much as a scratch.

Her fake activism, her insincere protests, hidden behind a montage of pretty photos of books, drinks and cats; interestingly other people's cats, not her own. The closest she had come to receiving abuse was someone disagreeing with her, to which a quick and simple blocking of the offending account sufficed, according to her own self-congratulatory post-fight comment.

Had she been familiar with real online abuse, she would've changed her settings to filter out words such as *fucking* and *cunt*. Maybe *ginger* and *speccky* were banned too, as hate crime words, although this was London, not Scotland.

Had she filtered, I would've resorted to sending her a dick pic from my collection of unsolicited dick pics, because what is more romantic than receiving an unwanted photo of a man's blood-engorged junk with accompanying hairy/creased shopping bag?

I couldn't let her away with simply blocking me and continuing with her day of sucking-up a small business's free Wi-Fi and taking away valuable real-estate that could be used for an actual, paying customer.

No, I had to strike to kill.

She was in such a hurry to leave, she almost forgot her phone, *oh why couldn't you do that, Kate?* and I had to shout her back and hand it to her.

Thanks, she merely said, barely giving a thought to my kind gesture. As tempting as it was to keep her phone for a while and cause all sorts of havoc on her social media, I had better things to do. I sat on her warmed seat and watched as she scuttled down the street, looking to her left, looking to her right, a paranoid freak if ever there was one.

I pressed my face to the glass window, nose upturned on the cold surface, breath mist appearing and disappearing and reappearing, my focus entirely on the entrance of your literary agency. Not even the teenage boy who knocked on the window and laughed at me, pressing his nose up like he was a piglet mimicking my own face, could disturb my concentration.

An hour passed, and I bought another coffee with a slice of chocolate cake sprinkled with chilli powder, because I'm no freeloader and I certainly didn't want anyone leaving explicit slurs on my Instagram.

By the time I finished the cake, crumbs all over the window sill, lips hot to the touch, there was still no sign of you, and this time I had checked that you would be there, your X account tweeting—*sorry, X-ing?*—that you were having a busy day in the office.

Where are you, Kate? I grimaced at the thought of

purchasing another slice of cake, adding another millimetre to my waistline.

But surely you had a life to lead outside of work, a home to go to?

Just as I was about to give in, my need for proper food overriding the temptation to eat more cake and drink more coffee, the universe cut me some slack.

The back of your unmistakable blonde head left the office, door swinging back to its default position. You were dressed in a smart black coat, down to the knees, covering what looked like dark brown boots. Although the slack was welcomed, the universe wouldn't make it too easy for me, as you walked in the opposite direction of the cafe, my intense stare burning into the back of your head from a thousand yards.

With everything already paid for, I slung my hook, practically throwing my jacket over my outstretched arms, my face both steaming hot on one side from the situation I found myself in, and freezing to the touch on the side that had been pressed against the window for too long.

I huffed and puffed along the road as we left the salubrious area you worked in and entered a street where every sign, smell and language made me feel exposed, alien, watched.

I followed your blonde head as it bobbed through this mass, until it stopped at a bus stop, a rather busy bus stop.

Divine timing was in full flow as the distinctive red

double-decker bus came into view. It alighted, and I watched as you boarded from the rear.

I broke into a sprint, one which would give me a stitch in my lung, but excitement and anticipation overrode my pain.

I hopped onto the bus, probably the last person to do so. It was mobbed inside. But I spotted you sitting on a seat near the front, on the ground floor. This was the nearest we'd ever been, and all I wanted to do was creep up to you and sniff your pristine hair.

Had the bus been quieter, I'd have sat a few rows behind at most, but there wasn't space to swing a cat, so I reluctantly headed up to the top floor.

Even there, all seats were taken, and no chivalry was afforded to me. I stood holding a bar, swinging from side to side as the driver took bends at speed, trying my best to see out the windows on the left side of the bus.

Finally, a man-spreading simpleton rose from his seat, freeing up two spaces, which I took for myself and my handbag.

For the rest of the journey, face pressed against yet another permeating, cold window, I watched to see if and when you would exit the bus, leading me to your home.

Eventually, the back of your blonde head left the bus, in an affluent area which confirmed what a great agent you were.

I flung myself down the stairs like baboon descending

from a tree, teeth bared, pushing stair-dwellers out of my way. I'd have struck them with my bare bottom had I the chance.

Thankfully, two other bus-dwellers had exited the bus and were walking behind you, giving me a little human camouflage to saunter behind.

But soon they went their separate ways, leaving me lingering behind you like an eggy fart. *Though I like to think your farts smell like roses, my queen.*

Eventually we reached your home, my eyes straining to see you as I'd left too much space between us. The faint echo of your front door slamming behind you had my heart palpitating.

You lived in a pretty, if unspectacular terraced home, a tiny garden adorned with...gnomes.

Not quite the detached house with massive garden and modern decor I always imagined. But this being London, you were probably up to your eyeballs in a mortgage for posterity to have even this.

I was stuck between the realisation that I'd finally found where you live, and, asking myself, *what do I do now?*

Again, unlike what television shows would have you believe, you couldn't simply stand outside someone's home watching them go about their business, nor could you sneak up to their windows like a Peeping Tom, not when the homeowner had installed floodlights and you were stalking someone on a cold, drizzly winter's night.

Instead, I walked up and down the street continuously, stopping outside or near your home, pretending to check my phone and look about for directions like I was lost. My face looked east, but my eyes looked west, watching your shadow occasionally rise from its seat, your room lit up by the brightness of a television.

A fortuitous moment approached when I caught sight of the titles of your TV entertainment through the netting. *Coronation Street*.

Call me a dreamer, but in my fantasies, I imagined you, a literary agent no less, going home and reading through a million submissions from writers around the world, and during whatever downtime you allowed for yourself, you would read actual published authors, to keep yourself in shape, peak mental fitness, a reminder of the standard these wannabes had to emulate if not better.

At the very least, I imagined you watching TV as a way of learning, a thoughtful documentary, a classic black and white film from the golden years, the latest zeitgeist phenomenon just for something to talk about on X.

Coronation Street, not so much. And as the credits rolled, which I counted was the sixth time I'd passed your home since the program began, I just couldn't shake the feeling that you would turn the channel and start watching *Eastenders*.

Never meet your heroes, there was never a truer saying.

With the programme finished, and the realisation that

the outside world was darker than your stalker's heart, you approached the window and reached for your curtains, ready to close the door on my brief insight into your private life.

And that was when I realised the folly of everything I'd done that day.

This woman, standing at what I thought was your window, was not you at all.

Which begged the question: *Just who the fuck was she?*

WHEN YOU LEFT MY WORLD, a cloud was lifted and the only way was up. This became apparent in all aspects of my life.

I welcomed my first new client in too long. My first foray into representing Romantasy; think, sexy goblins with a penchant for eating-out lonely, vulnerable women. It had bestseller written all over it, and I had the utmost *pleasure* in telling you that your latest romantasy novel, which was pornography masquerading as romantasy, was too similar to a current client. *The timing is never right, is it, Elena?*

Better yet, the woman writing it had all the tools to be a success, both on the page and off it. On the page, Sarah Barrett had impeccable writing and a knack for industry trend timing.

Off the page, an Instagram account with followers in the thousands. I know we agents say that having a social media

presence doesn't really matter—unless you're writing non-fiction—but for me, knowing that someone is real, that this real person can attract numerous followers, that she is comfortable in her own skin and won't give me the heebie-jeebies, well...

I can forgive the narcissism that necessitates having over six-hundred selfies, if it means knowing that the person in the photo is the real thing, even if it's a rough approximation of the real thing.

Radiohead's *Fake Plastic Trees* doesn't quite do justice to these face-altering filters but at least Sarah's filters were simply a smoothing of the skin rather than an uncanny valley replacement of the entire face.

I wish you knew how I felt when I read her sample, asked for the Full, read the Full, had The Call, and offered her representation. I wish I could have looped you in, but only on condition that you looped me in on how it made *you* feel.

Jealous? Heartbroken? Utterly defeated? Your dreams decimated. I could lie and say that Sarah's journey is not something you should compare to your own, but I won't lie, Sarah's journey is a parallel universe to your own.

Where you stumbled, she flew; where you fell, she rose. While you were too scared to show yourself, she basked in the glow of self-love and confidence, even if both were likely self-deception.

When Sarah walked into my office, an identikit blonde-haired, white woman, a look and ethnicity that has taken

over our industry from agents to authors, myself included as you very well know, I smiled. For the first time in months, that magic feeling of knowing you have a prospect that will have publishers pre-empting and/or bidding furiously for, and well, it was better than the sex I still wasn't having.

I mean, getting rid of you did wonders for my work life, but not everything was salvageable. At least Malcolm wasn't cheating on me, *we both agreed, self-love doesn't count.*

Meeting Sarah in the flesh, her perfume sweet, her attitude casual yet confident, was a palate cleanser after the stench of desperation that accompanied your every email.

Not only did she have a fully-fleshed novel—which even by my own editing standards, needing very little done to it—but she had outlines and drafts for future novels. This woman was not just a novel, she was a brand in the making, a brand that would have Christine's smile melt into a puddle of envy.

I could see Sarah shining her light and bringing in income for the next ten years at the very least.

What have you brought to the table in the last five years, Elena? An idea? Not even a fully formed idea. I remember an absolute stunner from you, *In the end, the main character isn't who she says she is, but all I need to think about is how to start the novel. As you love working editorially with your clients, I'm sure we can come up with a good storyline. Anyway, here's the last ten pages of what will probably be around a 400-page novel, for your kind perusal.*

Come on, Elena, what did you expect me to do with that? Write the novel for you? Allow you to tag your ending to my own book and publish it under your name?

Meeting Sarah was cathartic, allowing me to purge all the emotions I had for you, which were bottled-up inside me. For once, I could throw myself into a project, in a client's potential career.

I tried my best, absolutely tried my best to savour the moment, and not allow any thoughts of you to sour my happiness.

But I knew, in the back of my mind, the pit of my stomach, that you wouldn't give up so easily. That you'd be back one day, possibly when I least expected it.

You have no shame, Elena, no sense of self-worth and pride. You'd stop at nothing until you got what you wanted.

In a perverse way, I was counting on it.

LORRAINE

KATE WAS BEGINNING to open up, no longer afraid to show herself on social media. I told her, *don't let anyone cower you into being a lesser version of yourself*, and ever since, she's been rampant with the selfies.

'Can I try your glasses on?' she says, waking me from my reverie. 'I want to look a little more sophisticated.'

'Sure,' I reply. She slips on my glasses, barely noticing any discernible difference in my appearance, and merely quips, 'Is there any prescription to these? I can see fine through them. Never can with my mother's.'

Ah yes, Kate's mother, who wears bottle-top glasses that magnify sight to the power of ten, glasses so dense and powerful, any other glasses would be seen as non-prescriptive in comparison.

I only met the woman once when she came by the office. She had a permanent look on her face, mouth pursed, nose

constantly twitching, as if she could smell shit everywhere she went.

There was tension between them. I didn't get the impression they were that close, more like a dutiful daughter—to an extent—with an overbearing mother.

She perused the bookshelves behind Kate's desk, all Kate's authors on display.

'It's hardly Hemingway, is it? Where's Brontë?'

'I represent living authors, mum.'

'A shame.'

Yeah, Kate's mother had a real bee in her bonnet about commercialised fiction, or *dumbed-down nonsense* as she called it.

'Literary fiction rarely sells,' Kate said, as way of explanation. 'I do have bills to pay.'

Her mother wasn't having it. 'You get what, twenty or so manuscripts a day? Surely one of these—aspiring authors, can string a sentence together? Surely one has the potential to win a literary prize, get noticed, make money.'

'If only it was that easy.'

I wondered why Kate didn't tell her the truth. That she loved commercial fiction, loved genre, loved the authors who wrote them.

I, for one, was grateful for Kate's literary tastes. Had her Manuscript Wish List asked for literary fiction, I'd have been bored out of my mind sifting through them. Not to say such things are bad, but they're not my cup of tea.

It's exhausting enough reading submissions from amateurs that don't have proper punctuation and do have spelling mistakes galore; reading manuscripts that do this on purpose, as some kind of non-standard, experimental layout, no thanks.

Don't get me wrong, if someone sent me a modern-day *The Karamazov Brothers* and could put on a Russian accent, I'd be all over that like a rash. But these things do not happen.

No, what constitutes literary fiction these days is a thousand pages of child abuse and suffering and torture porn and...

Well, it's not for me, no sir'ee.

Give me a good thriller, nicely plotted, stakes galore, and I'll bump you to the front, and sing your praises to Kate. If I really like it, I'll keep you to myself.

I've only done that once, and not in the way you think. A writer submitted to Kate, I immediately saw the potential and forwarded it on. A month later, I asked Kate if she'd read the full and offered yet. Kate hadn't got past the cover letter. I could sense that she wasn't feeling it at all. So I took my chance, asked if I could maybe contact the writer instead.

At the time, I was still looking for my first client. In the end, she rejected me for an offer with another agency. *Some you win, some you lose.*

The rejection was hard, and it was only one rejection. How do writers feel? Kate only takes on maybe three clients

a year, which gives them a roughly three-in-seven-thousand chance of success.

But they'll ignore those odds, because they believe in their story, they know they're on to something special, something which will propel them into the tiny minority.

Yet, for all that Kate champions, and she does do her bit, there's another side to her. If she doesn't like something, she really doesn't like it. The word *compromise* doesn't seem to be in her vocabulary.

Take what she did to her client, Indigo Hanford. That was beyond cold, and it shocked me when Kate did it without batting an eyelid.

But having met her mother, I guess the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

ELENA

I ALWAYS WONDERED where this new obsession would lead me; fame, fortune, a penthouse in the city to call my own, perhaps even fix up my dear aunt's cottage to become a writer's retreat for myself.

I didn't imagine I would be rummaging around in an industrial-sized bin, the stench overpowering, the physical embodiment of a Steve Cutts animation, the excesses of humanity contained within its walls, disgusting, diseased, rotten food and the ultra-processed remains of dead animals, looking for any paper evidence that would enlighten me as to your home address, Kate.

No, it's safe to say I didn't imagine ending up in this scenario at all.

There's something about writing, the need to never give up, the knowing that all that time you sunk into writing novels that no one will ever read cannot be taken back. If

you have a positive mindset, you might say it's all practice, every failed book is simply a book nearer to the one that succeeds, you're a better writer for all the work you put in.

But on darker days, you admit, you're wasting your life away. Your body actually confirms this as you have aches and pains where you once didn't, repetitive strain injuries in your hands and wrists, a forever aching neck and back. What's the point of it all?

If someone writes a book and no one ever reads it, was it ever written?

And then, you rinse and repeat, because really, it takes a tougher mind, a brutal mind, to stop doing what you're doing. To call it a day, admit defeat, go back to that mindless job, that mindless existence, another hamster on the wheel where you truly belong. Dreams are for dreamers, and children, and sleep.

And hey, you can always write in your spare time, as a hobby, because some published writers have told you that you're not really a writer unless you have a compulsive obsession to do it for free, for nobody, for yourself only, that you're not really a writer unless you accept that being a writer is shit for the majority of people who do it.

Those writers with their published books, their royalty cheques, their adoring fans and persistent haters, *oh what I'd do to even have haters*, preaching from their ivory towers, safe in the knowledge that they have a career writing novels and getting paid, telling us we have no right to complain, if you

don't like writing, then do something else. Well, I humbly say, fuck them all!

As much as I loved writing, and as much as I thought I loved you, I just couldn't get my mind past the rejections you gave me, not when you so easily gave yourself to a fake like @SarahtheBookieworm.

The time I wasted writing those novels, reading those books, watching those television shows and films, listening to those podcasts, all those things that consumed my life and took away my life, all to get closer to you so you could just reject me and reject me and reject me with your fake honesty, your insincere flattery, your absolute bullshit form rejection that read like a personal one.

Just who the fuck do you think you are?

But one thing I was working on was forgiveness. Could I forgive you, Kate, for all you had done to me?

I certainly forgave myself for diving headfirst into a career that would get me nowhere other than where I was then, and it wasn't a pretty place. It was dark in there, dark in my soul, dark in that stinking, commercial rubbish bin.

Would the waste operatives come and empty me into their lorry, crushing my bones like the crushed dreams of my literary ambitions, dumping my lifeless, broken body on a landfill, next to the my unread manuscripts which I shredded and couldn't put in the recycling bin because the council didn't allow bags and the little pieces would've strewn all over the street and some devious little fucker

would've sellotaped it together like he was the Penguin from *Batman Returns*, found my name, complained to the council and stole my ideas for bestselling novels!

Phew! It's quite the life being an aspiring author.

But you wouldn't know that, would you? You've never given birth to a creation, happy to stay in your lane, the one with all the power to destroy a life and career.

But there was fuck all in the bin, and another day wasted finding out nothing new about you. I climbed out of the bin, stinking to high heaven, though interestingly, on the way home I wasn't the worst smelling person on the underground train.

Back at base, having scrubbed the dirt and grime off me, I wondered, *is this writing game really, truly, for me? Do I honestly stand a chance of being an outlier, one of the very few who secure a literary agent, a publishing deal, and a horde of insatiable fans?*

I've read so many book acknowledgements to know that most writers do not have the same background as me. The writer who thanks each and every friend, teacher, tutor, confidante, seemingly from the moment she picked up a pen and wrote a poem at aged three all the way to publication of her debut, such writers encouraged to pursue their passions from cradle to coffin. *Was I ever encouraged to do anything?*

Then there's the writer, she who thanks all those publications that published her on the way to her debut, the literary magazine, the student lit mag, the journals. These

writers acknowledge more people in two pages than I've known in my entire life. Sometimes it's the same writer saying all of the above.

But what could I say in my acknowledgements? Thank you to all the teachers who said I would amount to nothing, you've been right up until now. Thank you to all the literary magazines, newspapers, and writing competitions who all rejected my submissions, because not only was I not good enough to write a novel worth publishing, I couldn't even get my one-thousand words past your gatekeepers either.

I suppose I tell you all this, simply to illustrate the fact that my burgeoning writing career has been anything but. There has not been a slow, but steady, stream of little successes leading to the ultimate biggie. Yet, why do I persist? Why do I believe there is a book in me, waiting to be read by someone? *Anyone*? Why can I not find my bliss in something that pays, something that gives back, something that doesn't suck the time and life out of me?

It's not like I'm afraid to die a penniless writer. I'm afraid to die a penniless nobody, whom contributed nothing to the world I became so obsessed with. I'm not special, *only you're special, Kate*, but I do believe that everyone has a destiny in life, that we can all contribute in some little way to life on Earth.

I've tried to find my tribe, a collection of people to workshop my writing with, a bosom of beta readers to beckon at

my call, but unlike the multitude of narcissists that populate social media, I can't be one of them.

I even tried my dear aunt, showed her my latest work-in-progress. After a month of badgering her to read it, she finally made comment on the first chapter. *It meanders*, she said, *with little in the way of basic punctuation, coherence or likability*. Well, of course it meandered, of course it lacked punctuation, it was a stream of consciousness! She followed this up with, *I suppose the next time I see you will be when you write another masterpiece?* The sarcasm dripping off her last word was just too much!

Though to be fair to her, she was right. After what she said to me at her cottage, well, she was lucky I was talking to her at all.

But was her reaction surprising in the slightest? She wouldn't know the word *encouraging* if it slapped her on the saggy-skinned scrotum she passed off for a face. I'll always appreciate that she brought me up after my parents' untimely, unfortunate deaths. It was a selfless thing to do, and by God, she wouldn't let me forget it, either. Apparently, looking after me had *upended* her life, almost *ruining* it, what with the *hopes and dreams* she *put on hold* solely for me.

And thus, I would spend my childhood attempting to please her. But nothing ever did. *You're just like my sister. Except she didn't lie so much*, which I would've responded

with *it takes one to know one* had I not been terrified of the old bag.

My aunt always told me, *Your grandmother always said, and she got this from her grandmother, well, she said, if you tell the truth, then you never have to remember anything.*

It was probably the one piece of advice which aunt gave that rung true, this being why I struggled to remember everything I'd allegedly did or said, not that I took any heed to her advice then or now. She certainly didn't take her grandmother's advice, why should I have?

I often wonder why she didn't just give me a poisoned apple and end her burden then and there, though judging from her cooking, she was trying to kill me in slower and more painful ways.

Yeah, I think it's safe to say that living with my aunt fucked me up good and proper.

MALCOLM

MANNING AGENCY IS CELEBRATING TODAY, namely the massive deal Christine has bagged with a new client. Kate was effusive and generous when praising her colleague.

‘Why do all the writers, who understand what high concept means, submit to her, and I get all the rejects?’

Kate forgets Sarah Barrett, *the bookie worm*, whose sexy legs on Instagram have cheered me up on quiet, loveless nights, and her high-concept romantasy that got Kate her own slice of a very nice deal, but I understand where she’s coming from. I think this particular scenario hit a sore spot for my dear, beloved, Kate. My wife makes it clear on her bio and manuscript wish lists that she has an absolute passion for psychological thrillers. *I live and breathe them!*

Christine, on the other hand, mentions her like of the genre as almost an afterthought, way down her page playing tenth-fiddle to other genres she’s more interested in, no

matter how strange. *I do love a good animal-narrated story! Send me a psychological thriller if you really must.*

I try my best to placate my insecure wife.

‘Perhaps the writer thought Christine was a better fit for her? Personality wise?’

I didn’t want to remind Kate that Christine has a reputation, one that’s holier than thou. Where Kate is known for her emphasis on editorial collaboration, and many webinars involving her clients attest to the many rewrites she makes them do, Christine is a wham, bam, thank you ma’am agent, who’ll take your manuscript, send it to an editor and get you a deal.

‘Writers are too damned impatient. The wheels turn slow in this business. I would never send out a manuscript until we’d polished it as much as we could. My reputation goes out with those books too.’

And yet, Christine does none of that, and still gets the deals.

To be a defender of my wife’s honour, Kate has a point. Looking at Christine’s authors, they tend to burn bright and fast. Sure, they get the deal, but there’s always chatter about the lengthy rewrites they inevitably have to do. Christine might’ve let them away with it, content to promote the hook of the book, but the editors will not, and many of her writers suffer rewrites from Hell, not quite what Christine had promised them when she made her offer of representation.

But I think my wife is in denial. She’s forgetting a key

element to all agent-writer relationships. Loyalty. You see, Christine, as lazy as she is, sticks by her writers through thick and thin. Looking through her client list, most have been with her since the start of their careers, and a sizeable minority are strays, poor writerly souls who were given a second-chance at literary stardom by Christine, like she's a one-woman writers' refuge.

Kate on the other hand, well, she's rather detached when it comes to her clients.

'It's a business. I understand that. Indigo understands that too.'

'But does she really? I mean, you sold books together, and now—'

'Now she wants to write in genres I don't represent!'

That wasn't quite true. The writer in question, Indigo Hanford, merely wanted to add a flavour of genre to her latest novel. Thriller tinged with romance, not the worst suggestion in the world, and I even suggested to Kate that she could lead the charge for cross-genre thrillmance.

Kate had previously gotten Indigo a six-figure, two-book deal, and this would be her third book, but Kate did what she does best, separated emotion from logic, her version of logic at least, and parted ways with Indigo.

Kate might've thought she was being reasonable, even convinced herself she did the right thing. But it's pitiful when you look up your wife's name online, and find all these happy blog posts from writers who, only a couple of years

ago, celebrated signing up with their dream agent, your wife, and when you look at their Instagram now and see the inevitable post about parting ways with their agent, who they profusely thank anyway, well, it's all a bit sad really.

Especially when this happens on more than one occasion, becoming a habit and the start of a cruel reputation that is now being shared anonymously by bitter writers, and sometimes with no anonymity at all, such as on Query-Tracker.

I had to laugh. But Kate wasn't laughing at all, and before I knew it, a fake profile appeared, purporting to be one of her happy clients, defending her against these online attacks in the comments section, enthusing about how kind and supportive Kate was to her clients.

I told her, 'You're above all this!'

And she agreed, hence why she got me to do it...

I tried being honest with Kate. 'I get it, dear, you got a great deal for their debut, and you know the next time around won't offer much of an advance, that is, guaranteed income. So you get them in, use them, dump them, rinse and repeat. It's like you're hiring university graduates, you know there's a conveyer belt out there. It's cynical and cyclical, dear, it really is, but I like your sty—'

She slapped me on the face and I vowed to never be truthful with her ever again, at least not when it regarded her job and the way she went about it. I'd love to say Kate's dabbling with physical domestic abuse was a one-off, but I

always rationalised it with a bit of self victim-blaming. I always deserved it, because I thought with my smaller head, and was useless, and why did she bother marrying me anyway? I dare not breathe a word about what my late father told me, before walking Kate down the aisle, *Never divorce this woman, son. She's a looker, and I'd hate for her to take half the family silver on her way out the door.*

Thusly, if a writer has a choice between submitting to Kate or Christine, even if Kate seems to be the better match on paper, do they choose the one who'll stick by them through thick and thin, or the one who'll use them up and leave them adrift at sea as the sharks of irrelevancy circle around them?

This is why Christine has brands, and Kate has books. There's a difference even though she won't admit it.

Plus it's a numbers game. Christine's list is lengthy, whereas Kate keeps hers compact. Kate seems to think that signing a new client means she has to let go of an old one. Christine doesn't. Again, whether Christine is lazy or hedging her bets, it works.

Only last year Christine launched a potential brand with a writer who she last published over a decade ago. Apparently, this former romance writer woke up one day, fancied her chances at crime writing, which totally had nothing to do with her home being burgled, and came up with D.I. Askew, an overweight female cop with a penchant for tattoos and woke vengeance, *Freeze burty-word freak!* Had

this writer been part of Kate's stable, she'd have been looking for a new agent ten years ago, never mind last year.

The only person Kate has ever shown loyalty to, and I include all her clients and her own mother, is me. If I were to blow my own trumpet, I'd say it's because I'm a great guy, with a compassionate side and I'm wicked in the bedroom department.

But if I'm honest with myself, and I don't agree with my late father's pre-nuptial concerns, Kate's only loyal to me because I'm none of those things. Her clients lick her arse, her mother is domineering, I'm literally the only person she knows who treats her like shit on occasion, just to keep things interesting.

Yes, the moment I become a good guy, she'll be out the door with the first bad boy she meets.

Perhaps that's why she tolerates this Elena character. It's in her nature to welcome the dark side into her life. Perhaps it holds a mirror up to the side of herself that she dare not acknowledge, though the rest of us see it daily.

Debbie walks in and cracks open a bottle of wine, though I notice it's not one from her vintage collection, but something she got Lorraine to buy in Tesco.

Even cheap wine doesn't suit the boss, whom I often imagine would be more suited to a can of super-lager and a fag hanging out of her mouth. *That or a crack pipe.*

'Congratulations, Christine!' Debbie tries to smile, and I stifle a laugh at the futility of it. 'Our agency's superstar!'

Cue sporadic applause, Lorraine giving a genuine effort, Tom slapping the back of his hand like he's mildly handicapped, *possibly severely*, and me giving enough clap to make my genitals shudder.

Notable is Kate, her hands unmoving, her face inanimate, like someone has pumped her full of botox and she couldn't twitch even if she wanted to, staring at Christine with unblinking eyes.

And the truth is, if looks could kill, this wouldn't be Christine's celebration.

It'd be her funeral.

LORRAINE

TODAY IS IMPORTANT TO KATE, for two reasons.

For the second year running, she's one of the judges for this literary prize to find unagented writers, well, unagented female and non-binary writers, *Biological men who know they're men, need not apply.*

Two, today is the day she can finally admit to @SarahtheBookieworm's good news, that her novel has snared a deal for *seven* figures. Whilst enjoying the festival, we both check our phones, waiting for *The Bookseller* article to post the good news, officially.

I'm happy for Kate and you should be too, Elena. She deserves this. To come back from the abyss like she has is no mean feat. If she's not up there for Literary Agent of the Year, and this time winning it, well, there's no justice in the world.

The only thing that can possibly ruin today, even in the

slightest, is a face I recognise in the crowd of eager wannabes. The same face from last year's contest. It couldn't be her, could it?

She scuttles around, flashing her toothy smile, but only when people are looking at her, or she thinks they're looking. When eyes are diverted, her face slips effortlessly into resting-bitch face. Whatever her true feelings, a smile is not the genuine representation.

Picking up on my uneasy vibes, Kate taps my shoulder and nods to the living scarecrow. She reads my mind.

'Do you think it's her?'

I take a breath. I'm here to help Kate, not fuel her paranoia. But to paraphrase an old saying, *it's not paranoia if someone really is out to get you.*

'It could be, but—' Yes, there was a but. I'd done my research on this girl. Going by the name Becca Baird, she, like so many in this allegedly introverted industry, had an Instagram account. Typical of many wannabes, she extolled the life of a writer, the struggle. She jumped on any bandwagon going: pre-Cass report, *Hey guys, I'm gonna sell all my HP books, I can't bear seeing this transphobe's work on my shelves!* Post-Cass report, *Unlike many whom I won't name and shame, I kept hold of my beloved HP books!*

And most of all, she was a follower of Kate.

The one hitch, was a development that happened at last year's contest. Though she didn't even make the shortlist, she did find an agent willing to take her on, though by the

time the contest came around again, she'd been dumped by her agent, her book having died on submission to editors. *It can be a cruel industry, sometimes.*

'It can't be her, then,' Kate says, letting out a sigh of relief.

I should leave it there, but I don't. 'Well, I mean, most likely it isn't her. But if she's obsessed with you, I doubt having an agent will put her off. I mean, Elena did tell you she had an agent interested in her work.'

Kate's frozen in thought, looking away, thinking carefully about her next words. 'Someone was interested, but they backed out at the last minute. Just in time.' She finally looks at me and smiles. 'So, I heard.'

Ah, Kate's usually so honest about everything, but her relationship with you seems to bring out the worst in her. Forgive me for checking all the emails you sent each other and realising that Kate actively ruined your chances of securing your first literary agent.

Of course, Kate doesn't know that I know, and my lips are sealed, even though I don't agree with her actions at all.

'A lucky escape,' I offer, and we both smile. 'Did Elena submit to the competition? This year, I mean.'

Although I'm Kate's assistant, her extra-curricular work is her own. I'm not sifting through the submissions for this particular prize.

'No, she didn't.'

'Not even under a fake name?'

‘I—uh, I mean...’ Kate pinches the top of her nose, eyes closed. She opens them. ‘She could have used a fake name, but after years of her submissions, I think I can smell her shit a mile off.’ Kate’s eyes open wide. ‘She could basically be anyone.’

I’m surprised by Kate’s surprise. In all these years, did she take for granted that Elena Cartwright really was of her name? *Are you?* I mean, it’s a distinct possibility, but the opposite is too.

‘She’s most likely who she says she is. It’s not like she sent you submissions with different names. Did she?’

Kate shakes her head.

‘So either Elena is her real name or she’s very committed to this non de plume, which considering she’s been doing this for so many years, seems doubtful?’

Kate closes her eyes, again, her intake of breath showing off her sharp cheekbones, and exhales.

‘You’re right,’ she says, opening her blue eyes which seem to dim each time, ‘I think I’m being paranoid. We both are. It’s not like she even applied to the competition this year. Why would she bother turning up?’

To see you, of course.

‘Who knows what goes through the mind of a disturbed individual?’

I don’t think you’re disturbed, Elena, you’re simply misunderstood. I too had my dreams before the allure of agenting took up all my time. I wasn’t a writer but I know

what it feels like to be rejected. Unless they've walked a mile in your shoes, or typed a handful of novels with their fingers, they'll never understand you, not the way I do, not the way Kate secretly does.

And in spite of her revival, and all the good she does for writers online, what Kate did to you was *abominable* and I think it's a stain on her career, one she should never recover from, were there justice in the world.

She was my mentor, and I still learn from her to this day, but I didn't realise I'd learn not only how to be a good agent, but how also to not be a bad one, or in Kate's case, a *despicable one*.

I get it, Elena, I know why it would drive you mad, but you have to let it go. There's other agents out there, agents more deserving of your talents. And I have read your work, there's something there, a diamond waiting to be polished by an agent who has time and inclination.

Between me and you, I'd happily have you as my third client. But given the history between you and Kate, that flight will never take off, will it?

Who knows, maybe if I join another agency and you're still looking, I'll drop you a line, save you finding me.

But in the meantime, it is what is, and I work where I work.

Is it bad that I occasionally remind of Kate of you, just to watch her squirm?

If only you knew, perhaps it'd make you smile.

ELENA

IT HAD BEEN a few months since I was last in London, stalking out your agency, following the wrong people to the wrong homes, raiding bins that offered no more than half-eaten sandwiches.

During these months, I kept my head down, wrote a book based on a Manuscript Wish List prompt you provided, and waited for the inevitable full manuscript request, writing it all under a fake name so you wouldn't reject me for simply being me.

But, oh, Kate! I mean, really, wasn't that a bit shit of you to do that?

Oh, you don't know what I'm talking about, do you? Surely you can't have already forgotten the email you sent me only an hour ago?

Every literary agent, seemingly, has a Manuscript Wish List, allegedly written with good intentions, to help guide

the salivating, wannabe writers. You might have thought, *oh, you know what, I love the thought of a sapphic romance with disability representation*, and I'd have to look up *sapphic* in the dictionary and then beg my doctor to diagnose whatever the fuck is wrong with me so I could include a bit of genuine hashtag OwnVoices disability representation.

But from a writing point of view, as crazy as it sounds, I did what you asked. I wrote a novel specifically aimed at one of your MS wishes. And what happened? Only an hour ago, you rejected me. And what did you say? *I can't see a market for this kind of book.*

If I'm generous, I'll allow you the fact it was a form rejection, so perhaps you didn't mean to utter those words to me. Surely, having known you wished for a *dark academia with a diverse neurodivergent protagonist* you wouldn't have purposely replied to me stating that such a novel with exactly that genre and protagonist wouldn't find a market.

Or perhaps I've misunderstood the whole point of an MS Wish List, have I? It's not actually a list of novel premises you would love to see published because you think you would represent such a novel and sell it to the highest bidder; no, it's merely a manuscript wishful-thinking list, where you can indulge in your favourite fantasies without a thought for your fellow human who spent months writing a novel based on this wishful thinking.

It's so clear to me now. You do all these webinars for

working-class writers, yet you don't have a single client that is working class. You don't practice anything you preach!

If I'm honest with myself, it's my fault. It really is. I look up to you too much. I worship you. I put you on a pedestal. And you know I'm not the only one.

You admitted it yourself in many of your webinars, urging aspiring writers to see you only as a facilitation to getting published. You didn't want to be worshipped, you repeated, time and again, stating that you wouldn't have a job if it weren't for us writers. That's what I liked about you. You had no ego about this. You truly were trying to help us. Help me.

But here we are. Another novel. Another rejection. Nothing I do is ever good enough for you and your ilk. Even when I'm pretending to be someone else and I follow your wants and desires to the letter, you reject me.

I'm starting to think this is personal. A creeping, nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach. I think if I sent you a future Nobel Prize winner, you'd reject me.

What is the secret to getting published, Kate? Can you tell me?

What do I have to do to have you represent me, fulfil my desires, literally enact my dreams?

Because if there's one thing you should know about me by now, *I won't take no for a fucking answer!*

So I scoured the internet, hoping to find inspiration, anything that might light the way. Instead, anonymous

Instagram accounts relaying abominable stories from behind the publishing industry's curtain. Though no names were mentioned, one of the stories was so detailed that it was metaphorically pointing elbows at you, or more to the point, your husband.

Malcolm Finlay, someone whose existence I preferred to ignore, lest the thought of him fucking you send me to an early grave with high blood pressure.

But although the rumours pointed to a man with a penchant for visiting the office of Pam and her five sisters, there was no definitive proof. And to be frank, I didn't believe that rumour anyway.

Why would he massage beef mince at work, when he already had a rare steak at home? No, I simply couldn't believe that he'd rather touch himself during the day than save himself for you at night, it made no sense whatsoever.

But as is the way of my life, I tumbled down the rabbit hole, looking up everything about the man so good you took his family name. Other than the salacious gossip aforementioned, there was nothing remarkable to note, other than the incredulity of you choosing him to be your lawfully wedded husband.

His Instagram account was inane, like he couldn't be arsed; an X account gleefully stated that he had abandoned X for Bluesky, which was ironic considering his pro-Trump tweets.

Finally, I chanced upon his Facebook account, which

hadn't been updated in over a year, but for all intents and purposes was open and transparent for all to see.

And see I did, as I spent the rest of my evening scouring through his deluge of posts, photos, reposts.

I finally understood what you saw in him, at least ten years ago. His head full with hair, a smile that reached his eyes, a stomach that remained perpendicular to his chest. You both looked gorgeous, and ready to take on the world. As time passed, the hair thinned to almost nothing, the smile was forced, the stomach became elastic; you remained pristine. But that's just superficial. What really attracted you was his humour. His very close to the bone humour...

A halloween picture of Malcolm and three of his male friends dressed as women. Harmless enough until you read the caption that accompanied it.

Oh god, it was disgraceful, Kate, it really was. Who knew your husband was an absolute TERF!

It's a terrible thing, the cancel culture. It seems to affect men more than women, maybe because men are bigger cunts, I don't know.

I'd never be one to join the baying hordes calling for someone's blood and someone's job. Collective bullying is not right, I abhor it.

In saying that, I have no qualms whatsoever in igniting the fire in the first place. Evil thrives when good people look away.

And just because Malcolm wrote this over ten years ago

does not absolve him of historical guilt. His white male privilege has allowed him to lead a consequence-free life, and as a white, middle-class feminist, it is my duty to call myself Karen and right a wrong in the world.

Today is my chance to be a good person.

For a change.

MALCOLM

DEBBIE ASKS me into her office for a chat. I wrack my brain, trying to think of what I've done wrong, who I've offended, what I can compliment her on to get out of this.

I haven't choked the chicken in a month, my testicles swelling to tennis balls. Thanks to the influence of NoFap Friday, I'd been a choirboy these past four weeks, though I didn't hand out a sponsorship form like I did when I grew a moustache for Movember. *No one would've believed me capable, anyway!*

Perhaps Debbie actually wants to talk about work.

'I've been thinking about your position here at the company.'

Fuck me, a promotion! Well, I didn't see that coming, but it's long overdue.

'I'm not sure you're the right person for the job.'

I snort, fidgeting in my chair. Debbie's perfume is over-

powering and I feel a migraine coming on. I want to compliment her smell, as it's possibly the only thing masking the nervous fart that has escaped my clenched buttocks.

'What do you mean?' I say, struggling to escape my dumbfounded stupor.

'We received a complaint about—'

'Lorraine complained?' I interject, believing attack is always the best defence. 'And you want to sack me without hearing my side of the story first?'

'What? Can you let me fin—'

'She was practically gagging for it. I mean, any normal woman would've left the room, but she was like, *Oh, I'm a doctor, I don't think you should be lifting anything heavy and—*'

'Would you shut the fuck up!' Debbie's quite terrifying when angry. It's quiet for a moment, and her face softens, like stone becoming hardened clay. 'Please listen to what I have to say before you incriminate yourself any further.'

Ah, I get it. Debbie's already thinking of damage limitation. She wants to work with me to find a way out of this. Perhaps put me on gardening leave with full pay. It's not the worse scenario to endure.

'This has nothing to do with Lorraine.'

'Oh,' I say, my cheeks flushing with embarrassment.

'We received a complaint about your personal social media posts.'

A horrible realisation accosted me. Debbie had obvi-

ously found my profile on xHamster. Perhaps she had infiltrated my five-hundred-plus perverted friends. Yes, she was obviously the mastermind behind the profile that stated, *I only love three things in life: books, dildos and anal beads!*

‘Listen, Debbie, my sexual preferences and proclivities are mine alone. I don’t think it’s any business of yours what turns me on.’

Debbie’s face was unmoving. Then she let out a long, lingering sigh, like I was more pathetic than shit on her shoes. *And no, I won’t admit that I’ve rubbed one out whilst thinking about Debbie the Dominatrix standing on my balls with her high heels, sitting on my face with her saggy bottom and—*

‘It’s your Facebook.’

My Facebook? There was nothing on my Facebook to be worried about. I certainly didn’t show the real Malcolm on there, and more to the point, I hadn’t used it in months, maybe years.

Debbie lifts an A4 piece of paper and holds it up. I lean forward to make out the details. A photo, from back in the day, of me and the boys wearing women’s attire. *And good ole Garry certainly passes for one, chortle!*

‘What of it?’ I say, rediscovering my bravado. ‘It was just a bit of fun.’

‘It won’t be seen as that by others.’

‘Then I’ll bluff. Say I was actually transitioning at the time. I have no shame, don’t worry about that.’

Debbie shook her head in dismay, her eyes rolling around in their sockets like she was off her head. What was this demented hag thinking about?

‘Excuses won’t fly, not when these words accompany your photo.’

Debbie puts on a voice, an octave or two higher than her own, though allegedly, she’s mimicking my own voice!

‘A girlie night out, followed by a sleepover. Ah, me and the boys are having a laugh. But let’s be honest, people, you can’t be a real woman if you have a big cock!’

I snort, still finding it funny all these years later. I wait for Debbie to laugh with me.

‘Transphobic comments won’t wash in today’s world.’

‘But—but I didn’t write that today. Not even this year. It was over a decade ago! Before all this woke madness took hold and suffocated the life out of societal joviality.’

Debbie sighs again. ‘And the internet never forgets. Not even the comment calling you “Wee Wilma Winkie” can save you now.’

I swallow hard as Debbie’s face morphs into Kate’s. Now she’s laughing at me, degrading me, humiliating me in ways that even I can’t use for self-pleasure. My own wife wants to watch me squirm.

‘She sent these screenshots and wants me to take action.’

‘She? Who sent this to you? Who’s trying to ruin my life?’

‘Do you know a woman called Elena Cartwright?’

The name seemed strangely familiar somehow, though in my panic I couldn't quite place it. What I did instead, was note the fact Debbie had so freely abused the Data Privacy Act. Anything I could use against her, I would.

'Malcolm, between ourselves, is Elena a—you know, extra-martial—'

'No!' I rack my useless brain. *Elena Cartwright, Elena Cart—wait a minute.* I didn't know any Elena Cartwright personally, but Kate had mentioned the name before. Complaining about a woman who kept sending her written submissions and gifts. I didn't really take notice, because I hate when people are unappreciative of others' generosity and I was quite distracted with my own problems.

And then it truly clicks.

'Elena Cartwright, yes, the name rings a bell. In fact, I remember she sent an erotic porno to Kate. It was absolute filth!' I don't mention that I purposely took it from the email trash and put it back in Kate's inbox after being humiliated by Kate for masturbating in the office in front of Lorraine, to simultaneously piss off Kate and put Lorraine in the shit for not filtering out the email. *Phew!* 'Yes, she's got quite the history of harassing Kate and—'

'We're going off on a tangent, here,' she says, waving me down like I'm an imbecile. 'Kate's mentioned none of that. All I care about today is the reputation of this agency, one I built from the stone up, back when—'

Debbie drones on and on, telling me the same founder

story I've heard a million times. I get it, Debbie, your agency is your life's work, and you don't want it ruined, and for once you'll actually do the right thing instead of covering it up.

'Can't we cover this up?' I say.

What's she going to do, sack me? Admit that her beloved agency has been harbouring a transphobic, masturbator? It'll only take one slip-up, most likely from Tom and his big mouth, for the whole world to know that my little habits were common knowledge and quietly indulged.

Yes, I'm so confident in my worth to this agency, my cock has shrunk to the size of a peanut.

I jump to my feet, knocking over my chair. Debbie recoils and I enjoy this brief moment of her remembering I'm the male of the species, bursting with testosterone and capable of awful, terrible things.

I fall to my knees, clasping my hands.

'Please don't sack me!'

Debbie rolls her eyes again, the heartless cow. 'Can you get up off my—'

'You don't know what it's like living with Kate. If I lose my job, she'll never let me forget about it.'

'I have no interest in your private life, and we're not going to sack you.'

'You're—you're not?' *Idiot, Malcolm, you're putting ideas into this old bag's head!*

‘But I want your social medias deleted by the end of the day.’ She glares at me with such venom. ‘All of them.’

‘I will,’ I say, and I mean it. ‘Facebook, Insta, X, Bluesky, TikTok, they’ll all be gone!’ *Except for xHamster, naturally.* I know better than to look a gift horse in the mouth, but still I ask. ‘But I thought you said I wasn’t the right person for the job?’

She flicks her index finger at me. ‘Thanks for reminding me. I want you *off* social media duties for the agency. I can’t trust you.’ She looks away, muttering, ‘I’d be better off bringing in an intern to do it, at least they’d be capable.’

I haul myself off the floor, looking down at Debbie sitting small at her desk. *Oh, how the tables have turned!*

I offer her my hand. ‘Thank you, Debbie, I’m so glad we could—’

‘Get out of my office.’

My hand quivers in the air, Debbie’s already spun in her chair and has her back to me.

It’s not even my wanking hand. I could sue for discrimination. Instead, I thank her profusely, keeping distance between us, and scurry out of her office before she can change her mind.

Male pride is overrated anyway.

ELENA

A COUPLE of weeks pass and all I have to show for it is an email that says, *This matter will be dealt with internally through our Social Media Policy. Thank you for bringing this to our attention.*

Follow-up emails have been ignored. I realise the folly of hope, when I load up Instagram and see Malcolm's smiling face as part of an agency team photo, captioned, *Manning Agency is Family*. Noticeably, everyone is sitting beside each other, but Malcolm is in the background. *Maybe I'm reading too much into that.* The main point is, he's still there.

I knew it was a long shot. Deborah Manning's tweets show her to be an outlier in the publishing world. Whereas everyone else has jumped on the woke bandwagon, she's made it clear that she doesn't care about any of that. All that's missing is photos of her lighting up Cuban cigars with J.K.

I wrack my brain, wondering where I went wrong. I did everything according to the complaints procedure. *And that's where I went wrong!*

Of course, this bloody country is corrupt. Doing anything by the book will simply give the evil-doers a heads-up.

No, my next complaint would have to play by my own rules. That is, I'd give them no chance to back out of doing the right thing. Instead of sending it to some complaints procedure email address, manned by god knows who, allowing the agency to decide whom deals with the said complaint, I'd be more direct with my flying dart.

Yeah, Kate, my dart would land on the bullseye.

But one thing I now knew, was that my complaint had to be, *more*. If attacking Malcolm for a distasteful post was a bomb, and that wasn't enough, then I'd have to go nuclear, threaten to bring down the entire agency.

And to do that, I'll have to sacrifice a passion, something that's kept me entertained through the years. It'll be hard, this has been an emotional crutch for me through the rejections, through the tears. Honestly, there's nothing better than championing your fellow author, feeling part of a tribe, even though they'll rarely, if ever, thank you for it. Conversely, when you let the green-eyed monster get the better of you, you can let loose, bring them down a peg or two, deflate those massive ballooning egos whilst massaging your own fragile one.

To let it all go is to give up a habit, like smoking twenty-a-day to nothing, but it'll be worth it. *I can worry about cold turkey later.*

I load up my account, checking over everything I've posted for the past few years. At the last minute, I delete a couple of reviews, swapping a one-star for a five, exchanging a fire-dumpster for blowing smoke up a puckered arse.

I love it when a plan comes together.

Now where did I leave that bloody cigar?

LORRAINE

I STAND outside Debbie's office, fearful. It's not like I'm worried I'll walk-in on her flicking her bean, the agency isn't chock-full of perverts. But I am worried about what she'll ask me.

Her face was grim when she said, 'Come to my office in ten minutes.' That was eight minutes ago and I've been a nervous wreck ever since. Usually when Debbie wants something, she's straight to the point, you're never in any doubt about what she needs or what she wants to talk about. For her to leave me hanging speaks volumes. Whatever she wants to talk about cannot be good.

And then there were the stares as I made the walk of shame to her office. I couldn't put my finger on it, but something was off. Kate wouldn't even look at me. Tom had a smile on his face, the one I've seen many times when he

thinks he's got the better of someone. The rest of them looked fearful, especially Malcolm.

It was only a couple of weeks ago Malcolm was subjected to the same treatment. I remember him standing at Debbie's door, crouched over like the Hunchback of Notre Dame, clutching at his stomach like he was about to have an explosive blast of diarrhoea. When he left her office, he had the look of a man who had just avoided the guillotine and was now suffering with PTSD, and he went to his office and when I walked past I heard him grunting and crying. *Obviously, releasing some stress...*

For my part, I haven't done anything to be concerned about. I certainly haven't posted transphobic comments in this lifetime. *Yeah, Malcolm's complaint being dealt with by Tom ensured jobs for the boys and the whole office knowing what Malcolm did.*

Which means, it can only relate to what I witnessed when I walked into Malcolm's office—him doing such things is seemingly tolerated, as long as no one admits to noticing it. *The Emperor's flapping willy.*

Kate had pressed me to report him to Debbie, but in my need to avoid conflict and causing marital strife, I declined. It's obvious, Kate's went behind my back, offering up her own husband for some brownie points from the boss, and she's name-checked me as the prime witness.

It cannot be denied, Kate craves attention, and not so-secretly has her eye on the Director's post which will come

up should Debbie finally decide that she wants more time to enjoy the vintage wine she collects in her cellar at home. Not that I've ever been invited to her home, but social media allows a peek through the keyhole.

I catch my breath and enter her office.

'I'll get straight to business,' she says, before I've had a chance to sit down. 'We received a complaint regarding your improper use of social media.'

Another social media complaint? Someone really had it in for Manning Agency and anyone working here.

I was using a few accounts, both personal and for work. Last year I migrated from X to Bluesky, but I haven't posted much there. Instagram is a daily occurrence, but I keep my personal views to myself on both accounts. My personal account is private anyway. I make a habit of not offending people, preferring to sit on the fence where it's nice, cosy and non-accusatory, *apart from people accusing me of doing exactly that...*

She grabbed a cardboard folder and pulled out a decent pile of loose A4 pages.

'Do you recognise this?' Debbie pushed a single A4 piece of paper over to me.

It looks like a screenshot of someone's Goodreads account. 'Yes, I do.'

Debbie's eyebrows rose. 'So you admit it's yours?'

'I didn't say that.'

'A pity.'

A pity? I take the paper from her, and look closer. ‘I said I recognise it, as being a Goodreads profile. But it’s not mine.’ Strangely though, the profile picture is the same one I have on my Goodreads profile, a photo of my cat, Juju, but the profile name is different, Raine, a shortened version of my name. ‘This isn’t my account. Someone’s impersonating me.’

Debbie offers no reaction. Does that mean she believes me or doesn’t?

Well, I’ve nothing to hide. ‘Why don’t you load it up on your computer now, and I can show you my real account.’

‘I will not leave a single digital imprint from my office and this potential scandal. Besides, I have it on good authority that the profile is real. From someone I trust.’

The inference being, *I don’t trust you, Lorraine!*

‘What do you mean, potential scandal?’

She spreads the other A4 sheets across her large desk. They’re all similar, printed screenshots of what looks like Goodreads reviews.

‘I—I didn’t write this! I didn’t write any of these.’

Debbie tuts, and shakes her head in disapproval. ‘Over three hundred reviews. A fair majority are scathing one-star demolitions. Yet, as much as it pains me to say, the only five-star rim-jobs are given to clients belonging to Kate. And of course, your two clients.’

‘Why would I—I didn’t write—I wouldn’t leave reviews on my own clients.’

‘Interesting that you say that. I did a quick text compare with the reviews of your clients’ books and posts from your Instagram talking about the same books, and to no surprise, many have a copy and paste element to them.’

‘Of course they do! Someone’s trying to make it look like I did it! If you can prove I wrote the good reviews, then by extension, I must’ve written all those scathing reviews too.’

‘You said it.’

Sweat dribbled down my temples, and I looked away from Debbie’s piercing, accusatory gaze, noticing my white knuckles as I held tight to the chair’s arms.

‘Look at it all, Lorraine, take it all in. This has been going on for months—no, scratch that, years! This isn’t some prank, someone creating a fake account on a whim. This account has existed since twenty-seventeen. So unless someone has had it in for you for the past eight years at the very least, and let’s be honest, that’s not a dish served cold, that’s a dish rotting with maggots, then I’m finding it difficult to believe your version of events.’

How was this possible?

‘I—I—’

‘And really, you’ve let loose in the past couple of weeks, annihilating Tom’s client. You know her book isn’t even out yet, but your well-written hatchet job has so many likes that the first review anyone will ever see is yours.’ She sighs. ‘I understand. Tom can be hard work. But you’ve no right to—’

Debbie continues berating me as I struggle to think straight. Her words are a boxer's fists, knocking me senseless. I can't defend myself against these jabs, crosses, and uppercuts. Any more hooks and I'll be on the canvas, counting stars.

'And think about all the authors whose books you've slaughtered, many of whom are represented by this very agency. It doesn't matter if they have a hundred five-star reviews, the only review that'll burn into their minds is yours.' As if to prove the point, she pulls up Instagram on her phone and proceeds to show me a post by one of Christine's best-selling authors. I only make it past the first few words before tears fall from eyes, and it doesn't help when Debbie reads the words aloud.

'It doesn't matter how many books I sell, vicious reviews really affect me more than you can imagine. They're personal. They're vindictive. My mental health takes a dive every time I read one.' Debbie sees my tears as confirmation of my guilt. 'And this is a seasoned pro. Imagine how Tom's debut author feels?'

'But I—I didn't—'

'There's still a way out of this.'

'What do you mean?'

'Simply admit these belong to you. And then delete that bloody account!' Debbie continues berating me, her voice fitting in and out of my panicked mind...*you'll have to live*

with what you've done...but as it stands, only one person outside this agency knows about it...

'I can't delete it because it's not mine!'

But Debbie's in no mood to find an alternative. 'As you won't admit it, you leave me with little choice.'

I don't know what comes over me, maybe it's the fact I'm being blamed for something I didn't do. Maybe it's the fact my whole team are a bunch of back-stabbing bastards who are not only saying there's no more space on this lifeboat called a literary agency, but actively trying to kick me out of it.

I hate conflict, but push come to shove, when a rat is cornered...

'So let me get this right. Malcolm can masturbate in his office at will, but I get accused of something I didn't do and you want to sack me?' Debbie's face barely twitches. 'That's not even a surprise to you, is it?'

'Kate made me aware of the alleged situation between you and—'

'Alleged! She told you what happened, and I'm now telling you the same thing, but it's still alleged?' Debbie's eyes open wide. I'm unsure if she's shocked by the truth being flung at her face, or shocked by the realisation that I'm not a pushover waiting to be pulled out of the agency like a withered weed. And I'm not even finished. 'Why do men escape all the scrutiny? Why won't women believe other women?'

‘You’ve made your point,’ she says, eager to change the subject, ‘but it matters not. What Malcolm did, and I do believe you both, has been contained within these walls. But the allegations against you are beyond my reach. There’s nothing I can do to stifle this, and as you’re unwilling to delete the—’

‘You still don’t believe me!’

Debbie clears her throat. ‘I’ve already had a meeting with the rest of the team. We all agree, it’s best to let you go.’

No wonder they looked at me like I was a dead woman walking, especially Tom. He knew what was coming and couldn’t wait for me to get my comeuppance. From his point of view, I can hardly blame him. Who would do such a thing to a debut author? I mean, it happens, but I can’t even put myself in those vindictive shoes.

‘But surely Kate defended me?’

‘It was Kate who suggested this course of action.’

I hyperventilate, my rasping breaths audible enough to elicit Debbie’s waving palm, imploring me to calm down. How could you do this to me, Kate? Why would you do this?

With nothing to lose, I let rip with the truth.

‘Do you know what Kate did to a writer looking for representation? She—’

Debbie holds up her hand. ‘I don’t want to know, and really, Lorraine, it belittles you to gossip about everyone in the agency.’

I'm wasting my time here. Debbie has made up her mind. I'm the bad guy and she wants rid of me. All that's left is to throw a Hail Mary.

'Wait a minute. If Kate sent you this, that means it's all in-house. We can sweep it under the carpet like we always do. There's so much under there we'll be tripping over it, but hey, out of sight, out of—'

'The complaint came from outside the agency.'

'But you said—'

'I said Kate made me aware of it. But the complaint came from a member of the public, who sent it to Kate.'

I'm in full defence mode now.

'I'll take you to tribunal. Unfair dismissal.'

'You could do that, but as you said, there's no way to prove the account isn't yours. Who can prove otherwise? But your name will be reported in the newspapers, "Literary Associate Agent ruins careers to make hers look better." God, it'll be in the industry news outlets. It's no skin off my back. If we lose for sacking someone who was accused of this heinous crime, it wouldn't have the worst optics. But your reputation will never recover, innocent or not.'

I'm lost for words. I've always known this industry can be vicious, but mostly I've allowed myself to believe in the dream. Just because everyone else are ambitious backstabbers didn't mean I had to be. I shielded myself from it as best I could, like I was peering into the agency from outside the

window. But I was deluding myself. I'm in the middle of the ocean and I'm about to be swept away.

'Or you can tender your resignation, keep your lips sealed, and for that, we'll give you fair redundancy pay, I'll provide a personal reference and perhaps see if I can use my connections to place you in another agency. You're talented, you're hard-working, you just need to know when to look the other way for your own self-preservation.'

Debbie, all that shit you spout at the yearly agency parties, espousing the three values that created this agency: honesty, integrity, morality. You don't believe in any of them. You're a fucking fraud. You'd sign up Jimmy Saville's ghost and ask his living victims to provide a blurb if it meant making coin. How can you look in the fucking mirror, how can you sleep at night?

'So, what will you do?'

I think about telling her everything that's rolling around in my head.

'You'll have my resignation by lunchtime.'

Debbie has the temerity to attempt a smile. It's possibly the first time I've ever seen it happen. She extends her hand. 'I am sorry, Lorraine. It has been a pleasure working with you.'

I might be a coward. I might not have the minerals to trash her office, speak harsh truths, and do the right thing no matter the consequences. But I can do this.

I look at her with disgust, like she's been watching too

much *Trainspotting* and dipped her hand in a toilet bowl full of excrement looking for her suppositories to calm her festering piles. I say nothing and make for the door.

‘One thing though,’ I say, ‘concerning the optics. That Goodreads account will still be active. It’s really not mine, I can’t del—’

‘As you said, it’s not your account. We’ll reach out to Goodreads and let them know that you’ve been impersonated. All’s well that ends well.’

I snort, the fight seeping out of me.

‘What about the member of public?’

‘The complainant? She assured Kate that she’d be happy to forget all this if appropriate action was taken.’

She?

‘Who submitted the complaint?’

‘You know I can’t tell you that.’

‘After today, I know you can do whatever you want to do.’

Debbie grunts and rolls her eyes. ‘A woman named Elena Cartwright. Do you know her?’

I let out a resigned laugh. I could tell Debbie all about the stalker that is Elena Cartwright, tell her how she lives in a fantasy world and has made Kate’s life Hell, try again to tell her how Kate ruined Elena’s chances with other agents at other agencies, anything to save my job.

And then I remember, Debbie doesn’t give a fuck about anything I have to say.

Besides, it was Kate who forwarded the complaint. She could have come to me first, allowed me to protest and prove my innocence. But she went straight to the judge, jury and executioner, leaving me to walk the green mile without representation.

‘Thank you for the opportunity to work here. I’ve enjoyed it, for the most part.’ I close the door behind me. I only said that because in the heat of the moment, I felt it to be the classy option. Yeah, I’d leave her office head held high. I was above all this shit. *Plus, I’ll really need that reference later.*

Only when I get back to my desk, having growled at every single person who dared make eye contact with me, do I regret not telling Debbie to go fuck herself.

And then Kate walks in and I realise my hatred has been directed at the wrong person.

ELENA

ONLY A WEEK ago I received an email from your agency, Kate. For once, it had nothing to do with my writing submissions. It was from Deborah Manning, your big boss, the one you refer to as Debbie in your social media posts.

For a moment, I allowed a rare moment of whimsy to wash over me. She was obviously concerned that you couldn't spot a best-seller, the ship that was your agency was going to hit an iceberg called bankruptcy, and she was taking control to steer you all to safety and literary success.

I imagined the words clear as day, *I'm aware of an agent at my agency being an absolute clown, and though I haven't taken on a new client since Stephen King was in nappies, would you consider my offer of representation?*

What she actually wrote was equally good, if not better.

I want to assure you that we take all complaints seriously and that the matter has been dealt with accordingly.

It was just words, for what it was worth. I expected the usual bullshit, that is, for absolutely nothing to happen next. Then I saw a new post on the agency's Instagram, saying you were looking for a new literary agent assistant to join your lively and dynamic team.

Holy fuck, Kate, the pen was truly mightier than the sword. I mean, I really thought about buying a zombie knife and placing it between Lorraine's shoulder blades, because she couldn't go to work if she was dead, but all it took was a little deception, and a lifetime of regret. Who knew that a simple email could ruin a career?

But let's be real. Lorraine Centofanti, with her dark, Italian heritage hair never stood a chance in the blonde publishing industry, despite the fact the majority are flying around with a black box on board. Her card was marked as soon as it became clear she was unwilling to dye her hair to fit in, blondies pointing and screaming at her like we're living in a real-life *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.

Still disbelieving my own eyes, I looked up her two clients and found they had remained at the agency. Had I imagined it all? No! They were with another agent. *But not you, Kate, you were above picking on the carcass of your former colleague's dreams.*

And then it dawned on me. I had sent the complaint directly to you. And you had taken action with it. Against your own assistant.

It left me in two minds. Either you secretly loved me or you secretly hated Lorraine. Perhaps both.

Then I remembered my not so veiled threat, the one where I said I'd keep quiet about Lorraine potentially bringing a literary storm to your shores in exchange for you taking me on as a client.

But you'd rather ruin Lorraine's fledgling reputation than take me on. I'm like a magnet repulsing you at every turn, my North repelling your North, when we both know it would be so easy if you just did a one-eighty and let me be the North to your South.

I don't know how to feel about this. Conflicted, springs to mind. But business is business and friendship is friendship. I can't let the small stuff sweat me, I must keep my eye on the bigger prize.

Which is why I must confess.

I've done something terrible, Kate, something I'll never be able to take back, nor walk back from. You need to know how much I wanted this, how much I wanted you, it's the only way you'll understand.

Stalking is not a science, it's not even a subject on any curriculum in all the world's Universities, unless you count single modules warning female students to be careful of male stalkers. Sure, it gave me a few pointers, but mostly it was on the assumption that the victim had already connected with the predator; a fling that becomes something sinister, a friend who won't take no for an answer.

There wasn't much useful intel to be garnered on stalking someone you hadn't actually met in the flesh, someone you'd merely emailed hundreds of times, someone who you knew simply from their online presence, which was getting more meagre by the week.

There were useful tips regarding the isolation of the victim from her friends, family, lovers. But again, this was all on the premise that the abuser, *what an incorrigible term*, knew the victim personally and had access to these hangers-on.

As it was, I was merely an aspiring author, committing my darkest fears and fantasies onto the written page, in this case my old 13-inch MacBook Pro, in the vain hope that one day someone with clout would lead me out of the darkness and into the light that was literary stardom and success.

My obsession with writing had led to my obsession with the one person I felt, and believed, could do that very thing. You, Kate Finlay. Literary agents always told aspiring authors to do their research, make sure the agent was the right one for them, the right fit for their novel. Many said that a cover letter should always be professional, but that a little personalisation went a long way. And I took this advice and applied it accordingly.

When you used social media to profess your love for *Bridgerton Abbey*, I binged it in a day, simply so I could personalise my cover letter, letting you know that I too loved *B.A.* And do you know why I did that? I didn't want to lie to

you. I didn't want to manipulate you, letting you think that we had things in common which we didn't.

I would never allow a lie to come between us, not when there was so much at stake for both of us. After all those submissions, so many novels I'd written, surely you pieced together my cover letters and revealed a soul mate you never knew you had? How many shit books and time-stealing, soul-destroying, television shows did I waste my life on, simply so we could have something in common? Honestly, I'm not the target audience for *Gossip Girls* or *Vampire Diaries*.

How many things did we now have in common? The love of coffee, which I acquired after seeing your many Instagram posts, though much to my eventual gratitude, you favoured Starbucks over supporting your local workplace cafe like Chilli Beans. Couldn't have you bumping into me now, could we?

What else was there? Your love for animals. Your dog. I too bought a dog, though I failed to mention it was a stuffed toy version of a dog. What with all I had to do, writing novels, stalking you, I certainly didn't have time to look after another living entity.

I gave up my fucking job all in order to become committed to you, because once again, stalkers in fictional worlds have all the time on their hands, all the money, they want for nothing, they need no sustenance.

Well, reality knocked on my door and said, *You can't*

stalk Kate from a hundred miles away, nor can you hold down a job in London and expect to catch her during your lunch breaks, what with her office residing in a nice area and your job being in a complete shit-hole on the other side of the city.

And then your online presence became a shadow of itself, content only to talk about your clients' books.

You made your profile private, which did lock me out with one of my many fake accounts; but you, with your hundreds of followers, just didn't realise that one of my other accounts had already slipped past your net.

You even replied to this account on more than three occasions, subconsciously giving it your seal of approval; my account where I posted carefully choreographed photos of new, *physical*, books I'd bought, many of which were by your clients, but not so many as to raise suspicion.

Photos of the books themselves, I wasn't going to hold the book in my own chubby fingers, lest we meet one day and you match my digits to the ones who took a little too much interest in you. *Though my digits will be the least of the surprise.*

When money became too much to mention, I began stealing the books, taking them home, performing my Insta-magic on them, before returning them to the bookshop from whence they came, because hey, I'm many things, but a common thief isn't one of them.

I even championed your biggest successes, *your biggest fail-*

ures, the book that sold in more countries than I've ever visited, the one with the middling reviews, the book by the fake bitch Sarah that got the seven-figure advance and showed me you really knew how to sell a book to the publishers, *but you didn't know what readers truly wanted*. I read the arc, it wasn't awful, but it wasn't all that either, and I wasn't alone in thinking that. It sold but it didn't sell enough did it, and Sarah continued bigging-up book two of her two-book deal knowing that a third book would never be picked up, and still, I read it in its entirety, just to get one step closer to being a part of your life.

This fake account did not betray the fact I was a wannabe writer, merely showing me as a devourer of worlds contained in so, so many books, covering the length and breadth of your client list.

All those sycophants who treated you as some kind of demi-god, when one look at their profiles showed their true intentions; nothing more than sharks circling your bleeding corpse, desperate to suck on the teat of your success, picturing themselves as a bio photo on your client list, treating you as nothing more than a door to open and slam behind them.

I never once did that. There was no social media profile for Elena Cartwright. No photos of me online to show myself to the world. You deserved better than that.

I wanted to you love me for my words, for my novels, uninfluenced by previous social media connections.

I didn't want you to sign me up because you thought I was an attractive package; above-average looks, well-dressed, elegant in my ways, humble, *obviously*. Even if I was the ugliest motherfucker on this planet, I wanted you to not care in the slightest, only making your decision to represent me based on the novels I sent you.

My first novel took me four years to write. Take that in, four years. I was so full of self-doubt, that I ripped it up and rewrote it seventeen times, hoping to make each word perfect. A literary tour-de-force, if you will.

And then, having deluded myself that the last draft was perfect, or as near as it would ever be, I sent it out into the world of literary agents. Being naive, I didn't make a shortlist of suitable agents, no, I simply sent it to every agent who was accepting submissions at the time.

That was twenty years ago. I had to print countless copies of my writing sample, send them out with stamped-addressed envelopes for their return, though I was certain that was an unnecessary cost, surely the majority of the agents would clutch my papers with zeal, unwilling to let it out of their greedy hands, much less willingly send it back to me.

Weeks and months passed, and there was no reply, nor was there any return of my physical submissions.

Aside from one.

I had submitted to a senior agent at a boutique agency,

but she was obviously too busy to bother with me, and had her underling do her dirty work for her.

The note was handwritten, signed on her behalf from her assistant, named, Kate Finlay.

And what was it you wrote as an inspirational aside? Well, I don't have to remember, I still have the note, kept it for all these years.

Keep trying! I'd love to see what you come up with next! :)

I wouldn't say those words won my heart, but I decided then and there to keep an eye on you, see where this literary career would take you.

And then, the world of the internet opened up things in such a beneficial way. No longer would I be out of pocket and wasting trees, I could simply submit to agents via email or submission portals on their websites.

All that time wasted printing out submissions, gathering materials, popping to the post office where the post master saw me more than my own aunt, could now be used to write the next novel whilst I waited for agents' replies. I was no longer naive, I was cynical, though the hurt of rejections would never, *ever*, be conquered.

And then, only three years ago, I met you. Digitally, of course; a webinar for down-on-their-luck writers. And really, you were the making of me as a writer. I'd never been so prolific in two decades of writing.

How many novels did I send you that year? Six? A new novel written on an average of two months at a time. And I

was sure, I was only ever one novel away from representation, of finally meeting you in person and being with you.

My Bonnie to your Clyde.

And then there were opportunities to meet you face-to-face at literary events.

The Edinburgh International Book Festival. Brontë Festival of Women's Writing. Hay-on-Wye. Cambridge. Bridport. Henley. Theakston. Bloody Scotland. Aye write, for god's sake.

I attended them all, followed you everywhere. But much like our social media interactions, I couldn't quite bring myself to introduce you to the wretched, wannabe, author that I was and am.

You'd smell it off me, the desperation, the over-eagerness to please, the fake platitudes regarding your client list and their latest works. It would put you off me.

Every submission after meeting me would raise an eyebrow, your mind already made up, *Oh no, it's that strange author I met at all those festivals, stalking me like a hungry dog, what pile of shit have they sent me this time?*

And that's why today was painful for me.

No more chasing the back of heads that didn't belong to you. Life was short, and I didn't have time to chase not-Kates.

To admit defeat and realise that I couldn't win at this game unless I showed myself to you.

And show myself I did, as I walked into your office and stopped you in your tracks.

KATE

THE WOMAN STUMBLED into the agency and barged into me.

‘*Bloody whoore,*’ she said, in what sounded like a thick Scottish accent, and she grabbed me by the arm, possibly to keep balance. She looked out of it, under the influence of drink or drugs, possibly both.

I’m afraid to say, I clutched at my phone, wary of this stranger, her wandering hands and her sailor mouth. I didn’t have anything in my jacket pockets other than an unused tissue. *Maybe next time I’ll leave a mousetrap.*

‘It’s okay,’ I finally said.

Whoever this woman was, she wasn’t who I was expecting when the door to the agency swung open and the bell chimed.

The woman became agitated. She was incoherent, babbling on about a book she had written.

‘I want ye to publish it!’ she demanded, shaking at my arms. ‘Take ma book and get it published, ya wee slag!’

I didn’t know what to say, looking around, hoping someone would help.

Tom cowered in the corner, speechless for the first time in his life, letting this homeless woman manhandle me physically and abuse me verbally. He’d fuck me over to get a new client, but it was another thing to witness him do it action. Or inaction, in this case.

I thought about screaming for Malcolm, then I remembered that my useless husband was at home with man-flu, allegedly brought on by work-induced stress. No doubt he was using up all the tissues, with none of them making it to his nose.

The sound of the bell on the entrance door alerted me to another person entering the room.

I was scared, I thought perhaps this woman might have an accomplice of sorts.

But a hand grabbed the woman by the collar, and pulled her off me.

‘Right, Miss, if you would follow me.’

A man, smartly dressed, a bit on the heavier side, authoritative yet not looking entirely comfortable with it.

The delirious woman looked at him, not with recognition but wild eyes, and she did as she was told.

My saviour took the transient out of the office, and out of view, and I allowed myself a moment of relief.

‘I was totally going to help,’ Tom said, peering from behind the desk, ‘but I don’t do junkies.’ *It takes one to know one.* ‘Especially not Scottish junkies.’

The bell tolled once more, giving us both a fright, but I needn’t have worried, it wasn’t the troubled lady.

‘Thank you so much,’ I said, unsure how to word my following sentence. ‘I, er, she—well, she, caught me by surprise is all.’

‘It’s totally understandable, Mrs Finlay,’ and the man put out his hand, waiting for me to shake it. He knew me already. Of course he did. I was expecting him after all. ‘Am I too early?’

‘No, not at all,’ I placed my hand in his and he held it firm yet with care. His smile showed appreciation. ‘In fact, you got here at the perfect time. And what a great first impression to make.’

Yes, Nigel Carlyle was precisely the kind of person I needed in my life. Someone to watch over me, someone to protect me from people like you, Elena. If Nigel could handle a real-life degenerate like he just had, dealing with a non-entity like you would be a cinch.

If only he would take the job.

To my absolute shame, the only reason I didn’t email Nigel with a job offer as soon as the office door closed behind him, was the very real worry that he’d plaster his good news on social media and alert the other candidates who I hadn’t interviewed yet.

I had three other interviews after Nigel's, and though it pains me to have wasted their time, I couldn't cancel on them, nor get them out my office quick enough.

Even then, I waited a whole day to give the good news. I was restless the entire night, Malcolm soaking our bedsheets with sweat—*perhaps he really was unwell*—wondering if my need to play it cool would be my downfall. Nigel was obviously a capable person, and though he hadn't mentioned going for any other job, it was risky to not secure his services immediately.

The next morning, having not slept at all, I sat at my laptop, ready to send off an email to Nigel, but at the last moment, I was plagued by doubt. What if my email landed in his Spam folder, only to be auto-deleted a week later? What if Nigel didn't get back to me? Would this be a small taste of what writers go through when they submit their work to me, except condensed, because I would only be waiting a few days before moving onto another candidate.

So I gave him a call instead, hoping to catch him off-guard, making it awkward for him to turn me down.

The dial tone rang out, I thought for a moment it would go to voicemail and then I'd have the same paranoia about voice messages that were never listened to and missed opportunities. Just as I was ready to cancel the call, Nigel answered, out of breath by the sounds of it.

'Are you okay?' I asked, forgetting I hadn't even told him who I was, but already imagining him running down the

stairs—if he had any—having left his mobile lying on the coffee table.

‘I’m fine,’ he said, taking a breath, ‘is this Kate?’

My heart paused for a moment. I hadn’t given Nigel my phone number, but I suppose he recognised my voice. Random spam calls usually came with an Indian accent, not a southern English one.

We spoke, having a joke between us like we were already workmates, and then I offered him the job, which to my eternal gratitude, he accepted.

And I knew, hiring Nigel was the best decision I had ever made and that he would change my life in ways I could never imagine.

ELENA

OUR FIRST PROPER face-to-face went better than I thought.

You looked horrified, frozen to the spot, unsure what to do with the mess of a woman that stood before you demanding to be published.

I thought, *when should I end this charade and show you the real me?* But I had to let it play out, just a little more, enjoy watching you squirm.

The longer it went on, the more you'd appreciate when I stopped it all.

And I did stop it, didn't I? Because I wasn't that incoherent woman, I was the man behind her, the one you'd been waiting for.

Yes, Kate, Elena Cartwright is actually a big, hairy man!

I dragged the alcoholic off you, saying, *'Right, Miss, if you would follow me,'* like I was some kind of security for

Tesco—though judging from what I'd seen in London in the short time I'd been there, security usually watched-on as locals took whatever they wanted without paying.

Outside of your office, out of view from your curious eyes, I slipped old Izzy the promised twenty and told her to fuck off, which she duly did, though I had to point her in the opposite direction.

Izzy sits, drinks and begs only a street away from your office, yet it was noticeable that you looked at her like she was a complete stranger you'd seen for the first time.

I can assure you, Kate, you've walked past her on more occasions than I can remember. Your indifference has belittled you, you've allowed the world to shut out your inner child, your innate empathy. Quite the contrary to your online activism.

Having eliminated Lorraine Centofanti from the agency, I had three weeks to prepare for my job application. Where I'd failed at securing a literary agent with my novels, I would succeed at getting an interview for this job. Using my expertise at fantastical writing, I padded out my CV to cover all those times I was unemployed.

Now, before you judge me, I may have been unemployed and kept afloat by the safety net that was Universal Credit, but I was always working. You could call it volunteering, such was the way of being a writer who writes novels all day long and gets paid in rejections, self-doubt, and a sore neck and stiff back that will not go away.

I was so confident of at least an interview, I realised I would have to clean up my act. I raided aunt's piggy bank, *her ever-sustaining four-weekly pension*, and bought a cheap suit. I went to an actual barber, and had him shave off my foot-long beard and give me a short back and sides. I got rid of the fringe, because at the last moment, I felt my forehead lines to be character-building, and I'd never mentioned it to you in any of my submissions.

The only problem was, I didn't have time to lose weight. Not even a crash diet would shift the ever-burgeoning love handles that threatened to overspill from my belt.

I would have to make-do with what I had.

I thought about dying my hair blonde, and then I remembered, *I'm a man, I don't have to do that!*

When the email came from your agency, I braced myself for the worst. But I didn't have time to procrastinate. I couldn't believe it, you had shortlisted me for interview. No fantasy. No wishful thinking. I was to come and see you, pronto!

But in the back of my mind, I knew I still had a long way to go. I could ace the interview, for sure, but I'd still be up against women—let's be honest, it'd mostly be young girls—who actually came out of the universities they wrote on their CVs. All pretty, and all well-spoken, *most of you literary agents all sound the same, don't you?* Why would you want an old lump like me? *An old, man-lump...*

That's why I enlisted old Izzy's help. I'd love to say I

planned it all, but it was a last minute thing, showing my initiative and ability to think on my feet.

You see, I was waiting across the road, watching you as you came into the reception with that dark-haired bitch who would steal my future job, and when you shook her hand, a bolt of electricity shot up my back. How could you touch another person in front of me? It was unfathomable.

The youngster waved at you, and immediately got out her phone to take a selfie in front of your office. *Yes, Kate, I thought, this is what you'll get should you hire a Gen-Z narcissist with duck lips who'll use you until she can get a more Instagrammable office to work in, you'll be lucky if she hangs around for more than a month.*

Inspiration came with the jingle of coins in a polystyrene cup. Old Izzy, who I'd got chatting to one day when the real you got on your bus and the bus left before I could catch it, asked if I had any spare change. *Well, I spoke to her and I couldn't understand a word that came out of her Scottish mouth, but waving her empty cup around gave a general gist.*

I pulled out my wallet, a dangerous thing to do on the terrifying streets of London, I know. My inquisitive fingers searched for coins, but the feeling of a crisp twenty-pound note demanded attention.

I looked to your office, you were still in reception, chatting with another agent behind the desk.

I pulled out the twenty, clutching tight at the plastic, and made Izzy an offer she'd be silly to refuse.

‘Ye’re a crazy radge, ye’are,’ was all she said, which I assumed meant she accepted my proposal.

The rest as they say, is history.

After what happened with old Izzy, well, it was safe to say I was a shoo-in for the job, the interview a mere formality. Still, I couldn’t drop the ball now, not with all I wanted in plain sight. And you had your own agenda too.

‘I have a peculiar question for you, a sort of test. This is unusual but I really need to know how you’d handle it.’

Intrigued, I was. Were you going to ask me to do tests on Microsoft Word, Excel and Powerpoint, like they did for that council job way back when?

You slid over your iPad and asked me to read the email that was already open. I’d seen this email before.

‘How would you deal with that?’ you said, your chin trembling.

I re-read the email, this time aloud, emphasising each and every word, a familiar sensation tingling in my groin, enjoying this way too much but showing nothing of my enjoyment on my cold, poker face.

‘Dear Kate Finlay,

I am pleased to inform you that you have been successful in your attempts to gain me as a client. Let’s meet soon.

Best wishes,

Elena Cartwright

P.S. We should be together too.’

I sighed, a deep, lingering sigh. *Why the fuck did I*

include that last line? And then I looked to you, face determined, *you can trust me.*

‘I would deal with it, so you don’t have to.’

‘That’s the best answer I’ve had today.’ You smiled, a relieved smile, and inadvertently snorted up whatever mucus has filled your nostrils. ‘I’m sorry,’ you said as you grabbed a tissue, dabbing at your moist eyes. I dug my fingernails into my thighs, berating myself for not offering you a tissue first, missing out on all these little brownie points that would all add up in the end, *I hired you Nigel because with you around, I don’t even have to blow my own nose or wipe my own arse.*

I wanted to comfort you, stroke your pretty blonde hair, tell you everything would be okay, but this wasn’t the time to do so. I had to remain professional, even if you were acting anything but, because the job wasn’t mine yet.

We had made a connection, but I couldn’t take it too far, I couldn’t have you regret your moment of weakness, *Oh, Nigel’s the perfect candidate, but why did I break down in front of him, he knows too much about me already, I can’t work with someone who knows I’m fragile, weak and pathetic.*

The interview finished in a flash, I had enjoyed your company too much, and it was well-known, when you have fun, time passes quicker.

You bade me farewell, saying *I’ll be in touch* and you held my hand for the second time in an hour, actually touched my hand to shake it with your bare skin, skin-on-skin, I’d go home and do a Bart Simpson, never wash that hand, maybe

sit on it until I lost all feeling and then tug on myself with it. *A hand-job from a stranger called Kate.*

I did my usual firm handshake but with none of the knuckle crackers, and I held on to your hand a little longer than I intended but you didn't seem to mind, and your hand wasn't sweaty like the ginger in the café, it was cold, and that disturbed me for a moment, and then I regained my composure.

You were obviously a cold-blooded lizard who needed me to be your sun, I'd feed you live hamsters and never tell your secret to anyone.

On my way out of your office, I breathed a sigh of relief and hopped my way back to the hostel, walking around London like a complete tourist, unaware of my surroundings, I could have been robbed by a thug on a scooter, that's how much in my own head I was.

I deserve this, Kate.

I like to think of it as my reward. *A for effort.* It wasn't going to be handed to me on a plate, was it? The hours, days, and weeks I put in, led me to the right moment at the right time, the job opening and my metamorphosis into Nigel Carlyle.

You called me a day later, making me wait—as usual. I answered your call, breathless, and you jokingly asked if I'd just come home from a run. No, Kate. Receiving a call from you, as expected as it was, had me anxious and unable to breathe. But we got through it, didn't we, and you offered

me the job which I gladly accepted, though I was *very* tempted to take up your offer to think about it and have *you* sweating.

My first day in the agency was here, butterflies in my tummy. I'd spewed three times before leaving the house, and spent the commute to work worried that I had sick breath in the back of my throat, but at least I didn't have anything left in my stomach to bring up.

You welcomed me at the reception, I was so happy to see you in person again. This time you afforded me a quick hug, and I was so close I could smell you, your perfume masking the faintest whiff of body odour. I don't mean you stunk, simply your smell, your gorgeous fucking smell.

Let me show you around, you said, and I was so excited to be in rooms that I'd only ever seen on the agency's social media. All those dreams coming to life. I had already drunk from those Insta-cute coffee cups, already sat at the window with the view of the back garden, already lounged on your comfy reader's sofa. I even stroked the agency's dog for the hundredth time, though the first in actuality.

There was so much to do, Kate, what with protecting you from myself, and learning a new job *on the job*, because in spite of all my bullshit at the interview my CV was not worth the paper it was written on. *It's okay, everyone does that.*

I had to laugh, because if I didn't, I would cry. And I cried, too.

You could never know about Elena Cartwright, and to that effect, I'd have to continue sending the occasional submission to keep up appearances.

If you knew the truth, would you accept me? Accept what I've done? At least, what I tried to do.

It's not like I appropriated an ethnic minority, attempting to steal a rare seat at the table from someone equally struggling.

I pretended to be a white woman. You know, one of those species whom make up the majority of the publishing industry.

And I know what you'll say, you'll say that at the moment, the percent of published authors in the UK is only slightly in favour of women. But you can't see what I see. *The future.*

Take a look at your client list. Take a look at the majority of agents' client lists. All those new authors, waiting for their books to be picked up by editors, waiting for their publication dates. They are not yet part of the figures, but when they are, they will tip the scales.

For many literary agents at the bigger agencies, around fifteen percent of their clients are male. And that includes men from minority backgrounds. Either no men are writing anymore, or women have abandoned feminism and happy to live in the kitchen, in this case, writing novels, whilst their husbands earn a crust.

I found one agent whose client list comprised of twenty-

five percent males. That's as high as it goes, unless you want to include the agents whom look after dead authors' estates, which are in the majority, men.

Yes, because a hundred years ago leading up to the boomers, men had it all their own way, the rest of us must suffer!

And don't even get me started about class. If I take the meagre figures for male clients at literary agencies, and divide them into class, mine being working-class, well, finding one of my own is like searching for a needle in a haystack the size of Richard Osman!

There's even a woman's prize to help women find agents, I've been to one of their parties, standing in the background of a photo of Stanley Tucci, a bald man no less, but there's no such male alternative—*speak to your wife about this, mate!* Granted, when the prize was founded, it was no doubt needed. Is it needed now, when women dominate agents' client lists? Why can't we have a Men's Prize and then I'd never have had to conjure up Elena Cartwright in the first place?

Or take the Lucy Cavendish Prize, originally for women only, you can now enter if you identify as non-binary. How does that work? A man or woman could identify as non-binary. In which case, I could totally blag that, who's to say how I identify, no matter what I look like?

But I didn't go to such extremes, did I? I merely wrote in a female pen name. I don't want to have to bring up J.K. yet

again, but why can she openly admit to occasionally writing under a male pen name, yet if I do it, wow, I wasn't honest with you, I'm a charlatan, a man who skinned a woman and wore her skin as a suit to get by, a misogynist who stole a spot that was reserved for yet another white, blonde woman.

I love your blonde hair, Kate, but really, you're all prolific. How many women have I seen enter the industry with dark hair, fast forward to today, and they've turned blonde!

But listen, I don't want to sound embittered. The percentage of males working in the UK publishing industry is only around thirty-five percent, and yet, you did the unthinkable, and hired me.

Which tells me something. Against all odds, you and I are meant to be.

And interestingly, where you rejected Elena Cartwright, you accepted Nigel Carlyle.

You accepted the real me.

Or at least an approximation of me.

And soon, you, *Kate Finlay*, are going to find out what happens to those who fuck with me. Everything you ever knew, everyone you ever loved, is going to burn.

At the end of it all, by hook or by crook, whether we're alive and prosperous, or dead and sharing a coffin together, *the romance!*, you'll be mine.

Oh yes, you will be mine.

'Pain is certain. Suffering is optional.'

—Buddha

NIGEL

IF YOU REALLY KNEW WHAT I've done, you'd probably laugh, Kate, wouldn't you?

I mean, there I was, living a life of complete utter rejection at your hands, and that of all your industry sisters, and I suppose a part of me thought that it would be great to be on the other side of the fence, be the one dishing out the rejections instead of receiving them.

But it hasn't quite worked out like that, has it? We—that is, you and I—get rejected by publishers. Our clients, who we took a one-in-seven-thousand chance on, because the odds just keep-on rising year-on-year, whose novels have the potential to light up the bestseller charts and maybe change the way a reader thinks about life, are rejected.

And now I realise how much it hurts, how much it hurts you. On one hand, you're the bad guy who rejects the majority of manuscripts sent to you by desperate authors,

and on the other hand, you're unable to shield your own authors from more rejection.

Not only is it financially unstable for yourself working on a commission—though it's not like you're part-time and working in a bookstore, unlike some agents—knowing that every rejection is fifteen percent of nothing, but it's the time spent too, isn't it?

You don't regret all those nights reading your clients' work, sending them detailed notes, replying to their needy emails at all times of the day, and then spending your weekend sifting through the slush pile, knowing that to even cut-and-paste form rejections will take time, if only you could automate it all or at the very least, hire an assistant to do it...

But wouldn't it be nice to be financially rewarded for your every effort and endeavour? There's nothing better than telling a client that their book has sold, they'll get paid, you'll get paid, and hopefully, just hopefully, you'll create a brand around them.

Show me the money, Kate, your clients say, and you say this to yourself in the mirror, too.

But sometimes the editor that showed interest takes their time getting back to you. When you have to chase it up, you know, more often than not, the battle is already lost. Other times, it's more frustrating. The editor loves the manuscript as much as you do, but the marketing department have said no, because unknown to most aspiring writers, it's not just a

case of getting a literary agent who loves your book to sell to an editor of a publisher who loves your book, you have to have every team in the publisher's on the same page, that is, all loving your book and envisioning a way to sell it.

Now that I work alongside you, I can see that it's not easy for you, never has been. Would I have empathised had I known this previously? Had I known we were twins when it came to rejections, would I have taken yours less personally?

Probably not, all honesty.

You see, for you, rejection is more common than I thought, but you have your fair share of wins, too. It's not all a one-way street. Can you say the same for me? Do you know what it's like to be rejected and dejected with no hope in sight and—

Well, that's all in the past now, relatively speaking. There's no point in feeling bitter. Perhaps being a writer is not for me, though I do have a habit of quitting the life and then picking up the metaphorical pen once again when the fancy takes me. I might not be rejected by you that often, because I only pull out Elena when need be, when the itch to write becomes overwhelming, or when I need to put you in your place and have you running back to the Nigel version of me.

Of course, these days I barely have the time to write my own stories, due to the crazy workload you have me under. How do agents like you manage to do it? It boggles the mind.

We're getting on like a house on fire these days. We're closer than I could ever imagine. *Close but no cigar*. We could be closer, like me being the g-string to your arse-crack. It would help if you didn't have any distractions in your private life. It's difficult saying goodbye to you at the end of the working day, knowing you're going home to someone else, especially an imbecile like Malcolm.

Had you been married to a superior specimen, an intellectual adonis, with the body of a prime Schwarzenegger, the brain of Stephen Hawking, and the filth of Charles Bukowski, I could understand why your knees would part for such a creature. But Malcolm, the human equivalent of a cane toad, not so much. Like the real thing in Australia, he's an unwanted interloper, poisonous, with the capacity to wreak havoc, both within the agency and your private life.

We still text of course, and even call each other when need be, but it's not quite the same, is it? Every conversation is work-related. I remember when I called you for a non-work related reason and you sounded shocked, to which I made up a work-related reason before you ended the call.

Why can't you treat everyone—aside from me—the way you treat your mother? You know, the way you ignore her and try your utmost to never see her, confessing you might be happy when the narcissistic old bag pops her clogs. You haven't told anyone that, apart from me, and you only told me because I told you about my aunt first, and we both agreed that they could both rot in the fiery bowels of Hell.

If only the disdain you feel for your mother was extended to your husband and dog, the two insidious entities who pollute your Instagram like noxious gases. To be fair, your dog, cute as he is, doesn't know any better. But the other human-sized dog, well, there's no excuse for keeping him around, is there? He's not cute, and he certainly isn't loyal.

Honestly, Kate, wouldn't life be infinitely better if it were just the two of us?

And at the agency's summer party, I dream of having an affair with you, but you're nowhere to be seen, and Malcolm's not here either, and I wonder if you've both headed home to kiss under the late sunset and allow Malcolm to suck on your small, but perfect, breasts.

I walk up to Tom, whose pupils are so big there's no longer any blue iris in his eyes.

'Hey buddy—*sniff*—cool party, eh? *Sniff!*'

'Have you seen Kate?'

His mouth twitches, and he's about to say something, then takes a deep breath, and resets. 'No, buddy, haven't—*sniff*—seen her at all.'

I look around at all the people I don't care about. Christine is talking to a woman I don't know, her husband loitering behind them both. He's miserable. *Who wouldn't be, living with that endless bundle of sunshine, rainbows and cringeworthy positivity?* Debbie is eating canapés, the one day of the year when she lets go and stuffs her face. A photo of

her late husband adorns the table, a macabre reminder of the real founder of the agency.

‘Where’s your wife?’ I ask Tom. I’d seen a scantily clad red-head prancing around, quite the actress, her ample bosom threatening to suffocate me and my lustful glances.

‘Olivia? God only knows. *Sniff*. Like, it’s between her and God, you know what I mean?’ I nod even though I’ve no clue what he’s on about. ‘I’m just gonna—*sniff*—nip to the loo. Do you want to join me and Charlie?’

He winks, and if I wasn’t as streetwise as I am, I could be forgiven for thinking I’ve just been invited to a homosexual threesome, with me being the mouth to Tom and Charlie’s glory hole.

But thanks to Tom’s dribbling nose and lips constantly rubbing against his bulging gums, I can safely assume Charlie doesn’t exist, and isn’t in fact, an imaginary friend, either.

You know me, Kate, I never judge a soul. But why anyone would want to snort the finest, white Columbian powder cut with ant powder, from a toilet bowl caked in germs, urine and excrement, I’ll never know.

‘I’m okay, Tom,’ I say, and I lean into his shoulder and whisper, ‘but if you want some real action, there’s a public toilet down the road. Absolutely filthy and has a decent sized hole in the door too.’

Now I wink at him, and push my tongue through my cheek and make a jerking motion with my closed fist to my

mouth. Even in his coked-up state he's horrified, and I back away like it's no skin off my septum.

'She's in her office,' he finally says, and he has the vilest smirk on his face. 'She's—*sniff*—upset it seems?' He shrugs his shoulders and hurries to the bog, my eyes shooting daggers at the back of his snide head.

He might be lying, but there's no harm in trying. I head to your office and open the door. You're sobbing, snot dripping from your petite, perfect nose. I want to lick it, but me slobbering over your nostrils will hardly enamour me to you.

'Are you okay?'

'I'm fine,' you lie. 'Please, I don't want you to see me like this.'

You turn away, unknowing that in my dreams I've seen you in all states of undress and duress. A teary you is nothing to be ashamed of.

'What happened?'

You say nothing, but I know I just have to wait. Your desperate need for attention will finally override this rare instance of stoicism.

'It's Malcolm.'

Ah, let me guess, the meat beater has been celebrating Palm Sunday again, has he?

'What has he done this time?'

'He was in the cupboard...' *making the bald man cry to the tune of Michael Jackson's Beat It? 'with Tom's wife...'* *And she was—wait, what?*

I grab a tissue, aware of the unfortunate connotations, *or perhaps it's only me thinking like this*, and I dab at your mascara-strewn eyes.

What was Malcolm thinking cheating on a queen like you? It was a crime just thinking about it. *In my defence, she had big knockers, your Honour!*

'I'm so sorry,' I say, sincerity dripping from my lips. 'You deserve better.'

'You know what? You're right.'

You suck the saliva off your bottom lip, and your teeth bite down, lingering there in a manner that has me excited. *Do you know what you're—*

You take my head in your hands, gazing at my forehead.

You trace the lines with your fingers, and then you grab my head and thrust your tongue into my mouth. It's not quite the romantic peck I envisioned sharing, but I will not complain!

You're like a ravenous wolf, and I pull you back before you rip off my face with desire. I look at you, drinking you in with my wanton eyes, and then I kiss you again, this time with love, my hands gentle on your face.

But you're having none of it. You kick off your heels, grab me by the shirt and pull me with you, your bottom crashing against your desk. I hoist you onto it, and your legs spread, and you push my head down, inviting me to taste the fruit of your very being. *I can eat a peach for hours!*

And just as I'm about to rip off those flimsy knickers

that would deny me my birthright, a terrible pain shoots from my head. You've grabbed my hair, not with love, not even with lust, but with regret.

'Stop it! I can't do this!'

The final insult is your perfect foot thrusting into my shoulder, knocking me backward onto my back.

Before I can comprehend what has happened, you're helping me to my feet, apologising profusely.

'I'm so sorry, Nigel. I just can't—he's still my husband. I took my vows seriously. Just because he's a cheat, doesn't mean—'

Allegedly you're talking to me, but I can see you're simply trying to convince yourself. You don't want to lower yourself to Malcolm's standards, even if it means missing out on a once-in-a-lifetime shag with me. As much as I appreciate your integrity, I can't help lament the missed opportunity.

And then you slip up, showing the real you.

'If I do anything with you, I won't be able to lord it over him ever again. He'll be unbearable to live with if I don't have the moral high ground. You're a man, you just don't understand.'

On that final point, we agree, Kate. I don't understand you, which is why I'm so intrigued by you. If I understood how your female brain worked, well, you'd be fucking boring to me, wouldn't you?

Honestly, I was raised by a woman and I've been writing

under the guise of a woman for the past twenty years, but I'll be the first to admit that women are from Venus and that's millions of fucking miles away!

You leave the party alone, and leave me with the cretins. I drown my sorrows, but not enough to allow Olivia to make me notch number two on her cupboard post. I was tempted, I won't lie, anything to take my mind off you, but when I noticed her tits were now shining with what I suspected were millions of dead, microscopic Malcolms, well, you'll forgive me for wanting to kill the guy.

Instead I went home, tail between my legs, and made love to a fleshlight I named Fake Kate.



IT'S BEEN three weeks since the office party. For the most part, our working relationship is unchanged. I thought, with a naive hope, that the shenanigans of the party would alter things.

You had kissed me, and your husband had cheated on you, something you witnessed with your own eyes. The very next day you poured your heart out to me, leaving me with the impression you were ready to divorce Malcolm. I waited for the inevitable, where you addressed our kiss and made it clear you wanted more.

But you said nothing.

As each day passed, you complained about Malcolm a

little less, and you still said nothing about our kiss, until the day arrived when you said you and Malcolm had made up and you didn't need to tell me that I had spent the entire week firmly in the friend zone.

It's obvious to me now, you're fucking with me, again. I knew, and hoped, one day, of your own accord, you'd invite me into your bed and we'd indulge all manners of sexual deviancy, consensual and loving, and I wouldn't even mind if you forced yourself on me against my will.

But you didn't, did you? We are close, *but not that close*. You share the majority of your waking day with me, *but you don't share the world of nod*. You haven't kissed me again, or even hinted at ever wanting to kiss me again.

I'm simply your workmate who was a convenient distraction when the fancy took, a man who is allowed in your life during daytime hours only, a Cinderella whom you fear will change into an ugly bastard at the stroke of midnight, a fucking mogwai who you're scared to feed *after* midnight lest I metamorphosis into a gremlin at the bottom of your bed.

You begrudgingly tolerate me, because since I came into your life, the influence of Elena Cartwright has waned. You subconsciously recognise that every time our working relationship cools, Elena finds a new way to harass you, and I find a way to fix you and make you whole again.

But you don't love me, do you? You reject me the way you reject Elena's novels. There's nothing I can do to fix this,

is there? You'll never want me, no matter how much I sacrifice to please you.

Now I know how far down the rabbit hole I've tumbled. I didn't just want a red pill. I wanted a box of them. Fuck your blue pill. Fuck your blissful ignorance. Give me cold, hard, brutal reality each and every time.

And the reality is, I'm starting to FUCKING HATE YOU! Honestly, I thought I'd forgiven you after you rejected me. It wasn't personal, was it? You were simply tied to your vows. But to reward a man who cheated on you with a swinger? It's simply not on!

I had given love a chance, but now it was time to give hate its due.

IT WAS TOO good to be true, Elena. Life was going along so swimmingly, blessings bestowing themselves upon me at every opportunity, but I knew, disaster was just around the corner, I could feel it in every fibre of my being.

Professional life, great. Finding satisfaction in my workplace for the first time in so long, enjoying taking on new clients, having meaningful interactions with promising authors, delving back into the webinars which I hoped would really bring useful help and advice to those who needed it.

Private life, ever better. Malcolm ravaging me most nights like he was still the horny beast I once married. It came with the caveat that I'd have to forgive him for his drunken dalliance with Tom's adventurous wife—Tom himself was non-plussed at the whole thing—but I deemed

it a price worth paying, anything for a life that resembled the normalcy I once lived.

Malcolm assured me it was only sex, he didn't love her. I know, if the boot was on the other foot, Malcolm wouldn't care if I loved another man, but he would be furious if another man penetrated me with a penis bigger than his own. *But we're not men, are we, Elena? We don't think like that.*

Then, without warning, life tumbled, free-fall down a hole the depth of the Mariana Trench.

At six am like clockwork, I took Poe out in the back garden to do his morning pee. I usually stand there watching him sniff around, waiting for his hind leg to rise.

But then my phone rang, and when I say phone, I mean my landline phone, which only one person ever phoned, that being my mother. To phone at such an early time meant trouble. In my worry, I rushed into the house, believing Poe would be fine to do his business and come back in himself. With a six-foot fence surrounding him, there was no means of escape for a little dog whose torso lay an inch from the ground.

I picked up the receiver and said hello, but all I heard was a muffled sound, like the caller's microphone was rubbing against their clothing. I heard Poe yap, like an echo of yap, as if it came from the garden *and* the phone call itself. I said hello once more, and the line went dead.

The caller ID was unknown. Not my mother then. Most

likely a wrong number. It didn't call back, so I returned to the garden, but Poe was gone.

I panicked and imagined the worst. Had he escaped down the back lane and found himself on the main road and under the wheels of a bleary-eyed driver's car?

I checked the fence for any kind of gap underneath, perhaps he'd squeezed under and was in the neighbour's garden. But there was no gap larger than what would allow a hedgehog to navigate the gardens.

I ran to the gate, intent on running down the back lane, and I noticed, *the gate was already open*. I entered the lane, looked down both directions, nothing. When I closed my gate, the latch would not catch. Someone had stuffed-in a small piece of cardboard, obstructing the mechanism.

How long had that been there? It was there through deliberate actions. Had someone left it, hoping to come back and rob our home? Instead, the gate must have crept open, by a gust of wind perhaps, allowing Poe to stick his nose through the gap.

I looked for chalk marks with symbols I wouldn't understand. I'd heard about how burglars marked easy targets using such things.

Nothing.

If someone had intended on robbing my home, they hadn't done it yet, or had tried already and gave up; either way, their prep-work had allowed my dog to escape and be lost in the big bad world.

During the next sixteen hours I pleaded on social media for the safe return of Poe. I plastered photos on streetlights in nearby streets on the off-chance someone had seen something.

I approached neighbours who had CCTV cameras pointing to the front and back of our street, told them the exact time of escape. I hoped any footage would show Poe escaping and scampering down the lane. But cameras from both ends of the street, on both sides for the street and lane, came up with nothing. No dog. No appearance of any dognapper. Not even a jogger. It was as if Poe had vanished into thin air, or run through the woods at the back which was the only blind spot we had. That sounded reasonable. He caught sight of a rabbit and set-chase like he was an oversized ferret.

Comments flooded my social media—*were any of them yours, I wonder?*—exhibiting empathy, kindness, advice—*no then*.

Precisely twenty-four hours after his abduction, as I lay awake with no dog to take outside to pee, a direct message arrived on my Instagram, no words, simply a photo.

Poe, lying on his back, waiting for someone to rub his belly. I had to double-check that someone had not sent me one of my own photos, but I suppose the name of account gave the game away: @poe_is_okay

What is this? I wrote. **Who are you?**

The messages were instantly read, and then, the profile disappeared before I had a chance to view it.

That profile never reappeared. Instead, a couple of hours later, another profile left me a direct message with another photo of Poe, his nose snuggled into his paws like he was playing a game of hide and seek. *Appropriate.*

This time, the profile's tag was @poe_is_ookay. Whomever was doing this had a plan, but no ounce of originality. I sent a message. **What do you want?** Once again, it was read, and the profile disappeared.

Another profile, many hours later, this time the tag stating the bloody obvious: @I_have_your_dog

Yes, Elena, some absolute idiot had my dog, and wasn't in any hurry to return him. Did they find Poe wandering the streets? Take him in and find my name on the back of his collar tag, but unwilling to contact me directly, looked me up on social media first?

Or was something more sinister going on? Did they *take* Poe when I went to answer the miscall on the landline? Was this all premeditated?

Over the next couple of days, this cat and mouse game continued, until I realised that messaging them back meant the sender's profile would immediately be deleted, so on one occasion, I didn't message back. But this only bought half-an-hour before the profile was once again, deleted. Whoever it was, waited until I opened my inbox and read their

message, gave me a little time to reply, and then deleted whether I replied or not.

I tried another tactic. The message came in, I didn't open it, and went straight to their profile. But it was empty. Of course it was. There was nothing of value other than knowing that another photo of Poe was in my inbox, and if I didn't check it, I'd have no idea if it was him playing with a ball, or him disembowelled.

Yes, Elena, this was truly fucking with my mind, which I suppose was the point.

Things came to a head when I received another photo whilst eating lunch with Nigel, who had spent the past few minutes looking at his phone and relaying to me mundane stories from around the world.

'Another photo!' I said, placing my phone down, head falling into my hands. 'I just don't know what to do.'

'Can I see the photo?'

I handed Nigel my mobile, and watched as he smiled at yet another adorable photo of Poe. He caught me looking, and his face became stern. 'You should go to the police.'

'But you said it would be a waste of time.' Sad as it was, Nigel had been the first person I called when I received the first photo of Poe. My call to Malcolm went to voicemail...

'That was before. This is now. At the very least, this is some kind of online harassment. Text me later and let me know what they say.' He handed the phone back to me. 'You know I'm there for you. Always.'

I'd have been disturbed by that comment, given our drunken kiss which I instigated, but Nigel's been the perfect gentleman since, hasn't mentioned it even once. *I sometimes wish he would.*

On the way home from work, with Nigel's words ringing in my mind, I stopped at the rare sighting of a police station.

The officer was, well...

'Gangs are known for stealing dogs on demand. What kind of dog did you say he was again?'

Perhaps if the officer had listened properly the first time, I wouldn't have to repeat myself. 'A Miniature Dachshund.'

He laughed, then composed himself. 'The gangs usually prefer an XL Bully or the likes.'

'I thought that breed was banned?'

'It is. Hence why I said, *and the likes*. But yeah, little sausage dogs aren't high on the list. Aren't those things usually very clingy?'

I didn't like his tone of voice, nor him referring to Poe as a 'thing', and I wasn't sure what Poe's separation anxiety—a common trait for his breed—had to do with anything. Was the officer suggesting that Poe couldn't have possibly been left alone long enough to be abducted?

I told him about the photos.

'Has the dog been harmed?' He leaned over the front desk, eyes shooting from side-to-side, and in a whisper said,

‘If it has, you might want to repost that online, there’s plenty of vigilantes who despise animal cruelty.’ He pulled back, straightening himself up. ‘I saw a documentary about cat cruelty on Netflix. Trust me, the netizens will find this thief before we do.’

And there I was, Elena, thinking reports of police incompetence were exaggerated. ‘I don’t think enlisting vigilantes is something I’m comfortable with.’

He sighed. ‘Let’s see the pics, then.’ I showed him the photos. ‘Hold on, why are they all on your phone roll?’

I had to bite my tongue at the cruel thoughts I was having about this particular man. ‘I saved the photos as evidence. The original profiles are gone. They appear and disappear within the day. Could you trace them if I sent you them quick enough? You’d have about twenty-odd minutes.’

His eyebrows rose, saucer eyes dripping with incredulity. ‘They’re probably using VPNs.’ He caught sight of my *scrunched* eyebrows and sighed. ‘Virtual Protocol Networks? They allow the user to shift their IP address all over the globe. We have ways of tracking this kind of thing down, but it’s all a case of priority. I’m sorry to say...’ He stopped before confirming that my missing dog was not a priority. ‘Look, at least your dog’s alive and well. It’s highly unlikely that he’ll be involved in any dog fights. Unless they’re looking for a training toy or—’ He showed his palms in apology. ‘Sorry! Look, obviously someone is pranking you.’

‘A prank? Who would do such a thing?’

‘Do you have any enemies? Anyone who would want to mess with you? Mess with your mind?’

When I thought of it, I did have one, absolutely fucked-up weirdo stalker, didn’t I, Elena? But even then, I couldn’t believe you would do such a thing to me. It went against everything you purportedly felt about me. And creepier still, would mean you knew my home address, which seemed unlikely, as no unwanted gifts or handwritten manuscripts had been left at my front door.

‘My final theory, is at some point you’ll receive a ransom note. Please do let us know if that happens.’

‘And then what? You’ll provide some kind of negotiator?’

He snorted a laugh, uncertain if I was joking or not. ‘I’ll update your file, of course.’ He smiled, a lazy smile that barely creased his mouth. ‘Don’t worry, it’s like our Mayor always says, this kind of stuff happens in all major cities.’

Yes, Sadiq Khan thinks it’s fine to be robbed, sexually assaulted or murdered, and it’s fine to steal someone’s dog, torture the owner mentally and wait for a ransom! *Don’t worry, you’ll own nothing and be happy!*

I left the police station infuriated, and utterly helpless. All I could do was wait for the dognapper to contact me again, hopefully giving me instructions and payment methods on how to get Poe back. I was short on actual cash, but Visa and Paypal worked fine for me.

The photos kept coming, always from different accounts that would delete soon after the fact. I don't know how anyone could have the patience to create all these accounts.

'They might be blocking you, and unblocking you?' Nigel said, when I called him with an update, realising we were calling each other for matters not relating to work.

'I thought that, but the handle is always different.'

'Could've changed it when you were blocked.'

'It's a possibility. Doesn't matter anyway, the police won't do anything.'

'Useless coppers.'

Any messages I sent were read but never replied to, which made me sick with rage, my replies becoming increasingly unstable.

Please, please can I have my dog back?

Why are you doing this to me?

What the hell is wrong with you?

You'll regret this one day!

I will find you and I will kill you...

After the last one, I stopped. What if the dognapper took my anger out on Poe. Up until now, Poe was unharmed, I didn't want to provoke the thief.

And then I had an awful thought, that perhaps all of these photos, which were all seemingly different, had been taken on the same day, yet sent to me weeks apart, giving me the illusion that Poe was still alive, but in reality, long dead.

The background of the photos gave no clues to his

whereabouts, other than to allow me the knowledge that his little paws were playing on grass, dirt, and gravel. It could've been someone's unkempt garden, it could've been a public park, it could've been anywhere!

Yes, some had bright lighting conditions, some were duller, but that could be an English spring day rolled into one.

Still, if this was a sick prank or a ransom, surely Poe was still alive? There had to be an end game.

In my frustration, I drafted an email to you, Elena, demanding that you give me my dog back. But before I could press send, Malcolm, the voice of reason, stopped me.

'Are you fucking crazy?' he said, and quite rightly, too. 'You can't accuse a random member of the public.'

'She's hardly a random member of the public.'

Malcolm only knows tidbits of your existence, my having cursed your name under my breath once too many times, he wouldn't understand the strain of having you in my life.

'What if she posts your email online?'

More publicity to get my dog back? I cynically thought. I couldn't tell Malcolm that you would never betray my trust like that, that you already have enough material on me to ruin my career thanks to my incomprehensible need to rub-in how involved I was in ensuring you'd never get a literary agent.

‘You’re right,’ I said, anything to placate him. ‘Then what do we do?’

‘We wait for them to slip up. A photo with a detail that shows where they are.’

‘Oh yes, Malcolm, let’s wait for a photo of Poe crossing Abbey Road!’

‘I married you for your wit, not your sarcasm.’ He yawned like this was all too mundane for him. ‘Maybe they’ll get bored and bring him back. Maybe you should stop replying to their photos. They’re probably loving the attention, knowing that it’s getting to you so much.’

‘It’s our dog, Malcolm! How can it not get to me? Why is not getting to you?’

He wrapped his arm around me and pulled me in. ‘It is getting to me,’ he lied. ‘But I just think we are dragging this out by giving them the attention they crave. Maybe it’s better to change our response to it all? Be unwilling to feed the monster.’

This suited Malcolm. No longer would he have to pretend that he cared about Poe being missing. He never wanted a dog in the first place, but went along with it, because, *it’s better than having a brat, isn’t it?*

Not once did he take Poe out for his morning pee, *not once*, hence why he’d never dare blame me for Poe going missing. Malcolm was the epitome of western individualism. An only child who was quite content with his lineage ending with him.

With the burden of finding Poe all but alleviated, Malcolm slipped back into being himself.

Interestingly, without Poe around to distract me, I noticed things that had gone under the radar.

Things that would have me believe Malcolm was cheating on me once again.

NIGEL

FROM THE MOMENT I noted down your landline number from the emergency phone number list in work—nice of you to list both mobile and landline—I had a plan. I would sit in a car I didn't yet own—at the bottom of your street with a pair of binoculars—waiting for you to come out to your garden with your dog, maybe do it a few times over the course of a month to see if there was any pattern to this, something I could rely on.

But then I remembered I had a full-time job, and then I remembered there was no need to do any of that anyway, not when you posted on social media at the same time, every time, saying things like, *Beautiful sunrise! #dogneedspectime* and *Early mornings start at 6am #dogspeelikeclockwork* and *Poe is relieved...literally! #groundhogmorning*

Too much information, Kate, literally!

Not only that, from your photos, I knew you let your

dog piss in your back garden, not the front one. You probably thought, *no harm in letting people see my back garden*, but you didn't bank on me.

One day, you might look back and regret the barbecue you invited me to, which allowed me to scope out your back garden. There were CCTV in a couple of your neighbours' back gardens, paranoid so and so's, but not yours. A lane backed your garden, with thick trees backing that still.

You might remember I asked you to accompany me on a walk around your block to burn off the calories that the burnt sausages and burgers had no doubt put on my waist. Having you with me, it was fine to case the back lane. *Oh look*, I said, *this garden has a garage at the back, with a CCTV camera too!*

Overkill, you said, and I wished your neighbours thought the way you did.

Instead, I made a mental note of all these cameras, and realised I wouldn't be able to access this lane from either entrance at the north and south. The best approach to your back garden would be directly from the trees that lined parallel to all the gardens in your street, trees that provided privacy from the river walkway that meandered close to your home.

I did a test run of the route, and I don't want to scare you, Kate, but unknown to you, these woods host parties and sex-fuelled orgies, or at least, have done so in the past

judging from the burnt-out grounds, copious amounts of rusting beer cans, and used condoms.

The main thing was, the woods offered cover and a route that avoided any nosy CCTV cameras. I could pick and choose where to access the river walkway, and make my way down it until I reached your home. I didn't think how dangerous it might be for me to be navigating these darkened walkways, but at that time of morning, no one was around. I couldn't risk a cyclist passing at dawn, ringing his bell for me to get out the way, and glaring at me like he was Jeremy Vine, his helmet camera recording me for all posterity, *Yes, your Honour, he was the only person I encountered on the river walkway during my entire one hour of cycling to work, he was obviously a sexual predator, why else would a man be walking around at that time in the morning?*

You can imagine the joy the very next morning, attempting my first stake out, having waited only three hours, I heard you come out of your home at six on the dot, the squeak of your dog's bark catching me off-guard. I licked the tip of my finger like I was Fantastic Mr Fox, and held it up, hoping the wind was not blowing the fart I had expelled towards little Poe and his inquisitive nose. With no time to worry, I rang your landline and listened as you disappeared inside.

Your garden gate was unlatched, and had been since the night before, the barbecue, when I left my little cardboard jammer in place, with you none the wiser.

With your landline still ringing, I pushed the gate open.

'Hello?' Your voice echoed from the speaker on my mobile, and I turned down the volume a notch.

Poe ran to me barking, this time smelling the treat I had in my hand. He took it, and with phone in one hand, I took Poe in the other.

'Hello?' a second time, and then I disconnected the call. From there, I pocketed my phone, and pulled out a bag of treats, ensuring Poe would eat and not yelp all the way home.

Later on, replaying the abduction in my head, I was mostly satisfied, aside from one thing: I scolded myself for not removing the cardboard wedged in your latch—I mean, I did have my hands full—and I debated in my head, whether or not to go back for it.

But it was too risky, so, instead, I focused on the plan at hand, got out my old digital camera and began snapping shots of my furry model.

Not long after pressing send on the fake profile, you called me, worry in your voice. *Don't you love how drama brings us closer together?*

You now believed Poe had been snatched. Further proof was the fact someone had lodged cardboard into your gate's latch, allowing them access to your back garden.

If only you could have seen the detailed imprint of a five-fingered slap that was left on my face after you said that.

Still, the cat was out the bag now, *or should that be dog?*,

and at least I could question you on it, though I left it for a good week before asking in a subsequent phone call.

‘Remind me, you said the thief stuffed cardboard into your gate’s latch? You didn’t touch it, did you? The cardboard, I mean.’

‘I binned it, of course!’

‘Like, binned it, as in, put it in the bin and now it’s at the recycling centre?’

‘More like landfill. Why would I keep it?’ I paused, allowing you to think on that. ‘Wait,’ your voice was shaking now, ‘did I do something wrong?’

If only you could’ve seen the grin on my face.

‘DNA.’ You went silent, like the wind had caught your breath. I imagined your face drooping to the floor like melted cheese. ‘I mean, if it’s a career criminal, then they might have left their DNA on the cardboard.’

‘B-b-but—’

‘It’s probably a waste of time going to the police now,’ I sighed, expressing audible disdain for the useless police, *Oh, how I love you guys*. It was unlikely I’d left any DNA on the cardboard anyway, what with the latex gloves. But who knows, the delivery driver who dropped off the parcel—from which I cut the cardboard from—might’ve left *his* DNA on the cardboard. He looked shifty enough, didn’t even smile when handing me the parcel, wouldn’t surprise me if he had priors. The police would suspect him, but he’d have GPS proof that he was three miles away at the time of

abduction, loading up his van at the depot. Thinking out of the box, they'd check his delivery recipients for the past month, see if any had a personal connection to you, and find me, little ole Nigel, who ordered a new fleshlight because he'd broken the old one—*say hello, Fake Kate 2.0*—with mainstream media headlines running: SEXUAL SELF-SATISFACTION DEVIANT STEALS WORKMATE'S DOG FOR...REASONS!

Yeah, I'll go out with an orgasm, Kate! Not a whimper...

Thankfully, you binned any possible evidence and I celebrated after our call ended by lubing up Fake Kate 2.0, and I made a mental note to buy more lube, as I had a feeling I'd have many more reasons to celebrate in the future.

Poe stared at me with curious amusement, but he didn't seem distressed or startled, which made me think you were quite partial to self-love in front of the dog too.

I threw him a bag of treats as I felt uncomfortable being watched, which is quite the irony, I'm aware. *If you ever get Poe back, he's gonna be a big, big, boy.*

Every day, he's fed, he's watered, he's loved. We even have a little photoshoot, because I need you to know that he's alive and thriving.

How does it feel, having something you cherish ripped away so brutally? A small taste of the life I lead every day.

One thing has been taken from you, but there's still plenty left to take. It won't be easy, but then, nothing good in life is.

LORRAINE

IT'S BEEN ALMOST four months since I left the Manning Agency in tears having been betrayed by an entire office of what I once thought of as friends.

I replay the my last moments in the office on a daily basis. My eternal shame.

Your incorrigible husband, Malcolm, emerged from whatever rock he was hiding under and offered me his hand.

'God no!'

Unlike Debbie, I didn't have to imagine where his appendage had been. He scarpered with a reddened face, and the only enjoyment I could muster was the look on your face, as you panicked, wondering if I would lose my shit and tell the whole office about your ham-shanking husband.

But at that point, who would've believed me? Forget that. They all know, don't they? I'd have wasted oxygen singing to the choir.

I packed up my belongings, preferring to indulge in dignified silence.

When you realised my lips were sealed, you looked relieved. Yes, it's always about you, Kate, isn't it? Always is, always was, always will be. Did you give one single fuck about my predicament, about your part in my predicament? I doubt it.

Do you remember your last words to me, Kate? *I do.*

'We'll always be friends.'

But what kind of friend blocks me on Instagram and sends my emails to the Junk folder? *I know the latter because it took a while for the agency to realise I could still access my old work email, and by extension, yours.*

To be fair to you, I probably shouldn't have pestered you, hoping that you'd somehow defend me, however belated, and magically get me my job back with reputation restored.

You're not a miracle worker, even I know if I rub on your magic clit, a genie won't pop out. Though it seems Debbie certainly has one, using up all three of her wishes to make the Goodreads' profile disappear completely. Not even a cached version exists. Unless Debbie has squirrelled away the screenshots, then the only person in the world who potentially has anything on her, and by extension me, is Elena Cartwright, the mysterious wannabe writer whose real existence I've yet to establish.

I've looked high and low for the woman who ruined my

career, asking myself the one question that seems unfathomable to me. *Why?*

There were only two scenarios that made any sense. One: someone was impersonating me, and Elena came across the profile and reported it. Two: Elena created the profile, and reported it. The latter seems likely, though it doesn't explain how a Goodreads profile was set up to ruin me, years before I ever joined the agency.

Before Debbie had the profile wiped from existence, I scoured through the reviews, looking for any hints that might give away their true creator. As the account was created years ago, perhaps at one time it had another username, a username hopefully mentioned in a comment left on the reviews.

But mentions like, **Girl you dang cold!** and **This is brutal, lass, but totally on point.** didn't offer any clues as to whom the original poster might be. I wondered what goes through the mind of someone who has an average review rating of 2.35 out 5. Did they enjoy reading anything? And if not, why bother doing it? Then I remembered that all the five-star reviews were aimed at the clients of you and I.

Debbie had a point, Tom's debut author was suffering. Other reviewers had left damaging reviews for a book that wasn't even available as an arc. Mob mentality was taking over, simply because they didn't like the sound of the blurb, and the imposter writing as me, gave them the go-ahead to pile on, the author's book dead before it was even born.

Then the profile disappeared and with nothing else to go on, I began looking for jobs.

Debbie followed through with a reference, sending me a paper version, but it was a standard effort, merely noting that I had worked at the agency for a duration of time. There was zero personalisation, a form rejection of a reference letter! *Oh, the irony!*

And let's not talk about Christine, shall we? I mean, she comes across as the nicest person in the agency, but even she has a ruthless streak. How else to explain her taking me to the side on my way out the door, and saying that my two clients were best served staying on at the agency, with her.

'I feel there's some tension between you and Kate. And to be honest, Tom's given them a pass, not the right fit.' She then delivered the coup de grâce with a smile. 'You could take them with you, but as it stands, you've nowhere to take them to.'

Christine would cut off my hands and smile as she asked me to clap.

What was I thinking, spilling my guts about her to Tom, who was standing outside smoking, and merely said, 'That's cold. The quiet ones are the worst.' He then laughed, 'Look on the bright side, with no clients, the only way is up, baby!'

I was almost tempted to take up his offer of a powdering of the nose around the back, but by that point, I couldn't wait to get the fuck out of there.

'Don't let the bastards get you down,' he said, which was

probably the first piece of advice he'd given me in the five years I worked there.

Though I hate to admit it, the scavenger Christine had a point. Four months have passed—I left the agency in summer and now the cold, dark nights are drawing in—and I'm still jobless, though not for want of trying. I couldn't risk tanking my clients' careers along with my own. They understood why I was letting them go, and if I'm honest, they seemed quite excited to be pairing up with an agent who had a pedigree in the industry.

And the only reason I agreed was I knew their novels were ready. We'd polished them as much as we could, and Christine, always eager to send them out immediately, couldn't have jumped the gun.

Thus, it was bittersweet to see one of my former clients get a book deal only last week. Sweet because she more-than deserves it, bitter because I wanted to strangle Christine, especially when she made a big deal about having spotted my former client's potential. *Yeah, you spotted it on my list and told me it wouldn't sell, you jealous fucking—*

Always trust your gut, even when everything and everyone around you is telling you you're crazy.

Despite the signs of incoming success, I still worry for my former clients. Christine's online reputation amongst the wannabes and published authors alike is the bee's knees, yet there are subtle hints that not everything is so rosy.

Take for example Christine's previous assistant, Lisa,

who went on to become a fully fledged agent before leaving to join another boutique agency. On Lisa's new bio, she thanks everyone at Debbie's agency for helping her to become the agent she now is. She name-checks them all: Sapphire, the associate agent who was with us for three whole months, even Tom, who's well-known to never lift a finger to help anyone other than himself. But there's one glaring omission in this name-roll, and I don't count Malcolm because, well, obvious reasons, not to mention he's bloody useless.

There's no mention of Christine, you know, her actual mentor. *Miaow!*

Sadly, Gillian is yet to divulge further information, but it's only a matter of time in this caring-is-sharing industry. Still, erasing Christine's contribution, like she doesn't exist, is quite brilliant if I do say so myself. There's something quite hurtful about meaning nothing to a person you've helped shape. Much better to have someone attack you, and conversely, show that they still have feelings for you.

Whether Christine's cares about that or not, only she could say, and she never will, because she doesn't do negativity or pessimism. Perhaps that's why her Gillian hates her, who could put up with such a cheery person for so long?

I certainly couldn't, which is a moot point considering you were nothing of the sort, were you, Kate?

Only this morning, I noticed that you had viewed my

Instastory, which meant you had unblocked me. *Were you feeling guilty?*

I saw your recent posts. Someone had kidnapped your dog. As I slurped on my cup of tea, I had every right to add a dollop of schadenfreude to my crackers, but what had your dog ever done to me?

I'm not perfect, though. I did have the feeling that you were enjoying all the attention, the sympathy, the empathy, and the sycophantic messages that couldn't help but stray beyond their parameters:

I'm so sorry to hear this. I'll totally understand if it takes you longer to get back to me about my MS.

Does this mean you're not accepting submissions at the moment? Because of your dog? I hope you find him soon because you're top of my list.

I know this might not be a good time, but coincidentally I've written a novel about a woman who reunites lost dogs with their owners. It might be just what you were looking for!

I wanted to leave a comment on the last comment, saying, *She's looking for her dog, not your novel*, but I couldn't bring myself to let you know that I knew.

People just can't help themselves, can they? But hey, it's not my problem anymore. I'm not your assistant. Nigel Carlyle is.

Speaking of...

I load up his Instagram. It's fairly new. Like, his first post

was only a week before I got the sack. *Sliding doors, eh, Nige?*

He's been prolific since, almost exclusively posting from the confines of the agency, other than the occasional photo of a pretty garden, which allegedly belongs to him. According to this profile, the guy doesn't have a life outside of work. Almost every post is gushing about clients, books and his work colleagues. He even has a selfie with Debbie, though even he couldn't wrangle a smile out of her leathery face, caption stating **World's Best Boss**, which makes me want to puke.

How naive is this guy? Doesn't he realise he's surrounded by vipers and rats who'll bite him at the first opportunity? How else to explain the selfie with Malcolm? *Don't touch the hand!*

Witnessing Nigel enjoy his job, oblivious to his inevitable demise stirs something inside me. I'm not an angry person, usually, but I can't shake the shame of my cowardice.

I thought I would hate Nigel, an incomprehensible hatred of someone who took my job but didn't really, but I know, I hate that I've let him walk in there with blinkers on. I'm the one who turned a blind eye, allowing the cycle of toxicity to continue. I'll see it happen slowly, post by post, as Nigel finally clues-up on what he got himself in for. And by then, it'll be too late. Nigel will be accused of a heinous

crime he didn't commit, castrated and sacrificed at the altar of Debbie's malevolent God. *The agency always comes first!*

I don't know him from Adam, but he seems like a nice guy. He doesn't deserve the fate I left him to. Before I know it, I've opened the direct messages, typed in his username @literaryNigel and sent him a lengthy message, enlightening him to all that happens in that hollow excuse of an agency.

It doesn't take long for a reply to arrive.

HONESTLY, Kate, when a message arrived in my inbox, the last person I expected to hear from was Lorraine Centofanti. Despite my account clearly stating, **For personal use only, send submissions to my work email**, I still received countless direct messages from wannabe writers asking if I would be interested in reading their manuscripts.

I didn't have the heart to tell them I wasn't even an associate agent yet, therefore incapable of representing them. Instead, I'd leave them hanging and reply six months later, using a copy-and-paste job to ask them to consider you as a possible outlet. *The abused becomes the abuser...*

But Lorraine's message demanded I take it seriously. I'll admit, before opening it, I expected a tirade of sorts. Something along the lines of, *You stole my job, bitch!* At least that's what I would've done in Lorraine's shoes.

But she was sending this message from her own account,

it was obvious she wanted to be civil. How wrong could a man be?

What followed was a confessional, enlightening me on all aspects of working at this agency. Secrets galore, like this message was a case of expensive whisky that had washed up on my barren shore. And better yet, the promise of more to come, should I wish to keep the conversation going.

Some of the secrets I already knew. To a man and woman, everyone, and I mean, everyone, in the agency advised me to not shake hands with Malcolm. Ever. And the hilarious thing was always the excuses they made for him, like Debbie suggesting he sweated profusely and was embarrassed by his dripping digits. Or the usually upfront Tom, suggesting Malcolm had a weak grip, and once again, embarrassed to be a feeble excuse for a man. *On the contrary, we can assume Malcolm has a firm grip, a firm grip, indeed.*

Lorraine was the first to tell it like it is, that Malcolm is overly fond of wringing his bedsheet in the workplace. I respected her candour. *In another life, we'd be friends.*

As it was, honest or not, Lorraine was simply jealous. I couldn't trust a word she said, even though it all rung true.

I sent her a quick message: **It's not appropriate for us to talk.**

She read it immediately, and no reply was forthcoming. I was about to block her when curiosity got the better of me. Why, on this particular day, had she suddenly felt the overwhelming need to confess all the agency's sins to me? And

then I became paranoid. It was the dog thing, wasn't it? Lorraine mentioned it in her message, accusing you of being narcissistic, *well, she's not wrong there!*

But for Lorraine to know about the dognapping, meant that you had unblocked her, a course of action undoing my good advice to you. *Why would you do that, Kate? Why invite trouble back into your life?*

I also wondered what other juicy secrets Lorraine might impart should I keep the conversation going. Something I could store for later use, it was always handy to have dirt on every person I knew. *I just can't trust a soul these days.*

I popped off another message.

I'm sorry. I thought for a moment it was a fake account contacting me to stir the pot. What you say rings true. I'm willing to hear more.

I didn't so much hear more, as read more, as Lorraine poured her heart out to me, including the terrible accusation that she had been victim of a witch-hunt, started by an aspiring author and finished by her own mentor.

Lorraine was now living a life of shame and disgust at her own inability to do the right thing.

I tried my best, Kate, I really did. I told her to let it go, move on, live life to the fullest without looking back. I even lied to her, assuring her I'd be looking for a new job as soon as possible, anything to get away from this deplorable viper's nest.

But she got it into her head that the only course of

action left to her, was to bring all sins into the light. Yes, no longer scared of ruining her reputation, she wanted to go to any news outlet who'd have her, and pull back the curtain on a day in the life of a literary agent's assistant done wrong.

And the sad thing is, I agreed with her. She had every right to be upset. If morality were to weigh her grievances against the actions of the agency, then of course, Debbie's beloved entity was doomed. I offered myself a chuckle, imagining Debbie begging for scraps on the street, singing for her supper, all fur coat no knickers, giving blowjobs for smack money, possibly the only time we'd ever see her with a smile on her face.

And considering she'd shafted Lorraine, not once, but twice, well...

But after my moment of whimsy, I recognised what it truly meant. Lorraine had her sights on the agency, but the main target of her anger was directed at you. Of all the tales, no one came out of it looking clean—excepting yours truly, of course—but you, Kate, you came out of it looking like you hadn't washed in a month, hair matted, teeth blackened with plaque, breath like Tom's, *Jesus, Tom, would'ya just stop exhaling?*

Even if I could sacrifice you, the Queen to my pawn, I still had to think about myself. I had no intention on looking for another job at another agency. All my hopes and dreams were entwined with Debbie's creation. To ruin the agency was to ruin me, and I couldn't have that.

In a future of my own making, there was still a chance you'd see the potential in me. Yes, working together, you'd put two and two together and see me not as your assistant, but as a cash cow, ready to be milked. *Daily, please.* Lorraine, for all her good intentions, would bring my dreams crashing around my ears.

No, I thought, I can't have that at all.

And so, the latest message sent to Lorraine, reads: **I think we need to talk. In person. Would you like to meet for drink? Please. I need more time to get out of this shithole before you press the detonator. I don't want to be collateral damage from the blast. ;)**

Lorraine replies: **I would never want to hurt you! You've been a rock these past days. Yes, it would be nice to meet. :)**

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't rubbing my hands and cackling like an evil overlord while reading her reply. I deleted the message I'd already drafted in anticipation of Lorraine refusing to meet, the one were I beg her to do so, it was unbecoming to see me grovel so.

But there was no need for it. Lorraine, in the short time we've corresponded, already sees me as her rock. She values my contribution. *Why can't you see me the way she does?*

And for that, I'll allow her one last chance to walk away.

Failing that, I'm not sure what the hell I'll do with her.

LORRAINE

LIFE HAS a way of shitting on you when you're at your lowest. Some call it low-frequency, like when you take a drive and every single traffic light turns red as you approach it. Or you look out the window at the sun beaming down, only to step out and get caught in a downpour.

Take the interview I had only five days ago, for an assistant position at a relatively small agency on the other side of town. *Far enough away to not smell the stench of treachery coming from the Manning Agency.*

I absolutely aced the interview. If anything, I was overqualified, what with already having Associate Agent on my CV. They had wondered why I had left the Manning Agency at such an important time in my career development, then, wink wink, nod, without anything being said, I acknowledged the rumour that the agency wasn't exactly the

most comfortable for a young woman to work in. *Your reputation stinks out the industry, Malcolm!*

It's not like I brought up the subject. The interviewer did. And considering the interviewer was the agent I'd be working beside, honesty was the best policy.

She admitted that I was the best qualified candidate, that she liked my style and could see us having a productive working relationship.

Her last words, *I'll need to contact your old place, but it's all a formality*, didn't have me unduly concerned, not when she already knew what kind of place I was escaping from. She shook my hand, *I'll be in touch tomorrow at the latest*, and I believed those words. But four days passed without an email, or a phone call, or a text. I finally plucked up the courage and nudged her like I was an impatient, unpublished writer.

Her reply came soon after, succinct and leaving me in no confusion.

It read: **I'm sorry, but I spoke with Deborah and certain things came up which were not mentioned at the interview. In light of this, I don't think we're the right fit for each other. I wish you good luck in your job search.**

Translating this corporate bullshit talk, I roughly came up with this: *I cheekily asked Debbie if the wanking rumour was true, she denied it, and I said you said it was true, then*

Debbie got defensive and said she had printed proof that you tried to ruin the careers of your former colleagues' authors using Goodreads.

With a referee like Debbie, who need bother looking for a job? Ever again.

This was getting personal. I had taken my kick out the agency door with as much good grace as I could muster, but now Debbie was actively trying to ruin my career, something she assured me was not her intention at all.

Debbie sacked me from my old job, ruined my chances of getting my new job, and thought herself untouchable, anything to protect her precious agency.

But having discovered something I had long since lost, my backbone, I wouldn't let her get away with it.

I came up with a plan and the told one person I could vaguely trust.

Nigel, always considerate, implored me to take time, and then asked to meet me for a drink. Under any other circumstances, I'd never meet a stranger from the internet, even if he's merely my replacement at my old workplace.

But desperate times call for double measures, which is probably why the Dutch courage I'm sipping on is going straight to my head.

What was Nigel thinking asking me to meet him in this dive? The bartender told me they don't even accept card as payment, and I had to fish through my pockets to find

change. I pick up my drink from the sticky, unwashed table, old men sit in corners muttering to themselves, I'm literally the only woman in here.

But my worries are assuaged, somewhat, when Nigel enters the pub, looking quite dapper. He spots me and offers a warm smile. I feel my defences melt away and I let him buy me a vodka and coke, one measure this time, partly because I'm already tipsy, and partly because I don't want him to think I'm an alcoholic. He returns with a beer for himself too.

'I'm glad you came,' he says, and I feel glad too. Nigel's the only reason I've kept my shit together recently. I wasn't sure if I should meet up with him, still in the back of my mind thinking that this industry would have me back, that I could forget about what was done to me and move on.

But the industry does not forgive and it gaslights until you lose your fucking mind.

Even though we've only just met, in person at least, I tell him about my sacking. The true story behind it.

'Unbelievable,' he says, and he looks shook. 'I can't believe they would do that to you. I mean, it's all circumstantial at best.'

'Exactly! There's no proof that I set up that profile.'

'And no proof you didn't.' He sighs, and takes a large gulp of his beer. 'Still. That's not acceptable. And now I feel terrible.' He places his beer on the table and gazes into my

eyes. 'You were sacked unfairly and I took your job. Where's the justice in that?'

I place my hand on his, a reflex almost. 'It's not your fault! You didn't know. And even if you did, I don't blame you for getting your foot in the door.'

'You're very understanding,' he says, and I wonder why such a caring man is seemingly single, judging from the wedding ring-less finger. 'Which is why I don't think retribution is your best course of action.'

'What do you mean?'

'Think about it. Are you willing to be a martyr? Will you die on that hill for your beliefs? Sure, you'd be doing the right thing, but you can say goodbye to ever working in the industry. And I think that'd be a real shame. I can see the passion you have. Goodness, Christine owes you her fifteen percent for your former client. She did fuck all with her novel before sending it out!'

Tell me something I don't know, Nigel, though I felt relieved that Christine hadn't butchered a perfectly good novel with her disingenuous positivity.

'You're right,' I say. 'Everything you say is right.'

He smiles, a giddy smile. 'So you'll let it go? Go out there and show them all what they're missing?'

I want to agree with him, I really do. Everything he's saying makes sense. I should move on. Life's too short, corruption is rife, and even Batman would have a nervous breakdown trying to fix it all.

And yet...

'I can't. I just can't.' His smile disappears, and the warmth that was radiating from him dissipates, leaving nothing but a cold shell. 'You're disappointed, aren't you?'

'I, er—' He's lost for words. He knows he's fighting a losing battle. 'Listen, time's getting on and I should probably get going.'

Just as things were getting good. I look at the time, it's just flown by since he first walked in this dump. I've ruined it. He's right, I'm ruining everything because of what happened to me. I'm allowing a past grievance to taint everything to come.

I try to salvage the meeting. I don't want him to walk away thinking that I'm an embittered person beyond salvation.

'I enjoyed meeting you,' I say.

'Me too,' he says, and he gets up, swinging his jacket over his shoulders.

I want to say something, but as always, cowardice gets the better of me. He's about to walk away, then turns back.

'Do you fancy continuing this chat?' He looks around with an exaggerated expression of disgust. 'Perhaps in better surroundings?' He leans down to me. 'I don't know why I picked this shithole. Never ask Tom for a pub recommendation!'

I laugh. This man makes me feel good, something I

haven't felt since before my fateful last day at of the Manning Agency.

'Yeah,' I say, acting cool. 'I would like that.'

When he suggests going back to his, I don't allow cowardice to get in my way.

I WAS IN TWO MINDS, Kate, I honestly was. Part of me was thinking, there's no saving this girl, she's got her mind made up.

Another part of me wondered if I could continue the conversation online, wear her down until she finally accepted that putting the Manning Agency in her rearview mirror was the only way to ensure a happy life moving forward.

But the latter scenario ran the risk of her losing the plot at home and unleashing all kinds of horrors online. In the short time we'd spent together, in person, I was certain Lorraine was too found of spirits, that being, the alcoholic variety.

In my attempts to get her drunk, all I realised was that she could handle her drink better than I ever could. At that rate, I'd be wasted on the floor while she danced on the table, barefoot. But underneath her measured calm was a sadness

that the alcohol greedily fed. I knew, if I let her go, she'd stop by an off-licence, pick up another bottle of Smirnoff and drink herself silly at home.

Without me there to cheer her up, make her laugh, she'd be left with only the bitter taste of treachery, and an insatiable need to right a wrong.

Plus I had a sneaky feeling she enjoyed my company, and part of me wondered where it might lead. *Writers are always looking for adventures they can write about.*

I expected some resistance to my suggestion that she come back to mine, but she offered none. She'd told me her theory about low frequency, how it stalled her life at every turn. If that were true, I was obviously living a life of high frequency, my every plan getting the green light from the cosmos itself.

Mind you, when she fell asleep on the train I had to re-evaluate her capacity for holding her drink, and when she woke, I already had a newly-purchased bottle of water ready for her. She'd need to be lucid and hydrated for the long walk ahead.

'You're a good guy,' she said, and there was no slurring, but she couldn't just leave it at a compliment, 'unlike those bastards in the agency.'

The more the bitterness seeped from her self-indulgent wounds, the more I knew what I had to do, what had to be done, there would be no rewrite tonight.

‘We’re getting off at the next stop,’ I said, and she smiled, a half-cut smile, but genuine enough.

When we got off the train, I made sure to take the south exit, away from the taxi rank and the charlatans who ran it.

It only took a couple of streets before we were on the country road that would take us to my home.

After only fifteen minutes of walking, she said, ‘Are we there yet?’ and I chuckled, wondering if I should ask for identification to prove she wasn’t a child.

‘I’m just up this road.’

‘But do we have far to go? My feet are killing me.’

‘Just around the corner,’ I lie.

And we walk, and I repeat myself, and we walk some more.

LORRAINE

WE'VE BEEN WALKING ALMOST an hour. Nigel explained, *no buses serve this road and it won't take long*, but it has.

My feet are aching, what with me taking off my uncomfortable shoes and walking the freezing-cold country road, barefoot. At least it's not raining.

Nigel assured me, *It's fine, dirty tootsies don't bother me*, but the first thing I want to do as soon as we get into his home, is run to the toilet and wash them clean.

'Remind me why we didn't take a taxi?'

'Can't trust those guys,' Nigel says without missing a beat. 'The have a monopoly, extortionate prices for a sub-par service. Most of the drivers are illegals who don't even have a licence back in Afghanistan.'

We've never talked politics, and perhaps it's best we don't. He mentions money, but so far, I haven't gotten the

impression of Nigel being tight-fisted. I guess I'll have to trust his reasons. He's the one who lives around here after all. *Allegedly.*

But as we walk around a blind corner, a car comes around the bend too quick, narrowly missing us. I really wish we had gotten a taxi.

'Fucking car! Driving around here at this time of night.'

For the next ten minutes, Nigel continues complaining about the car, saying, 'I wonder if it had a dash cam?'

'Don't worry,' I say, 'it's not like it hit us.'

But he ignores me, and mumbles on, and from what I can make out, he's more concerned that there was a car on the road in the first place, which is a strange thing to care about. As far as I can tell, this is a public country road, not his own private road leading to his country mansion with spa, maids, foot massage—

'There she is!'

In the distance, and I do mean the far distance, on top of the hill, a small cottage stands alone. Like, alone, with only an outbuilding beside it. *Not a mansion, then.*

But seeing it gives me a second wind, and I shuffle ahead of him, desperate to get off this road.

'I'm taking a taxi back later, no questions!'

'Fine, fine!' Nigel laughs and he finally stops his whining about the car.

As the road dips, the cottage disappears and only reappears when we get to the entrance gate.

‘Good news is, we’ve reach my property. Bad news is, there’s a fair trek along the drive, so I’d advise you to put your shoes back on.’

He’s not wrong. The walk along the drive is potentially ankle-breaking, and long, the cottage still in the distance. I’ve been sweating alcohol since ten minutes into our walk and now, my wet armpits are starting to freeze.

I shudder as I place my filthy feet back into my shoes.

I turn on my phone’s torch to illuminate the way, and I notice there’s no signal here. *Hopefully Nigel has a landline or Wi-Fi for my taxi later.*

The drive is in such poor condition, I feel like we’re Neil and Buzz walking the surface of the moon, arm in arm, because Nigel insists and I don’t mind at all.

We eventually reach his cottage which is cloaked in darkness, but he takes me by the arm and leads me to the outbuilding.

‘I want to show you something first. My writer’s den.’

‘You didn’t tell me you were a writer!’

He shrugs his shoulders, all modesty. ‘Unpublished as yet, but I still have a dream.’

‘Good for you,’ I say, and I playfully knock him on the upper arm. ‘Just make sure you get a decent agent, eh? Hey, maybe when I get back in the game, you can send your novel to me.’

I laugh but he doesn’t, which for a moment freaks me out.

‘Sorry,’ he says, ‘but I already have an agent in mind. Kind of my dream agent.’

‘Oh, well, there’s me told!’ I forgot how serious writers can be when it comes to their dreams. ‘Is it anyone I know?’

‘You could say that.’

Nigel lets go of my arm and approaches the outbuilding—sorry, his writer’s den. There’s a floodlight but it doesn’t illuminate.

He pulls out a set of keys, sliding one key into a large padlock. He looks back, apologetically. ‘There’s been a spate of rural burglaries recently. Can’t be too careful. I mean, it’s not like I have much in here, but I would be sad if someone stole my laptop.’

‘And all your stories!’

He tries to smile. ‘Yes, those too.’

When he opens the doors, it’s dark within. He disappears inside. ‘Come in, I’m just setting up the light.’

My foot moves forward, then I pause. What am I doing? I don’t really know this guy and he’s asking me to walk into a pitch black outbuilding. He could do anything to me, perhaps I should—

A desk lamp illuminates at the back of the den, dim enough I can only make out Nigel’s cheery face beckoning me in.

I shake my head in embarrassment. I panicked for nothing there. When I walk inside, I see it’s quite sparse, I’m not sure what I was expecting. *Okay, I admit it, I thought*

there would be bondage gear of some sort. Many aspiring authors are perverts.

‘Sorry about this, I’m rewiring the electrics in here. Hopefully have a proper light on the ceiling in the next week or so, time allowing.’

‘It’s fine,’ I say, as my eyes struggle to make out the dark shapes in the den. Aside from the desk which has a laptop on it, there’s a large wardrobe, like absolutely massive. A table on the other side, with an SLR set upon it. Apart from that, nothing much else.

‘You’ve certainly cut out any distractions in here.’

‘All the better to write with.’

He opens his laptop, and I see a Word document with a screenful of text.

‘If you don’t mind, would you like to read my latest chapter? I thought I’d have to change the ending, but actually it’s worked out the way I originally planned.’

‘Uh, sure!’ I don’t tell him I haven’t read a thing since leaving Manning Agency. ‘What kind of story are you writing?’

‘Psychological horror.’

‘Hands up, not really my thing.’ He’s disappointed. ‘But I’ll take a look!’

‘Thank you. I just need to get something from my wardrobe.’

I sit down at his desk and read the chapter. A woman has met up with a man she doesn’t really know, a stranger from

the internet. They drink and chat, and he invites her back to his place. He asks her to read his story.

I begin laughing.

‘I see what you’ve done here. Very clever. Though I think it’s more a romcom than horror!’

Nigel’s still rummaging in his wardrobe, only peering around to say, ‘Keep reading to the end.’

I do as instructed, wondering where Nigel’s imagination will take him, where he thinks this night will end. *Are we on the same page, Nigel?*

But how wrong can I be?

‘This is sick! God, horror, right enough! How could you write—’

I turn around and Nigel’s standing over me. He’s another person, possessed by an evil entity, manic smile reaching his eyes, hands raised to the ceiling, holding in them what his story promised the woman who was stupid enough to go home with him.

And according to the ending, I’ve just made the biggest mistake of my life.

NIGEL

TWO DOWN, one to go.

I know what you're thinking, Kate. *You* think *I* must be feeling guilty today, what with my alleged dalliance with your former colleague, Lorraine.

Yes, I did meet her for a drink. Yes, I took her back to my home. No, I did not have sexual relations with that woman, and by god, I certainly didn't penetrate her with a cigar of any brand!

You don't get me, Kate, you don't know the kind of man I am. I would never cheat on you. The thought of touching another woman makes me sick to my stomach, and trust me, my stomach is beyond empty having exported its contents last night after having one too many.

And let's get real, shall we? You're simply projecting your guilt, giving me a hard time, not because I met up with Lorraine, but because you unblocked her on Instagram in

the first place. An event that set off the chain reaction that followed. If anything has happened to Lorraine, it's your fault.

'I thought I told you it was best you block her?'

'I did. But, I—I just wondered how she was getting on. I don't excuse her behaviour, but I feel—'

Somehow responsible for her demise? Well, you did get her sacked rather than take me on as a client in Elena form, but let's not cast aspersions on the past, shall we?

'It's not your fault. She made her bed. Now, she's probably lying in it reading novels, while we work for a living. Reading novels.'

You catch my wicked smile and you finally smile back. That's the Kate I love. The one who doesn't allow life to grind her down. The Kate who knows that conscience is merely the fear of getting caught.

'I'll block her. This time for good.'

Atta'girl. I wink, no words needed.

Still, I hover over you as you load up Lorraine's Instagram on your phone, having one last look at her posts, allowing yourself to read her last Instastory before it expires.

'Meeting a friend for a drink,' you say, reading Lorraine's words that accompany a photo of her hand holding what looks like a glass of coke. 'At least she's moving on with her life.'

I place my hand on your shoulder, a tactile gesture to affirm, and nod in agreement. 'You see, she's already

bounced back. She's young. She's got her whole life ahead of her.'

You take a deep inhalation, lift your finger, and drop it on your phone a couple of times, and viola, Lorraine's page is blocked. *For good this time, I hope.*

You know I'm here with your best interests in mind, always.

But after our kiss, the one I cannot—will not—forget, my love for you has grown exponentially, and don't get love confused with lust—yes, I'd happily fuck you forty ways from Sunday, but I've always felt that way. Love is something different. Something all-encompassing. You belong to me, Kate, you truly do.

My dear old aunt would be furious at my addiction to attachment, but I care not.

When Malcolm left the office early, you made a point of kissing him full on the lips, and the cretin squeezed your buttocks, his eyes peering over to me, like you'd both paid me to be your paparazzo and keep you relevant in the gossip section of a downtrodden tabloid. Had you been a fly on the wall on the inside of my head, you'd have witnessed me grab Malcolm by what hair he had left, smashing his skull against your desk, breaking every finger in his hand lest he ever touch your bottom again, and that would also be the end of his career as a professional purveyor of the five-knuckle shuffle.

You walking into the office this morning like a cowboy

told me everything I needed to know without you spelling it out, your skin glowing like you were ovulating, *were you?*

It was obvious our kiss had awoken your conscience, much to both our surprise that you had one, and you'd given Malcolm a pity-fuck. It was the only explanation. How could you so easily forget his cheating ways? It was not long ago Malcolm was exploring the inside of Tom's wife with his tongue, and this is how you punish him? *No bad deed goes unrewarded!*

Of course, a secret like that wouldn't stay hidden for long, not in this agency, not after I let slip to Christine, whom despite her cheery disposition, is not above salacious tales and the need to stir a massive pot of scandalised soup.

But in this case, it wasn't just old news, it was irrelevant news.

'Tom knows. Him and his, um, other half, have an arrangement of sorts. They're quite open in the relationship department.'

Tom had a reputation for getting a bit too close to his better-looking clients, something that was hinted at in #metoo forums back when feeling regret at having fucked someone to get further up the ladder was a popular pastime.

At least his wife wasn't quite the sucker I thought her to be.

Still, Tom's lack of moral fibre had nothing to do with your reprehensible behaviour, Kate. I understood when you rejected me, in favour of lording—your word—over your

husband. But to not follow through? To admit defeat and capitulate so spectacularly? Shame on you!

I haven't quite finished mopping Malcolm's brains from the floor when you disrupt my reverie.

'Is everything okay?'

Of course, what happens in my head isn't necessarily what can happen in the real world of civilised society and consequences.

But retribution demands to be acknowledged, enacted and celebrated.

'I'm fine,' I say. 'Totally fine.'

And when you turn your back on me, leaving me with only the thought of what could have been, my eyes burn into the back of your head, a malevolent force wishing nothing but harm onto you and yours.

Love and hate really are two sides of the same coin.

I HAVEN'T TRUSTED Malcolm for longer than I ever have trusted him. That's a terrible state of affairs—wrong choice of word, or perhaps, the exact choice of word—for a marriage.

Even if I wanted to trust him, which I don't, how else to explain the amount of time Malcolm spent in the toilet? I don't mean he was in there preening, he barely wastes five minutes on shaving and doesn't bother styling what's left of his hair. When he went for a leak, which for a normal man I'd assume takes a minute or two at most factoring in a quick wash of the hands if they can be bothered doing that, why was Malcolm taking longer? Why did he feel the need to lock the bathroom door to take a leak?

How to explain the time when I changed the ringer on my own phone, and when it rang, he leapt from the sofa like

a clown in a Jack-in-the-box, fear plastered across his face at the sound of an unfamiliar phone ringtone.

I knew his password, of course I did, he made it so blatantly loving and obvious, and I'm ashamed to say I checked his phone, despite there being no telltale signs of deceit, such as being overprotective of his phone, grabbing his phone whenever someone called in case it was a name I didn't recognise, there was none of that.

Either he was being very devious, such as having a woman's name appear as one of his male friend's names instead, or he was completely innocent, most likely the latter, as none of his male friends were showering him with compliments and flattery, quite the opposite.

The only mildly scandalous things I found were his casual sexism and general laddish conversations, though I knew this was simply Malcolm trying his best to be one of the boys.

And yet, in all my time with Malcolm, and we're approaching fifteen years married, I've always known when something is wrong, he can't hide it. Unlike men of older generations, whom being stoic, macho and keeping one's feelings to themselves was a way of life, much like my late father who died too soon, Malcolm was never slow to show his unhappiness, much like many of his own generation.

'It's not my fault, it's society. Toxic feminism has taught the world to hate us men, and they're bringing up new

generations of gents to hate themselves. Especially us white fellas.'

Malcolm felt hard done by, like he was the abandoned working class and not an upper-middle class 'fella' who phones it in work.

'Why would I graft when it doesn't make financial sense? I totally understand why some people won't go to work when they'd get more money sitting on benefits. We're like two cheeks of the same arse.'

Who knew that families waiting on endless housing lists, needing benefits to survive, were in the same boat as Malcolm?

Any dissatisfaction that visited Malcolm's mind was inevitably worn upon his face. He wasn't a narcissist, uncaring of my feelings, happy to infect me with his misery, no, he was simply honest.

Marriage takes work, it's not all a bed of roses, Elena. You may have written, in that unforgettable email, that you wanted us to be together. But do you know what that really entails, once the fantasy has worn off?

For the most part, I'm lucky. Malcolm and I slowly changed from passionate lovers, to contented companions, a necessary transformation that would ensure a long, lasting marriage.

There were the occasional wobbles, periods of discontentment from both sides, usually enforced by circumstances

beyond our control, such as Tom's wife offering herself to a weak-willed sex addict.

He'd have everyone believe he was a man in touch with his feminine side. I knew when one of his week-long huffs was coming, long before it stank out our home.

Which is precisely why I was dumbfounded, completely blindsided, by the text he sent me this morning, in the wee hours when he seemingly vacated our bed and left his side empty and cold when I woke.

Or perhaps, he hadn't returned home at all? When he left yesterday evening, shortly after I arrived home from work, all he offered was a 'Don't wait up' on his way out of the door. I knew better than to press it, and later I went to bed, it's not like you wait up for a partner after near fifteen years of marriage, especially not one who is in full crybaby mode.

And then I woke to this text:

I need time and space to think about us. I love you. I just don't know if I'm in love with you.

Malcolm had dramatic tendencies, but not once in our marriage had he left me for 'time and space.' Even after an argument, he wouldn't sleep on the sofa or in the guest bedroom, saying, 'This is my bed as much as yours. Just turn away if you hate me so much.'

No, Elena, this was a *first time for everything* moment from Malcolm. With him gone, and Poe still in the clutches

of some maniac, I did the only thing I could, even though it was incredibly unprofessional of me to do so.



THE DOORBELL RINGS and through the frosted glass, the shadowed outline of someone who has yet to betray my confidence.

‘Thank god you came. Malcolm’s gone. He’s left me.’

Everyone needs a friend, Elena, a true friend who’ll be honest with you and not judge. If only you had such a friend, perhaps your life would be immeasurably better for it.

Perhaps I shouldn’t have done this, given what happened at the office party, but Nigel’s the only person I trust right now.

NIGEL

I JUST DON'T KNOW.

Four words which, having read years' worth of texts between you and Malcolm, were some kind of written tic your hubby had adopted.

Did you look at the photos I sent you? *I just don't know* which colour suits best.

I could go with them for drinks, but *I just don't know* if I can handle listening to Daniel waffle on.

***I just don't know*...maybe we can do Sunday?**

Malcolm wrote *I just don't know* so frequently, that *I just did know* if I put it in his text to you, you'd swallow it whole, no matter how shocked and astounded, you'd be reading the rest of the message.

But I suppose I'm getting ahead of myself, aren't I? You really want to know how I got a hold of Malcolm's phone and—

‘Sorry, is it one sugar or two?’

Oh, Kate, you’re always interrupting my daydreams, as I stare at your open blouse, barely concealing my want of you. Only you, Kate, queen of the narcissists, would think it appropriate to cry on the shoulder of a man infatuated with you. *My husband’s gone, oh lover, what will I do?*

‘I’ll make it,’ I say, but you hold your hand up.

‘I insist. You do enough tea-making in the office.’

Yeah, thanks to your husband’s reputation preceding him, no one trusts him to make a cuppa without adding a disgusting ingredient, and thus, I’ve found myself heating a brew throughout the day.

I take in your kitchen. *My kitchen*. It looks relatively new, like, I finally got the £20,000 portion of my advance for paperback rights and spent it on a new kitchen, new.

This kitchen is *my* kitchen, Kate, or at least, I should have an equally new kitchen in my home. But I don’t do I, thanks to you ruining my chances of getting published. Instead you walked SarahtheBookieworm down the aisle, and procured a six-figure dowry, a portion of which has obviously been spent in this very room.

But of course, you’re getting your cut in dribs and drabs too. *Kitchen on credit, anyone?*

I suppose I should be grateful that you allow me to walk around it, rubbing my sweaty fingertips over the marble worktops.

If you only knew who you were pouring this tea for.

Would you throw boiling hot water over my face? Or would you drop the cup to the floor, take my face in your hands and challenge me to a game of tonsil-tennis with only time as the umpire? A rematch for the ages. *It'd end in a draw.*

Your hands are shaking, but it's not the realisation of who I really am.

'I'm so sorry, Kate. If he knows what's good for him, he'll be back before you know it.' Yes, Kate, you rejected my advances, and now I have to lower myself to assuring you that your marriage is not dead.

Or maybe that's what you want. There's plenty of insidious creeps hanging around women who have only just split up. The favourite being your male friend, who stood by you whilst you made your way through every boy in the classroom and the workplace, and now, twenty years later, he can finally have you.

But I'm not that man, Kate. I'd never allow you to move on with someone else, content to leave me in the friend zone. I'm not even content to allow you to continue to be married, but that's quite another thing.

'Back from where? I have no idea where he is.'

This is your problem, Kate, you're just not suspicious enough. What kind of married woman doesn't have her partner's GPS location turned on as a matter of course? It's not about jealousy, per se, merely the need to know where someone is.

Had you done this, and I'm glad you didn't, you

might've known that Malcolm had visited a cottage on the outskirts of London, a place that is unfamiliar to you.

Of course, phone company records would have that, and push come to shove, if the police ever pulled them up and asked me why Malcolm came to visit, well, I'd have to explain that he came to me in tears, thanks to your alleged infidelity, but I managed to talk him down, persuaded him to come back to you the next morning, which is why I have his phone in my pocket, letting its signal blast its location back to Apple HQ.

The police would understand why I didn't tell you that I let your man stay over without your knowledge. *Bros before ho's.*

'I'll try phoning him again,' you say, and if you knew what I have in my pocket, you'd wonder why I'm not panicking at all, because I have the phone muted and when you ring it, there will be the sound of silence.

You pick up your own phone, finger hovering over the screen, hesitant, enough time to allow me to recognise the fatal flaw in my plan: *phone is muted, but phone can still vibrate!*

'Wait!' I say, so loud you jump out of your skin. 'Sorry, it's just...I think it's too desperate.'

'Desperate?' Your finger lifts a little from Malcolm's name.

I nod and nod some more, playing for time, gathering

my thoughts. Why do you do this to me, Kate? Why does everything have to be such a drama?

‘Whatever’s in Malcolm’s mind, be it understandable or not, he’s left because he needs space. I just think pursuing him will drive him away.’

‘But—but I’m not pursuing him, I just want to know if he’s okay. A quick call, that’s all.’ You look at your phone again, and I have to do what I secretly love doing, reminding you of *her*.

‘You’re thinking the way Elena Cartwright would.’ Your bloodshot eyes open wide in surprise. ‘I mean, that’s Elena’s purview, isn’t it? All those times you wrote back to her, saying things like, give it a few weeks, etcetera. She never did give it a few weeks, did she? She always replied immediately, demanded your attention, which drove you mad and pushed you away.’

You lick the tear that has reached the corner of your mouth, and place the phone on my—*your*—kitchen worktop.

You snort a chuckle, grabbing a tissue from its box, and dab your wet eyes.

‘I’m turning into Elena,’ you say, humorous words delivered with no hint of humour. ‘No wonder Malcolm left me.’

I leave you stewing on that thought, making my excuses for a trip to the loo, except I take a detour to your bedroom and leave you a goodbye gift.

NIGEL

I LOVE YOU, Kate. I'm not saying I'm in love with you. I've not thought of you sexually, or maybe I have, but you're more to me than that. More than simply a sexual means to an orgasmic end. You are the means that will transform my life in more ways than you can imagine. I have become a better person because of you. I look in the mirror and see a totally different person, and that is all down to you.

Still, what happened last night might shock you to the core. It's best I tell it to you, as it happened.



I STAND in front of the mirror, knowing that fate will soon knock on my door.

The doorbell rings and a bolt of excited electricity shoots up my back. *It's now or never.* I peer through the

peephole and see him. He's dapper, though his facial expression is one of mild bemusement, like he hasn't seen a run-down cottage before. In his hands, a carryout. *He intends to get me bloated so he can have his wicked way with me.*

I take a deep inhalation, and blow out my cheeks. *Here goes nothing.*

I open the door, his eyes widen, and before I can say, *Hi, welcome to my very humble abode*, he says, 'Nigel! What the hell are you doing here?' He looks more frightened than surprised.

'I live here.'

He looks at me, up and down, eyebrows rising in confusion. 'I'm sorry, fella, I must have the wrong address. But what strange coincidence!' He looks at his mobile, bringing up the Google Maps app. He lifts his phone in the air. 'No signal around here, huh?'

There is a signal, for those with the right network, but I don't mention that. 'A weird coincidence, indeed,' he says. 'But hey-ho, I'll let you get back to, whatever it is you were doing. Sorry about this, old chap!'

I twitch at the *old chap* reference. He's technically a couple of years younger than me, but with his balding head and crows feet around his eyes, I look younger.

He turns to leave.

'Stop!' I say with more desperation than I intend, and his head snaps back. 'You're here to see Jessica, right?'

‘You—you know Jessica? Where is she?’ For a moment, he looks worried. ‘Wait, you’re not—her father, are you?’

My face flushes red, Kate, like you cannot believe. *How old does he think I am? Why do I know his age, when he knows nothing about mine?* While I secretly fume, he mutters excuses under his breath, *She said she was over sixteen...I’m as much a victim as her...I just don’t know how...well, it doesn’t matter, she didn’t say she’s underage, so I did nothing wrong...this is the last thing I need!*

‘I’m Jessica,’ I say, and his eyes open wide, mouth slack. ‘Well, I’m the guy pretending to be Jessica.’

It takes him a moment to comprehend my words. ‘What the actual fuck? You catfished me? You absolute prick! Why?’

I stand there, smiling. I say nothing, allowing him to fill in the blanks.

‘Wait, is this some kind of prank?’ He looks around. ‘Jeremy Beadle’s dead, so—okay, Tom, you bastard, you can come out now!’

My face is unmoving, like I’ve stood in front of the mirror pretending to be Debbie for the day. ‘It’s not a prank.’

‘So, what, you want money out of me or something?’ He turns his back on me. ‘Oh, fuck this, I’m off. If you contact me again, I’ll call the—’

‘Malcolm!’ I scream with a deep-voiced fury, and he freezes to the spot. Yes, Kate, the insufferable douche who is

more worried about potentially being outed as an unintentional paedophile than caring that he's willing to cheat on you, is none other than your own husband! He turns back to me, his head first, his body creeping slow behind.

He shows me an upturned, open palm. 'What the fuck is this?'

I take an exaggerated, bemused look around. 'Uh, the doorway?'

'I don't fucking mean that.'

I get it now. He means, *why have you opened the door, Nigel, when I expected a barely legal teen to open the door, the same barely legal teen I've been sexting and sending dick pics to for the past three months.*

Yes, Kate, your husband is a complete scumbag, but at least he's not a paedophile, huh? It's not like I'm a paedo-hunter and about to post this attempted meeting of a minor to YouTube for the views and the moral satisfaction.

'No, fella, fuck this. I'm out of here,' he says, really believing he can just walk away from this so easily.

'Wait!' I knew this would happen. 'I'm sorry!' I say, sincerity dripping off my tongue.

'Sorry's not good enough,' he says, standing on his high horse, unable or unwilling to see how precarious it is up there.

'Sorry's all I have.' He goes to move, but I place a strong hand on his arm. 'Please, I have to explain.'

I give him a pre-rehearsed sob story about how I became

jealous of your happiness, Kate, that you always spoke so highly of Malcolm and in such glowing terms, that my own experiences with women had left me broken inside.

‘So what? You thought you’d ruin her happiness?’

That’s not what I thought at all, Kate. I assure you everything I do is *for* your happiness.

I change tact. Playing on his guilt isn’t working, as he’s placing the blame firmly on me, like I forced him to create a fake dating profile so he could sex chat with a complete stranger who wasn’t who she said she was. *If I’m a catfish, then he’s most certainly a dirty dogfish.*

‘When I chatted with you, I wasn’t thinking of Kate at all. I just felt jealous that she could have this fucking amazing guy.’

His face softens, but only a little. ‘Yeah, well, I don’t like being deceived,’ he says with no hint of irony. ‘And all those things we said to each other, all those photos I sent, and you’re not even the person I thought you were. I feel violated. You’ve seen my cock!’

Most of the office has seen your penis, mate, it’s not something to be proud of.

Your husband thinks sending dick pics to an internet stranger means he’s the victim. All this faux outrage is hilarious, though I keep my poker face on, the one that’s sad and nodding with tears at all this alleged truth being thrown at it.

‘It was so wrong of me to look at those pics and enjoy them.’ The corner of his mouth twitches, and I can see

stroking his ego is better than condemning his lack of guilt. More interesting is the fact he hasn't thrown homophobic insults at me. *I wonder why?*

I wish I could tell you that, in return for these intimate photos, I sent Malcolm naked photos of a hot, young chick whose body was unblemished without filters, but I didn't.

I simply accessed my archive of old photos procured from my younger days. An ex-girlfriend fit the bill. Even with clothes on, she was alluringly attractive, and these photos, taken over twenty years ago, were no longer searchable by Google Images—*curse you GI with your ability to allow people to find the real person behind the pics!*

Malcolm gave himself up without even a hint of boob and muff, believe it! I dare say, he'd have sent a dick pic without being asked. *Did he violate you like this too?*

Or, if I'm to play Devil's Advocate, he simply couldn't resist a little cockteaser who promised him all sorts of carnal pleasures, should he hand over the goods, pronto!

All those passionate nights you've had recently, Kate, did you think they came from nowhere? That no malignant force was guiding this to happen? It's a known fact that men treat their wives better when they have a bit on the side, a heady mix of guilt and having someone else who actually makes them happy, *for a while.*

It pains me to tell you, that while Malcolm was inside you, his eyes were closed, thinking of the photos of a twenty-

plus-years' younger version of my ex and the sex chat of a forty-two-year-old degenerate.

Malcolm wanted me to degrade him in our chats, to degrade you. It became clear he was a twink of sorts, a sandwich filler for the two bread slices known as Tom and his wife. The more humiliating the better.

His fantasy was to leave his phone on while he fucked you and allow me to listen in, which actually did happen I'm afraid to say. *He's a sick bastard.*

'I need to tell, Kate,' he says, 'I need to confess to what I've done.'

He leaves me with little choice.

'You really want Kate to know everything we talked about? All those perverted fantasises that usually ended with Kate being indirectly violated?' I want to say, *what's wrong with you?* but we don't have time nor a therapist to unravel this sick puppy's mind.

He doesn't protest now, moving his closed lips like he doesn't know whether to be angry or sad. Then a single tear dribbles down his cheek. *Hello, conscience, is that you?*

'Please,' I say, 'come inside. We need to talk about all of this.'

We spend the next hour chatting, only interrupted when I nip to the loo midway. Our conversation comes from a place of brutal honesty. I wish I could do this with you, Kate, how freeing it would be for both of us to let it all out.

We both admit that we're damaged creatures, at least, Malcolm does, and I agree with him.

He laughs with a rueful smile. 'The sad thing is, you're the only person I've ever shown this side of me to.'

It's probably a good thing, rather than a sad thing, matey.

He bursts into tears, Kate, and I'm pretty sure it's fake. Regardless, I get off my chair and sit next to him on the sofa, pulling him in for manly hug.

He hugs me back, reluctantly, the smell of his aftershave mixed with his alcoholic breath, intoxicating my senses. I don't know why, or how, but I look up to his tear-strewn face and our lips meet, and we kiss, and his five o'clock shadow scrapes against my clean-shaven chin and I don't know how women put up with this, but my tongue searches his mouth regardless and it does not stop until he pushes my head down and I free his hard cock from its clothed prison and suck on it, taking it all the way, my chin playing conkers with his balls, and I'm disappointed that his cock is clean, and I tell myself that he ravaged you doggystyle only moments before ringing my doorbell, and I imagine your sea-salt taste along his warm shaft.

He grabs at my flaccid cock, and in a whimper says, 'Are you not enjoying this?'

How he expects me to reply with a cock in my mouth, I'll never know, so I soldier on, marching little Malcolm to the drum of my fingers tapping on his scrotum.

'I just don't know if I can do this,' he says, pushing

violently on my forehead, his throbbing cock slipping from my ravenous mouth. He forces his cock back into his trousers and gives me a look of disgust like he's caught me scoffing the entire Easter egg collection in Sainsbury's. 'I don't mind Tom watching me do things with his—but I'm not—I'm not a—'

'You're not a giver, you're a taker. I get it, I get it.'

'I don't mean that!'

To give him credit, Kate, I half-expected him to reject me *after* he came in my mouth. *Brownie points for belated conscience and a modicum of self-control.*

He gets off the sofa, his stiffy now fighting to be free of his trousers, the little man signalling to me like a white flag, *I surrender, come suck me now*, and I stifle a laugh at the ludicrous scene unfolding, as he bends over to hide his shameful want of me.

'I know I'm not Kate,' I say rather pathetically, 'but a mouth's a mouth!'

'You're insane,' he says, like this is news to him.

I'll have to tackle this from another angle. Compared with you, Kate, I'm not alluring enough. Not sexy enough. Some men will take anything on offer, but Malcolm seems to be aloof, conceited, dare I say it, somewhat loyal to you, unless it's a girl half his age, one who was admittedly pretty with the mind of a filthy millennial. Perhaps if I bring out an ex-wife, he'd be happy to allow me to masturbate while watching him sexually assault her.

Will Malcolm tell you that I kissed him and sucked on him for a brief moment? Will he embellish the details, *Nigel threw himself at me, rugby-tackled me, almost killed me with all that weight choking the life out of me, forced my cock down his own throat against my will like an inverted irrumatio!*

Or will he keep his mouth shut, ego unwilling to let on that he kissed a man, face-fucked a reject, morals unable to accept that he, for even the slightest moment, was tempted to cheat on you with anything on offer?

When I think things can't get any worse, he waddles to the front door like a horny penguin, but before he reaches the handle, he hears a high-pitched yelp.

'What was that noise?'

'Uh...my aunt?'

'Shh!' He says, ignoring my reasonable enough guess, index finger against his lips for exaggerated emphasis. Another yelp fills the air. 'It's coming from in there.'

Don't open that door, I think, but it's too late.

'What the actual fuck is he doing here?'

'*He* has a name.'

'I know the name of my own bloody dog!'

With Poe at his ankles, Malcolm's hard-on vanishes, leaving only the small-bulged promise of what could have been.

I wish I could say fate is conspiring against me, but each and every moment led to this. I didn't have to dognap Poe, I didn't have to take him home and send photos of him to you

like a fucking psychopath, though really I just wanted to let you know that he was still alive, and thriving. *Honestly, Kate, put him on the scales, he's a healthy boy now!*

'Kate wanted me to look after him. She's been under pressure.'

'Bollocks!' His fist clenches, and I wonder if domestic violence is a staple of the Finlay household. 'She's cried her eyes out most nights wondering what happened to him.' *Yeah, and she told me how much you really care about Poe. Not a jot, mate, not a single jot!* 'I've had to listen to it all, it's been—stressful!'

As always, Malcolm only cares about himself. He picks up Poe with no care at all, doesn't he know Miniature Dachshunds need to be picked up carefully due to their fragile backs?

Poe fidgets and squirms in Malcolm's arms, it's obvious that he's not comfortable with this man.

'You're a stranger to Poe!' I say. 'I only took him because—'

'Hold up! That means...' His bulging eyes look at me in horror. 'You're the cunt who sent the photos! Why? Why would you do that to your own workmate?'

I think about denying the allegation, tell him that actually, I'm the cunt who tracked down the cunt who sent the photos, saving Poe from a life living with the original cunt. But before my devious mind can speak the lie, my front door

is open and Malcolm rushes to his car, throwing poor Poe onto the front passenger seat without a care.

You might think, *oh well, Nigel, you didn't plan for this did you?* and you'd be right, up to a point. Poe was supposed to be sleeping. They weren't meant to meet until later, until after I—well, it doesn't matter now.

Malcolm turns the engine over, and tries to reverse. I say, tries to, because it's clear his car is going nowhere.

He hops out and surveys the damage.

'You punctured my tyres, you crazy bastard. All four of them!'

Had he not been so angry, so blind to the danger he found himself in, he might have asked the question, *what sharp instrument pierced through my tyres and does that crazy bastard have it in his hands now?*

But he doesn't and I don't have my nail-gun anyway. He pulls out his phone, forgetting there's no signal to save him, and before he can type the third '9', my knife slides into his side, a couple more times just to make sure.

He collapses, his phone smacking-off a large stone, and Poe barks with excitement.

But don't worry, Kate—

Malcolm's still breathing when I drag him back to my writer's den.

NIGEL

MY WRITERS' den is basically a converted outbuilding, which came with the cottage, though it's so old on the outside, I believe that it was the original home for the family who lived out here, before their subsequent generations built a modern cottage in the 1900s. It's a bit bigger than a double bedroom, which makes it ideal for writing and... other things.

I don't know how suspicious you were of Malcolm, not very, as far as I can see, yet still, he wasn't silly enough to cheat and flirt using his own laptop, or his own phone.

It's like, dare I say it, cheating with someone online wasn't his first rodeo. I believe this, because he was too well prepared.

Lying, bleeding out, on my floorboards, he begged me to call for an ambulance.

'Please,' he croaked.

I fished his cracked phone out of my pocket. It was newish, so didn't have a fingerprint reader. I turned it on, holding it near his face, which, contorted in pain as it was, did not open the phone.

I was about to ask him to stop his whining and pull a normal face, when I noticed the phone was asking for a passcode instead.

'What's the number?'

He shook his head, like he had a choice in the matter.

I could have used my own phone, of course, and I wondered if I'd have to scratch my own face with his fingernails to give myself some kind of self-defence alibi.

'Either you cough up the passcode, or no ambulance is coming.'

'You don't need it to call—'

Maybe it was the look on my face, he seemed to know this bargaining was futile.

He finally spit it out. 15-09-84

How romantic is that, Kate? He used your birthday to password protect his phone, the same phone he used to send dick pics to strangers. *With lovers like Malcolm, who needs haters?*

'Why aren't you calling nine-nine-nine?'

I ignored him and searched his phone for our filthy, incriminating, chats, which didn't take long. I had a plan for this phone, but the plan was aborted when I noticed the only person he ever chatted to, was me, i.e. the fake Jessica.

There were no texts to you. No phone calls. No missed calls. Barely an app on the phone, save for the one he used to cheat with. It became clear as day—this wasn't his normal phone, it was his cheating-phone, which was quite the surprise to me. I actually thought the number I was sexting was his real phone, half-hoping you'd one day access it and see what a philanderer he was.

This also meant, his normal phone was still out there.

'What's your phone number? For your real phone that is.'

He smirked, which was ballsy of him. 'I'm not telling you unless you call an ambulance.'

I thought about torturing it out of him, but all honesty, he was already in quite a state. I'd have to play along.

'Fine,' I said, and I stepped away, and called emergency services. 'Hello? Yes. There's been an accident. My, er, friend, has punctured himself with a knife.' I paused for dramatic effect. 'My address? Certainly.'

Malcolm nodded in relief, which was a relief to me, I expected him to scream for help, which would have been irritating considering his phone had no signal and no way of calling for an ambulance.

With Malcolm finally placated, I connected his phone to my Wi-Fi, the only way I could use it to call someone. I then pressed for his real number.

'I'm not telling,' he said, and he coughed up blood as he laughed.

I had ways of dealing with this, but I thought, *best to keep it civil for now, try to reason with the man.*

‘I can always call back and tell them it was a prank call.’

‘I’ll scream for help.’

‘I’ll step outside and call them.’

‘I’ll—I’ll...’ Malcolm broke down, groaning in pain, tears streaming down his face once more. Who knew a man could shed so many tears? ‘O-seven-five-three-three...’

With the number entered in his cheating-phone, I dialed. Would someone answer? Had he left his real phone at home? But no one answered.

I slapped on a pair of latex gloves and went outside to his damaged car. I had one bar on my Wi-Fi. I rang again, listening to the dial tone in my ear, but hearing nothing in the car, not even a vibration. I checked the cubby holes, and found nothing. I opened the glovebox and inside, a faraday bag. I didn’t open the bag, simply felt for what was inside, a shape which curiously matched that of a mobile phone.

Do you know about the faraday bag, Kate? Does Malcolm tell you he uses it for the car keys, to stop criminals from stealing his keyless car? Well, it seems he used it for blocking the GPS signal of his phone, so that you would have no way of tracking him, no matter what insidious software you secretly installed on his phone.

This was good for me. I would pull out his phone in due time, but only at a certain location of my choosing. There wouldn’t be any GPS signal offering insight as to Malcolm’s

last whereabouts. *Not until I removed it from the bag outside your home.* It'd be a faff to hang outside your home in the wee hours, typing a text from your hubby, but needs must. When the phone company spilled Malcolm's last known GPS location, it would show your home, proof that he sent the text and walked out of your life for good.

Thanks to Malcolm having two phones, one which was very much off the books, I could easily get rid of the cheating-phone, leaving me with his normal phone.

Dead men tell no tales, but they leave clues behind. I did another trek through the woods to the back of your home, as near as I could get, and pulled out Malcolm's phone from the faraday bag, sending the text that would announce the possible end of your relationship.

I knew you would call me the next morning, what with it being a Sunday and you having no one else to confide in. You'd invite me over, *which you did*, and even if you didn't, I'd insist, *which, in the event, I didn't have to*. And when I had an opportune moment, I'd leave Malcolm's phone somewhere, perhaps the back of your bed, almost as if it were an afterthought for him.

You'd find it and realise he truly had let you go. You'd wonder why he hadn't packed any luggage. Why this decision was so sudden. You'd wonder where he'd gone the night before, and with whom. The police would confirm that local CCTV had no sighting of Malcolm leaving your home and street around the time of his final text.

His disappearance would eventually become a Netflix documentary, and you'd have hundreds of ghoulish fans offering up their theories, but none would fit better than Malcolm having evaded detection by leaving via your back garden and going through the woods, following the river to god knows where.

It has the makings of a thriller novel, Kate, one which Elena would love to send you. Just as well I've already started writing it, but we're nowhere near the end, so I'll have to wing that and hope for the best.

Either way, I think you'll love it.

NIGEL

I KNOW what you're thinking, Kate. Every time I go to the loo, there's some kind of nefarious activity going on, and you'd be right to a point. When I'm not pissing or shitting, I'm writing novels, I'm scheming, I'm popping outside to pop Malcolm's tyres with a nail-gun, I'm sneaking into your bedroom to dispose of evidence which would surely send me to jail.

What, when I said I left you a goodbye gift, you didn't think I snuck into your bedroom and took a shit on your bed, did you? What kind of sicko do you think I am?

After you almost caught me with Malcolm's phone in your kitchen which should be mine, I disposed of it, in your bedroom, like it had slipped between the headrest and mattress onto your carpeted floor.

You'd find it eventually. I imagined you crying on your pillow, calling Malcolm's phone for the umpteenth time,

hearing it vibrate under your bed like some kind of childhood monster. You'd realise he left without even taking his phone with him, proof that he really didn't want to talk to you anymore.

It was hard leaving your home that day, especially after you invited me to stay. It took every ounce of strength inside me to say no. It's not that I didn't want to sleep on your couch, or had we continued drinking into the night, shared a bed like a girly sleepover, pyjamas stained by red wine, telling each other horror stories under the cover, torch-lit faces making monsters of men.

I wanted to do all that. It would've been so easy. But I had other things to attend to, like two living, breathing things, that required me to feed and water them, lest they die.

I'll sort you an Uber, you said, which I knew would lead to the next question, *where do you live?* even though you know where I live, as we've had plenty of conversations about my commute into London, but I've never invited you out to my wilderness and you've always been too polite to ask, and if only you were curious enough to check the electoral roll history of my property and all would become clear and you'd never talk to me again...

But most people are not like me. They don't check these things. They don't wake-up in the morning and take on a new day with such cynicism and suspicion. Ignorance is

bliss, and I could never live like that. The unknowing of it all. It would kill me.

When I opened my eyes and looked around, I saw the truth of all things. Not only was my writing career nothing of the such, but my own country, my dear green England was becoming a cesspit. Your constant rejections put black dogs on my shoulders and the rose-tinted glasses I wore when writing a new story would smash under my feet.

I'd doomscroll on X and YouTube, and all I'd see were my heroes telling me how to live my life, telling me who to vote for in the upcoming elections.

Unless you've never been in the position to worry about where your next meal is coming from, or how you're going to pay the rent before being evicted, or whether debt collectors are going to come to your door—*or loan sharks with baseball bats in my case*—then you have absolutely no fucking right to tell anyone how to vote.

All these rich people, sitting in their ivory towers, looking down at the rest, dictating what we should eat, what we should watch, what we should believe. Rolling out their token trans kid because *look, we're progressive and better than you, and we have enough money to reverse any mutilation we force on our children!*

Honestly, it's enough to make me sick.

And the funny part is, even when America votes for the orange man in record numbers, and the dementia-afflicted incumbent is giving a pardon to his criminal son, giving stays

of execution to child rapists and murderers on his way out the door, even after all the Hollywood sycophants who came out in support of him for nothing more than a cheque or a promise that Diddy's incarceration won't shine a light on their participation in freak-off parties, still, these motherfuckers come out and tell us, the normal people, how to vote.

But you're not like that, are you, Kate? You've never mentioned politics in any of your social media posts, aside from the occasional **Free Palestine!** and **Stop the Genocide!** to soothe your soul. I get it, you're a good person, you want to be on the right side of history, and in no parallel universe is a real-time genocide ever right.

You know what a privileged life you lead, and you're humble with your fortunate life.

And I promise you, with all my heart and soul, when that day comes and you secure me the book deal that changes my life beyond all recognition, when that book deal leads to movie rights, when I'm in the position of being known for that one book I wrote twenty years ago, I will not preach to the masses.

I simply will not.

Who am I to tell them what to do with their lives? Why should they listen to me? Why is it, because I wrote a work of fiction that became successful, that I now think all the non-fiction that comes out of my mouth is suddenly worth listening to?

Why do successful actors and writers feel this way?

Honestly, if I had my way, Leo would be sinking at the bottom of the ocean, preferably along with his private yachts, and private planes. How dare he lecture us about climate change when he's polluting the earth like a one-man economy. *You're a good actor, mate, but stay in your lane!*

They'd be smart to remember that the axe forgets but the tree remembers awesome African proverbs.

And you'd do well to remember that Nigel Carlyle is your one and only friend. Your mother doesn't give a shit about you. Your sycophantic friends don't really care about you. Even Poe has forgot about you. *Kate, who?* I heard him bark.

Face it, Kate, I'm literally all you've got, which is why I'm compelled to do this. I can't allow Malcolm to come between us. He's a fake, a charlatan. It's obvious he was lying through his teeth when saying *I do* to all those wedding vows he knew he'd break.

I could do this later, but police are smart, aren't they? Or at least, forensic police are. They would know that the limb was detached after death—I've seen enough true crime documentaries—and that would defeat the purpose. There has to be ambiguity in Malcolm's disappearance, plus it's not like I can just leave his car lying outside my home.

I don't know how you managed it, Kate, all those years with this whining, excuse of a man. Honestly, you'd think a man bleeding out would conserve some energy for surviving,

but Malcolm is intent on making my life hell for as long as he can breathe.

Only the drugs have slowed him down and allowed me to get a word in edgeways.

‘Do you know what Kate and I did today? We cried. Together. Over you.’ I stoke the fire. It’s cold out, but in here, the flames spit and dance, like we’re in a Christmas card cottage, or the fiery bowels of Hell itself. ‘It’s okay, though. I told her what a cunt you are. That’s she’s better off without you.’ I give him a little hope, where there’s none. ‘She doesn’t agree with me. But time will tell, won’t it?’

Malcolm looks past me, staring at the wardrobe, sheer terror in his eyes. He’s heard the screams, the moans and groans of a creature pained and tortured. You don’t want to know what lies beyond the door, Kate. And neither does he.

I introduce Malcolm to my aunt, well, as best I can in the circumstances. He refuses to talk, she won’t talk.

My aunt listens to every word I say, but she says nothing. *Are you scared of me now?* This woman, the only person in the world, who struck fear into my very heart. She knows she helped create me, mould me in her own cruel image, and in her shame and complicity, she stays silent.

I go to the sink and drop a couple of pills into Malcolm’s water, and stir with vigour. ‘This will help with the pain.’

I lift the glass to his mouth and I expect him to resist, but he guzzles as best he can, greedy for the liquid that will sustain his life.

I go to my desk, open my laptop and write for a bit, imagining an implausible happy ending. With my eyes straining, I close the laptop.

‘Well, I best get ready for bed. Make yourself comfortable. You’re gonna be here a long, long time.’

Malcolm doesn’t reply. He’s out for the count. I slap him on the face, but he doesn’t respond. I check his pulse. It’s not strong, but he’s still alive.

I pull out a small saw from my desk drawer. I thought about travelling all the way down to Cornwall to buy this in a local shop that still had mirrors to catch thieves and no cameras, preferably a year in advance of having to use it. But then I remembered my aunt had one from way back when. It’s rusted and fairly blunt, but it should manage.

Anyway, tetanus is the last thing Malcolm should be worrying about.

I pull at his hand and lay his arm flat on the floor. I roll up his sleeve, and line the saw against his wrist. There’s barely a vein to bulge against it, which is good?

Aunt glares at me, I can feel it.

I nod to the poker, its wooden handle resting on the floor, tip left glowing in the roaring fire, ready for cauterising. ‘Worked for his stab wounds, didn’t it?’

I feel her head shaking in dismay.

‘I’ve no intention of killing him.’

She looks at me as if to say, *We’re past that stage now.*

‘If that’s the case, it’s all gravy, baby.’

I pull back and forth on the saw, bearing my weight down on it, like rusty metal cutting into moulding cheese. Blood appears to reassure me it will work. Bone might be another scenario all together.

Aunt wants to say something, I know she does, but I don't let her. I don't give a fuck about her protestations. I will not listen to a single word she has to say.

'Oh, just shut up, Auntie Elena!'

THE POLICE HAVE BEEN and gone, updating me on the disappearance of my husband.

A few weeks ago, Malcolm left this home and never reappeared. And then a dog walker found his burnt out car and—

I can't even say it.

His hand.

What happened to Malcolm?

Did he piss off the wrong person? Sleep with the wrong wife, the wife of some kind of psychotic gangster? I can't imagine him hanging around in such circles, as much as I can't imagine a gangster's moll finding him the least bit interesting, never mind swap her life of glamour and crime to be bored to tears with him.

Or was Malcolm a victim of unfortunate circumstance? It would be just his luck to be taking a morning walk when

a deranged killer was nearby, stalking the woods for a suitable victim. But there's too many questions with this scenario.

What was he doing in those woods in the first place, over one-hundred miles away from his family home? Why would someone kill him, torch his car and leave his severed hand as a sick calling card? Where is the rest of his body, and why would they keep it? It's not like Malcolm was an adonis, and even if he was, a decomposing corpse is not something people usually hold on to.

But this is a deranged killer we're talking about here. Who knows what sick thoughts populate their mind.

The police, their dogs, and all the lovely, charitable volunteers, scoured those woods looking for his body, and came up with zilch.

Internet sleuths offered outlandish theories without solicitation. Missing limbs, it was obvious he had messed with the wrong sort of people, they'd hacked him up and sent pieces of him to all four corners of England, like he was William Wallace.

Or was Malcolm the victim of some kind of homosexual serial killer, a preyer of men. There was precedence for this kind of horror, though I quickly tired fending off accusations of Malcolm's alleged secret sexual proclivities. I knew enough of my husband to know that any cheating would be with the opposite sex.

One thing all theories had in common, whatever unfor-

tunate fate befell him, it was at the hands of another of his gender.

The only theory that involved a woman was the one where I'd allegedly nagged Malcolm to death, in body and existence, a few misogynists throwing in comments to the effect of, *I'd have cut off my leg if it meant getting rid of the wife!*

Perhaps the truth was more akin to Malcolm's personality, his need for attention. Did he cut off his own hand, leaving it there as some kind of sick memento? Letting us all mourn his seemingly very-real death, while he lived it up on a beach in Thailand, a go-go dancer pawing at his new rubber hand.

It seems ludicrous, yet in all the possible scenarios, it's the one that suits Malcolm best. His need for running away from life's problems, his fear of growing old, his delusion that young girls not requiring payment found him attractive like he was in his younger days.

And then my mother, as heartless as ever and with that perma-scowl she never could remove from her face, said, 'I knew this marriage wouldn't last.' Even she didn't really believe Malcolm was dead. 'He's probably got another family, Kate, up north, probably another hundred miles from where they found his grubby hand.' She turned to me, gazing into my bleary eyes. 'You should've given him a child, Kate. Bound him to his marriage vows. Not everyone wants to grow old alone.'

Ha! I could barely contain the sarcastic laughter that built inside me. Yes, my mother had given birth to me alright, but she too was alone, having drove my father to drink himself to death. I mean, waking up to that stern mug every morning? I didn't blame him.

Though I did blame him for leaving me all alone in this world, with only her as company.

How could I tell her that Malcolm could barely tolerate a dog in our home, never mind another mini-sized human being?

Even you, Elena, have abandoned me.

How sad am I, that I miss the attention of my stalker? In my time of need, you're nowhere to be seen. Not one novel idea in my inbox, no gifts, no condolence card and flowers and promises to meet and stroke my hair and make everything better.

Which is why I'm ever-so grateful to have Nigel around. A real, tangible person, who does not stalk me, doesn't make me feel uncomfortable, respectful of personal boundaries, *mostly*.

I've asked him so many times to come over, stay with me, but he's too embarrassed, always refusing me.

But today is different. I don't have to ask. He offers.

'I'll come over, you can't be on your own at a time like this.'

I hadn't told him that mother had already offered to stay with me, *The full weekend...sigh...if I really must*, but

mother was relieved when I said she didn't have to bother,
Well, then, I won't.

Upon seeing Nigel, I break down, utterly and totally. Nigel takes me in his embrace, hugging me tight. I reciprocate, allowing my tears to flow, the smell of lavender coming from Nigel's person soothing me.

'I like your scent. A new aftershave?'

He doesn't reply, tightening her embrace.

'Nigel? Are you okay?'

Any tighter and he'll have me in a bear hug.

'Nigel, you're choking me!'

NIGEL

I UNDERSTAND NOW why smelly people don't realise they stink. When you spend too much time with a smell, be it on you, or suffocating you, your nose becomes familiar with it, and it doesn't stink so much after a time.

But for anyone else, the smell is new, unfamiliar, very noticeable. Smelling of lavender isn't the worst crime in the world, and you said you liked it, but asking me about it caught me off-guard, a rare moment of me not being in control in the slightest.

You asked if it was aftershave, and initially, I thought the easiest answer would be to say, *Yes, yes, it is*. Why deny it? The smell of lavender is lingering on me, and you've noticed it. But I know by now, even a simple answer can lead to further, probing questions, like, *What is the name of the cologne? How much did it cost you? Where can I buy it for my missing husband, yesterday?*

‘Nigel?’ you said. ‘Are you okay?’

Looking over your shoulder at the open living room door, which teased invitation for the night, I couldn’t for the life of me think of an aftershave that smelled of lavender. It simply eluded me. I wanted to lie, but you’d catch me out eventually, leading to more questions.

‘Nigel, you’re choking me!’

‘Sorry,’ I said, releasing you from my overzealous hug. ‘I was just thinking of everything you’ve been through. It’s not fair, Kate. You don’t deserve any of this.’

Yes, the best way to answer the unanswerable was to change the subject, like I was a politician. I wouldn’t lie to you, I’d simply move on to something more important, make you the focal point of attention.

You had kept it together for all of two minutes, and my words sent you spiralling, which allowed me to be the one to pick you up and make you whole again.

‘Can you stay the night?’

This time, I wouldn’t play it cool. ‘You don’t have to ask, it’s a given.’



IT’S THE EVENING AFTER.

Your disappointment was palpable when I said I had to leave early this morning. *But it’s Sunday!* I so wanted to

spend another day with you, in my dreams I had fantasised about such a domestic set-up, but—

Inspired by the police finding Malcolm's hand and not immediately locking me up, by the most perfect overnighter I've had in my life where we chatted through the wee hours, I caught a glimpse of a very real future for us, and when I woke on your sofa, watching as you snored on your chair, the muse finally rested upon my shoulder, whispering into my ear the perfect ending for the first draft of my latest novel, the one I hope will finally make my dreams come true.

As much as I love you, I had to run home, and now, sitting in my writer's den, engulfed with the smell of lavender, I sigh with contentment, looking at the word count on my Scrivener project, which tells me I have almost ninety-thousand words.

The End.

I don't actually write that, nor do I write *Fin* like I'm pretending to be French and/or pretentious, but the words ring out in my head.

For once I've not bothered looking at trends, hoping it piggybacks the latest fad or foresee the next one, ironic considering I'm in the best job to attempt all those things. It's probably the least commercial novel I've ever written. Write about what you know. Well, I know you, Kate. But despite all the me I've sent to you, my hopes, dreams, fears, written in novel format and outlined ideas, you don't really know me.

This novel will change that.

Of course, I don't really expect you to take notice, to suddenly bow down to the brilliance of the Elena Cartwright non de plume. But showing you my work, containing within my dream of being published, has become habit. Habits die hard, and dreams die harder. At the very least, or perhaps the most I can expect, you'll begrudgingly admit that Elena has improved her writing.

You might wonder how this transformation came about? Sifting through hundreds of manuscripts a week, reading the best of the best in their entirety, and the worst of the worst in their samples, it certainly offers a learning opportunity.

I'm humble enough to admit now that my previous efforts did not deserve to be published, I can see that now.

In my own bubble, I thought the world owed me, and I took your rejections personally. But the world is indifferent. It doesn't care if I'm published or not, and I should take nothing personally.

Since working alongside you and seeing things from the inside, I know now, much to my shame, that infinitely better writers than me are rejected by you and your ilk for reasons that are never personal.

Sublime writers whose plots don't quite add up, masters weaving a literary tapestry that would be spellbinding if they only had that magic something that would help them sell.

Technically brilliant prose with no hint of personality or voice. Others yet, whose unique voice springs from the pages, but haven't quite nailed down that *lil' something something* to make them stand out in a crowd. That elusive, high-concept factor, for example.

Did all these writers take our rejections personally? I imagine the majority did. How many hate your assistant? How many wish I wasn't there as a gatekeeper to the gatekeeper? I can only empathise.

My pen name was my shield and sword. It was fear that made me choose that name. Fear of the unknown outcome, fear of failure. I thought, what name could I choose to fight this fear? A name so shameless, stolen from someone so shameless. Why, of course, Elena Cartwright, my dear old aunt, a person so unafraid to sully her name with copious lies and embellishments, a few more rejections from strangers wouldn't hurt.

I even thought of passing myself off as my old aunt, an unremarkable woman who found the joy of writing in her twilight years, unbelieving that best-seller stories were pouring out from her arthritic hands. I could send literary agents photos of her, scans of birth certificates, her passport which she merely kept to show off the cover to her friends, never allowing anyone to paw the inside and the absence of any travel visas or stamps, *the old bag was scared of flying, ha!*

With every passing rejection, my instinct was proven

correct. My real name would not be a name stained by failure, simply a name kept in reserve for the inevitable success. An agent, such as yourself Kate, having become enamoured with my novel would forgive my moment of insecurity. I mean, why wouldn't you? It's absolutely fine to do it the other way around. A writer can contact you, real name and all, and you can both speak frankly about choosing a pen name for the book, it's all legal and morally acceptable.

Yet, most agents will have you think that it's a heinous crime to contact them with a pen name and only reveal your true name after the fact. *A real turn off*, you said, and that frightened me, because I'd already sent you three novels which I was waiting for a response for and I knew one of them would be a success and then we'd have to have this awkward conversation.

I'd go on the offence. *Well, look at that agent who moonlights as a children's author, he admitted sending his submission to another agent using a fake name. Why is it okay for him?* And you'd say, because you're honest and that's why I love you, *We agents don't always practice what we preach, you should know that by now.* And I know, I do.

That's why it's time for me to retire my pen name, consign my dear old aunt's name to the dustbin of literary history.

This novel is written by me, for you. My real name graces the cover page. No more hiding, no more shame. You'll read

my story and it'll open your eyes to a truth you've never known.

This time, you won't reject me.

This time, you'll do everything in your power to make me a traditionally published, bestselling author.

Either that, or you'll call the police.

Let's see.

NIGEL

I KNOCK on your front door, five minutes earlier than you expect and only thirteen hours after I last left your home when I stepped into your street feeling like the dawn of a new day promised so much. You take a while to answer, but when you do, your beauty takes my breath away.

‘Come in,’ you say, and I do. ‘What’s this? You’ve brought work with you? I told you, this is our weekend to do as we please.’

Ah, you’ve spotted the printed manuscript in my hands. I did think of bringing a backpack but a part of me wanted to wander London, manuscript in hand, allowing passersby to witness a man with his dreams manifested onto a thick pile of paper, trees high-fiving me with their branches, knowing their brethren died for the best of causes, at the very least I could use it as an oversized fan to blow away the stink of fellow, unwashed commuters on the underground.

‘It’s, uh, well, it’s not work.’

We wander into *my* kitchen, and you offer me a coffee. ‘Irish?’ I nod, always grateful that you enjoy a little whisky too. ‘This will wake us up and get us going at the same time.’ You wink, and I love how mischievous you can be. You look at my paper. ‘If it’s not work, what is it?’

‘It’s personal, it’s, well, I—’ Why are the words struggling to come out? I rehearsed them in the mirror, but it’s easier to talking to my own ugly mug than say them to you. ‘I, er, wrote a novel.’

‘You did what?’ Your hand covers your mouth, hiding a beaming smile. You gently nudge me. ‘Oh my. You didn’t mention anything. And look at the size of it.’ Oh, Kate, you and your double-entendres. ‘It looks like you’ve got the whole thing done and dusted.’

‘It’s finished, yes, but...’

I’ll let you fill the silence. I want you to offer, not for me to ask. ‘But you need someone you trust to have a good look at it?’ I simply nod. ‘You don’t even have to ask, it would be my pleasure.’

And they say that nepotism and connections don’t help in the creative industries? But my foot’s in the door now, I can let others bemoan that truth.

I want to melt into a puddle of gratitude, and yet, the ease with which you offer to help, sickens me. All those years trying to get your attention, being ignored, rejected. Look at you now. Bending over backwards to read my script, one

which you know absolutely nothing about. No cover letter, no synopsis, you don't even know the title.

Why didn't you at least ask for a one-sentence elevator pitch? Make me work for your interest. I have it ready.

'Basically, if I had to distill it down to one line, I'd say, *A fanatical—*'

'No, no! You don't have to sell yourself to me. Let me read it blind. I'm looking forward to it.'

Oh god, it's bittersweet, Kate, it really is!

We go into your living room, and I place the manuscript on your coffee table, like it's one of those full-colour tomes that are left there for people to look at, not actually read.

'I'll start reading tonight. I can't wait.' Despite your apparent enthusiasm, you don't even look at the cover page. Are you being sincere, Kate?

I pull out my phone and place it on top of the cover page, obscuring the written details.

I know I shouldn't, but I bring up the subject of @SarahtheBookieworm—I still can't bear to call her by her full, real name. I swallowed down my jealousy regarding her long ago, but still, it's there, causing me acid reflux and occasional sleepless nights.

'I think she inspired me. Seeing the excitement of her going through each stage of the publishing process, and how happy it made you—well, made us, everyone in the agency. I just thought, I wouldn't mind giving that a try.'

'That's really great. I'm so proud of you.'

I ask you about her, wanting to know more about the woman who would take your attention away from me.

You tell me more than I care to know, and then you say, 'Oh, and she's a big fan of Coronation Street.'

I want to say, *I know because I've watched her watching it*, but I've had enough hearing about her and I want to change the subject, so I put on a Mancunian accent and say, 'Any'road, is it wine o'clock?'

Your head snaps to the side, your eyes narrow, looking at me with suspicion and a smirk of curiosity.

'What's wrong,' I say, voice back to normal.

You shake your head, apologetic smile. 'You sounded so familiar for some reason. Probably *deja-vu*.'

The Call. *Fuck, fuck, fuck!* I had adopted my ridiculous northern accent, specifically a female Mancunian one, to keep you off the trail, and here I am, regurgitating it in a mock female accent, practically telling you who I really am.

My heart pounds, droplets of sweat dribble down the temples of my head, my face flushes. Now is not the time for my mask to come off, it can't happen until you confess to your own sins first, and then I'll forgive you and confess mine. Other way around, you don't forgive and you don't confess.

'Don't be embarrassed! It was a funny impersonation. Vera Duckworth, right?'

I exhale and nod.

'Do another one,' you say, your voice quite insistent.

‘I don’t think I will.’

‘Why not?’

Why not, indeed. ‘Because, as I said, it’s wine o’clock, and I’ll go get it.’

I return with wine glasses topped to the brim.

‘Are you trying to get me drunk?’ you laugh. ‘Are you trying to get me completely obliterated?’

‘Yes!’ We both laugh, even though I’m being deadly serious. Don’t worry, Kate, at your most vulnerable, you’re safe with me. Consensual is my middle name. I want your love, your devotion, your body, I really do.

But for tonight, I want something you’ll probably only give should you be paralytic. I want the truth. I want to know how you really feel about Elena Cartwright. I need to know this before you read my novel and realise the truth of all things.

Since I’ve known you, you’ve told me what you need to tell me, enough to allow me to know that you don’t want Elena in your life. But you haven’t elaborated beyond that.

I need this, Kate, I need to know. I don’t know if we can continue without knowing why you trampled on my dreams with such glee. There has to be a reason, and not just, *reasons*.

You can trust me, you know you can. You can admit everything to me, and I will not judge. If you want me to love you with all I have, I need to know that you are being honest with me.

But despite your shackles loosening with the drink, you speak freely of most things, Elena is still a prickly subject to broach. You want to change the subject, you want to talk about anything other than *Elena Bloody Cartwright*.

Taking the softly, softly approach isn't working, and I decide to pull out the big guns.

'Kate, I uh...' My face flushes. 'I don't really know how to say this.' I lift my hand, palm facing you. 'I must preface this with, you can totally trust me with anything.'

You smile, eyes scrunched, I have you confused. 'What is it? What do you want to tell me.'

I take a long inhalation and let out an exaggerated exhalation, fully blowing out my chubby cheeks. 'It's about Elena Cartwright.'

You shake your head in dismay. 'Please. I thought we agreed to forget about her for one night?'

You suggested that but I didn't agree to anything. 'I know that, but, it's important.' You sigh, and then nod. 'Well, you know how you've had me intercept her communications, etcetera?'

Your eyes open wide, glazed with one too many. 'You've always been happy to assist in this matter. Are you having second thoughts? If it helps, I can remind you of everything's she's put me through. Not that I really want to talk about her at all.'

I show you my palm again and shake it in a *calm down* manner. 'It's not that. It's just that, for me to do such a

stellar job in blocking her communications, I had to really dive-in to who she really was.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, I read all the emails she sent you. Every, single, one.’ You’re silent. What’s going on in that pretty head of yours? ‘I had to get a feeling for her writing, just in case she sent you anything with a fake name, and then I’d know it was her.’

‘I see.’ Is that all you have to say, Kate? Do you know where I’m going with this? ‘Then you know how deep the rabbit hole goes.’ Perhaps you don’t. You look almost relieved. ‘You’ll probably have collateral PTSD, now that you truly know what I’ve went through.’

‘Yeah. I can—I can totally understand where you’re coming from. It’s just that...’

It’s hard, Kate. Hard to pretend that I’m struggling to find the words that have been well-rehearsed, words that I’ve wanted to speak for longer than I care to remember.

‘Please, Nigel, speak your mind. You have nothing to worry about from me. I know whatever you do, it’s for my best.’

I take a breath. ‘It’s just that, I found the emails you sent to the other agents. The ones where you basically ruined Elena’s chances of ever getting representation.’ I look away from you, faux shame, then I look back in earnest.

Silence again, but there’s no shame on your face. Your eyes burn into mine, hostility bubbling beneath the surface.

Do you see your career ending in front of your very eyes? I expected denial to be the first step of your grief, but by the looks of it, anger has barged its way to the front.

‘I-I think I know which emails you’re referring to. Yes.’ You close your eyes, giving you a moment to concoct a lie. You open them and snap your fingers. ‘Got it, yes. I found out Elena was using A.I. to write her novel and...’

Oh, Kate, defending yourself with amateurish lies, it’s beneath you, it really is.

Your eyes close again, and you take a deep breath through your perfect nose. We sit in the silence, then you open your eyes and now they’re softer, and I can see you’ve jumped another couple of stages of grief, straight to the finality of acceptance.

‘You’re right,’ you say, and you try to smile, but you can’t because your chin is trembling too much.

‘I’m right about what, exactly?’

I need you to say it, Kate, I need you to confess.

‘I contacted those agents. I lied to them. Told them all manners of lies, anything to get them to dump Elena Cartwright.’ Tears stream your face. ‘I did it, Nigel. I committed a cardinal sin of the literary world. I took someone’s dream and consigned it to the rubbish bin.’

It’s just as well I’m sitting down, Kate, as my legs go to jelly, hearing the words I’ve longed to hear. You burst into more tears, but you look relieved, happy almost, this has not been a shameful admission, it’s been cathartic.

Somehow, I manage to waddle over to you, dizzy on my feet, plumping myself down beside you. You lie across my lap and I stroke your hair.

You cry. 'I'm sorry. I'm just a terrible person,' you say, and I want to agree, but now is not the time to be honest about your failings. 'What happens now? I suppose you'll want to ruin me?'

Kate! How could you think such a thing? After everything we've been through? Your admission of guilt only earns you brownie points with me, proves that you trust me enough to know your darkest secret, one I could use to end your life as you know it in a heartbeat.

'I have to admit,' I say, and I allow a degree of seriousness in my voice to convey the gravity of the situation, 'I expected better of you. But, we're all human at the end of the day. We all make mistakes.' I say these words to you, but I'm also saying them to myself. 'We cross that red line of no return, and then we have to face the consequences.'

'And what will be the consequences for what I've done?'

Oh, Kate, don't you know, you're not alone? I too, have committed abominable acts that I can't take back. And though I'd love to tell you about what I've done, now is not the right time. You'll find out for yourself soon enough, though.

But there is one thing I can tell you.

'I have a confession to make, too.'

You rise from my lap, leaving a teary puddle soaking through my trousers.

I walk back over to my chair, and sit down. I pick up my mobile phone from the coffee table and place it in my pocket. Your face drops when I speak the words you never thought you'd ever hear: laughter, confusion, anger, laughter again.

You don't know whether to believe me or not.

WHAT WAS I thinking confessing all to Nigel? Was I wrong to do so? I'll tell you what I was thinking, Elena.

Nigel had cornered me with his detective work. To lie was to lose his trust. I could see that after the first attempt at a lie, a pitiful lie at that. I didn't mean to be so pathetic, but I'm not good at lying. Not really. Not when I'm expected to lie on the spot. Give me a few months and I can concoct a lie for the ages, but catch me unawares and I fall apart.

In any case, it was a waste of time lying to someone like Nigel, someone simple whom what you see is what you get. Only truth would prevail, no matter how deplorable the truth was.

It was better to confess.

Nigel would take my confession and see it for what it was: the desperate act of a woman driven to madness by the actions of a deranged stalker.

Yes, madness, an easy excuse for everything I did. *Dear Jury, I wasn't in control of all my faculties, acquit me now!*

But do you know what I didn't expect, Elena? The feeling of utter relief after confessing. All those lies over all those years finally released, my demons set free. In that moment of confession, unencumbered with thoughts of repercussions and consequences, I felt liberated.

If you allow me to be frank to a degree that might shock you, I enjoyed confessing. I get it now, I understand why serial killers want their deeds to be known even though it means they'll be caught and punished. They want everyone to know of their brilliance, and I wanted Nigel to know what I did. The sheer audacity of what I did and what—up until his revelation—I had gotten away with. To have the power to make or break a career, to crush someone's dream into a powder of nothingness.

Of course, it was all bravado, an extended moment of self-delusion. Nigel had found what I did—you, yourself, always knew what I did. I wasn't some kind of mastermind, more a person who knew that she wove a magic spell over other people to the extent they'd forgive me of all my sins.

Still, you'll forgive me the moment of whimsy, for I knew a lecture from Nigel was incoming. I deserved that at least. Be told I was despicable, a cretin beyond saving, *What were you thinking, Kate? You could've ruined your entire career in the publishing industry! You might still!*

But Nigel didn't do that. He was shocked by my confes-

sion, that much was clear by his unsteady legs and his white-as-a-sheet face.

Instead, he said he had a confession of his own, and all I could think of was, what could compare to what I've done to you, Elena? Was there anything? I could only imagine that Nigel would try to make me feel better with a ridiculous anecdote of his own.

I told Malcolm that you were too good for him, and he agreed and left forever!

'Come on, then,' I said, a tinge of playfulness in my shaky voice, 'spit it out.'

Nigel's eyes locked with mine, intense. 'I'm not who I say I am.'

'You're not—what?'

'I mean, I am Nigel Carlyle. That's my real name.' I didn't know where he was going with this, Elena, but I wished he'd hurry it up. 'What I'm trying to say is, I'm also someone else.'

'You're someone else? And who might that be?'

'I'm,' he closed his eyes, took a breath, his following words came out with his eyes still closed. 'I'm also Elena Cartwright.'

I laughed, Elena, I really did. I deserved this joke in poor taste. Nigel was sending me up, making me pay for being a liar and a cheat.

His eyes opened, and I waited for him to laugh too. But he didn't. He simply looked at me, face unmoving. Only

when he recognised the confusion on my face, did the corners of his mouth upturn, like he was enjoying this.

When I allowed feelings of anger to take over, he finally spoke.

‘I know you’re angry, Kate. But it is what it is.’

‘You’re telling me that *you’re* Elena Cartwright?’

He cleared his throat. ‘Well, as I said, I am Nigel, as you can see, but yes, my writerly name is Elena C.’

‘So, you’re saying that, you, Nigel Carlyle, are the one who’s been stalking me all these years?’

He nodded his head, Elena, and I still couldn’t bring myself to believe that he was you. It didn’t make sense. None of it did.

I had to test him somehow. Nigel couldn’t be you, he just couldn’t.

‘Tell me something only Elena and I would know.’

He scoffed. ‘Like what?’

‘You’ve read all our emails, but there was a time when Elena submitted to me before the agency accepted email submissions. Tell me something, anything, about those submissions.’

This would catch Nigel out and end this charade once and for all.

Nigel put on a voice, like he was full of beans and pretension. ‘Keep trying! I’d love to see what you come up with next!’

I was at a blank as to what it meant. ‘I don’t understand. I don’t get—’

‘Those are the words that set a man down a path that led us both to this very moment.’ I racked my brain. I couldn’t remember those words. Not that I would remember every word ever committed to page, literal or otherwise, by the charlatan that is you, Elena.

‘You’ll have to do better,’ I said, deciding to bluff and sound certain of myself. ‘I don’t remember Elena ever writing those words in any of her submissions.’

Nigel laughed, slapping his thigh. ‘You silly-willy. I didn’t write those words. You did.’

I swallowed hard. My memory was blank.

‘When I sent you my first ever submission by post, and you were Debbie’s assistant. You sent it back, left your saliva on the stamped addressed envelope, and left that wee note for me. Even drew a smiley face at the end of it. Ring a bell now?’

And this is the moment, Elena, where I believe Nigel’s confession to be true or I delude myself for another day.

‘You’re really Elena Cartwright.’

You raise your hands in the air and holler, ‘One and the same, baby!’

‘You’ve fooled me all this time.’ My head sinks into my hands. ‘You’re a—psychopath.’

‘I’d say it takes one to know one, but I think I’m more sociopathic, or so my aunt said.’ Your voice becomes a high-

pitched croak. *'You're too emotional, Nigel, acting like a bloody girl!'* Your voice returns to normal. *'Still, it's a bit ironic coming from you. I mean, what kind of literary agent goes out of her way to ruin an aspiring author's career before it's even started? Oh wait...'*

I try to swallow down the anger that threatens to boil over my head. *'Your behaviour points to psychopathy.'*

'Are you saying I'm charming and—'

'Mimicry of other people and their actions. Lack of empathy. A diminished fear response. Anyone else would be fearful of consequence, but you act without a care in the world.'

'Ooh, look at you. Kate Finlay. Literary agent. Writer. Clinical Psychologist, ha!' You lie back and close your eyes. *'Therapy. Do you charge by the hour? How about this? Childhood trauma. Sexual abuse. Environmental factors.'* You straighten in the chair and open your eyes. *'It all points to sociopathy.'*

Perhaps your aunt is right, or you've simply taken the worst traits of both disorders, but I won't debate this any longer, and I won't fall for your manipulative tactics. You want sympathy from me? I'm all out of pity.

'Whatever you are, I'm going to the police. At the very least I'll get a restraining order against you.' I get up from the chair, adrenaline forcing me to my feet. *'You won't get away with this.'* I make for the door, but your meaty hand grabs at my arm.

'You can't do that.'

'I can't? Watch me.' I shake off your hand.

'Kate, wait!' your voice booms, and I freeze, involuntarily. You really are another person to whom I thought. I turn to face you, but your face is soft, and your voice comes out barely more than a whisper. 'If you go to the police, I will ruin you. Your career will be finito. You'll probably struggle to get a job, well, anywhere. I mean, who's gonna trust you after what you did?'

Everything you say is true, but after what *you* did, all those years of Elena Cartwright, my anger overrides any feelings of self-preservation.

'Then I'll face the consequences, like I should have done all those years ago.'

'Don't be a fool, Kate, you can still be the superstar you are. Don't throw it all away.'

I snort. 'I threw it all away the day I replied to your first submission.'

'That was merely the beginning, but this doesn't have to be the end. Think about it. What can the police actually do? I really am Nigel Carlyle. You hired me as such. So what if I submitted manuscripts for years on end, using a pseudonym? Isn't that the eternal struggle of any writer? Name one thing I did that was against the law. One thing!'

You've got me there, Nigel. In all the years you've stalked me, you've not actually committed a crime, have you?

You've done nothing illegal, nothing that can be proven. You've simply taken me for a fool, but that's not a crime.

'Even J.K. pretended to be a man. Twice! The first time to sell more books, the second time she realised that being a man sold fuck all!'

'There was a conflict of interest. You didn't tell me you were also Elena Cartwright.'

'No duh! Would you have hired me if you knew I was a failed writer who you'd rejected hundreds of times? I was embarrassed.' You smile, mischievous. 'At least, that's what I would say, should anyone ask. I think most normal people would understand where I'm coming from.'

'Even if that was the case, you kept up the Elena charade after joining the agency. Sending me submissions that you would then reject on my behalf.'

'But, since I started working with you, Elena hasn't sent a single manuscript under that name.'

'But you said—'

'And I'll deny ever saying it. I'm sorry you believed me. I didn't want to lie. But I also wanted you to value me, and I could see that you were always happy when I told you I stopped Elena getting near you. Come on, Kate, I wasn't gonna write new novels just to reject myself, was I?'

Your words make sense, but then I have to accept that the Elena in you has quit her life-long dream.

'So what, you expect me to believe you quit writing? Excepting whatever that is on the table.'

‘Oh, not at all. I passed you a few of my submissions and you did reject me. Just that it was under other names.’ How much time did I waste reading submissions from different versions of you? How did I not notice your tells? ‘I had to try. I mean, maybe you just didn’t want Elena to be published, but if the writing was good enough, you’d give someone else a try.’ You sigh. ‘Seems I just wasn’t good enough at the end of the day, no matter what name I used, no matter what style of writing I chose to employ.’

I stumble along the hallway to my front door, you following behind. My chest is tight, throat constricted. I open the door, I need to get out of here.

‘Why the fuck am I leaving? This is my home.’ I’m furious, struggling to compose myself. ‘Get the fuck out!’

Any normal person would be startled by my display of aggression, but you’re not. You’re as calm as they come, and you walk past me with the cheekiest of smirks, stopping at the doorway.

‘Don’t do anything, rash, Kate. If I go down, we both go down. There’s no winners in this game, believe it.’

‘Get out!’ I slam the door behind you.

I’ve barely slumped onto my sofa, when your text comes through, my mobile ringtone startling me.

I’ll see you at work tomorz. Nothing needs to change. I forgive you. I luv you. x

Everything has changed, Nigel, but according to you, nothing has.

Another text comes through.

Don't forget to read my manuscript. I insist. x

I pick up your printed manuscript, a thick-enough tome at three-hundred-and-eighty-two pages. The cover page reads: Catfish by—*yet another pseudonym?*

The title is slap in the face, a middle finger from you, throwing your deceit at me. No wonder you don't want to put your real name to this garbage.

Why couldn't you give me a synopsis, save me the bother of reading it all? But it's my fault. It was me who refused the suggestion of a synopsis. It was me who demanded to read it blind.

But that was before your confession. Before you admitted to being Elena Cartwright. I should insist on a synopsis now, but I'm in no position to dictate terms of engagement.

I read the first ten pages, and I have the sneaking suspicion this fictional tale has more than an element of autobiography to it. How else to explain the fact the first chapter is a behind the scenes look at your infamous *We should be together too!* email?

Is this email merely the starting point, the inspiration for the fiction that will follow? Or will you intersperse fact with fiction, a hybrid of truth and fantasy, where I will not really know what to believe?

Or is this as simple as it looks? I text you, though I really shouldn't engage.

What is this book? Some kind of confessional?

Your soul bared on paper, your lies, your deceit, your wrongdoings written for all to see. I don't write this, but it stands to reason.

Your reply chimes.

Keep reading. You'll see. x

How vague, how ominous.

I read on, now realising I don't need a synopsis to know what's coming. The hours pass and the midpoint twist is mere confirmation of what a fool I am, how you took advantage of me, abused my trust like no other. I continue through the chapters, feeling pity and disgust for the character based on me, the character who still cannot see you for who you really are.

When my eyes falter with tiredness, your story shakes the life out of me with confessions to heinous acts relating to Poe and Malcolm's disappearance, with my husband's being particularly abhorrent. There's even an ambiguous explanation for Lorraine retreating from the online world. I can't sleep now, I must reach the end. What have you done, Nigel, what have you really done? I should go to the police, but all I have is a work of fiction that's crossed a line of human decency, using my very real tragedies to flesh out your book.

Your, alleged, protagonist cuts off Malcolm's hand, having punctured his tyres with a nail gun. I know it must be inspired, because what was left of one of Malcolm's tyres had been damaged prior to the fire, and the police asked me

if I knew when that happened, and I didn't know if Malcolm had kept something from me, or thought it not worth telling me, and I told you about it, because, sad as it is, you were the only friend I could trust, *or so I thought*.

Finally, with daylight creeping through the top of my curtains, I get to the end, a part of the story that must be complete fiction, based on nothing but your own fantastical mind, for it is the only part that hasn't happened yet and isn't inspired by anything that's happened yet. A part of the story I have some agency over. Is the end really written if it hasn't been workshopped, beta-read, revised and polished?

Your ending is anticlimactic and wishful thinking, Nigel. There's no version of our story that concludes with a happy ending, you must know that by now. The boy does not get the girl, he does not get the publishing contract, he does not get to live the rest of his life in contentment and peace, he does not get to switch off his conscience and forget about all the terrible things he has done.

Seriously, you want the reader to swallow this? The antagonist—and yes, I am the bad guy—reads your book, accepts your confessions at face value, and accepts you as her soul mate? *Friends till the end, hi-di-ho, ha ha ha?*

The ending doesn't work, Nigel, and if it's the last thing I do, I'll help you write a better one.

An ending befitting the consequences you must face for everything you've done.

NIGEL

I GET HOME and put my feet up. My nerves are shook, and only little Poe climbing up and snuggling into me, can calm me down.

But it's not nerves of worry, Kate, it's nerves of pure elation.

Looking back, our little confrontation went better than I thought. It's difficult to be honest, Kate, it really is. Especially with those you love and care about, at the very least, respect. How many people in life bare their souls with friendship left intact?

So many people would rather ghost their friends and lovers, than confess to a secret that will turn their worlds upside-down. But we're not like that, are we? We face challenges head on, we treat honesty as a tool for good.

You confessed, Kate, you really did it. Had I not recorded your confession on my phone, well, I might've

wondered if I had suffered from some kind of hallucination. I thought about pressing record and putting my phone in my pocket, but there was the chance all I'd hear was the ruffling of my own trousers creaking at the seams.

There was no need. You're so obvious. Only you could fuck your man while his phone was connected to another caller, oblivious to it all.

I opened a voice memo, taking the precaution of turning off my ringer, and pressed the red record button. Turning off my phone's screen, I placed my phone between us, on top of my manuscript on your coffee table, for better audio clarity, and you thought nothing of it, too entrenched in your need for self-flagellation.

I'll listen to your sweet voice say those words, vindicating Elena's struggle and admitting the ruination of her career, and a better bedtime orgasm there won't be!

You might wonder why I needed you to confess, when I already had the emails? Well, emails can be doctored, can't they. You've already deleted your own, and an online witch-hunt is not the same as a criminal investigation, no one's going to demand proof of the original emails from Gmail. *They could ask, but they'll never get.*

But your voice, clear as day, well, that's more difficult to deny.

Shamefully, I did turn off my phone before admitting my own confession, and I regret not being able to listen to your reaction to it, the rage in your voice, how it shook when

you spat out your words with venom like you were a cobra attacking my mongoose, *you picked the wrong enemy there, Kate*. I'll rely on my memory alone to replay that event, though memory is prone to falter and mutate as time goes on. I remember your front door slamming as I left, but did you do that, or did I? Already I'm forgetting. I should write it down one day, but it won't be verbatim, it'll be my version of what happened. A bit like my latest novel, really.

I sent you a text, imploring you to read my novel. You sent one back not long after, and I wanted to stay awake in case you had any other questions.

But I'm all out of adrenaline, my eyes fight to stay open, and I crash out, hoping to find you in my dreams.



A TEXT WAKES me at 05:06am. It's from you.

Your book is brilliant. We'll talk in work.

You spent the entire night reading my novel. It's like my ultimate fantasy fulfilled, my dream coming true. One day, you'll be on X telling people how you were so engrossed in my story, you had to read it immediately, unforgiving of time and sleep.

Although I've had less sleep than I'd like, I come into work feeling fresh as a daisy, practically skipping into reception like I'm Walter the Softy from the *Beano*.

When you come into work late, it's quite the opposite.

You're a shattered version of yourself, a broken horse ready for the knacker's yard. Bags under your pretty eyes, hair unkempt. *Holy fucking shit, you really did stay up all night reading my novel!*

You look like shit, I want to say, but instead, 'Are you okay? You look like you didn't sleep much.'

'That's because I didn't.'

That's all you say. You don't add context, like, *I was too excited reading your masterpiece*. Your face doesn't show the excitement written in the text you sent me only four hours ago. As always, what's going through that mind of yours?

Finally, you open up. 'Don't mind me. I can't remember the last time I had a manuscript that—kept me so engrossed. I'm so tired.'

Fuck yes, Kate, that's what I'm talking about! I'll forgive you for the little white lie, though. I mean, it wasn't all that long ago you did an all-nighter reading a prospective new client's novel, was it? And I remember you dancing into work like the second coming of Michael Flatley, a lack of sleep barely afflicting you, grabbing a coffee and powering through the day powered by caffeine and genuine excitement for the future.

But I admit, as exciting as my novel is, it must've put you through the emotional wringer. It would have affected you personally, in a way that the other bitch never could, hers being superficial and merely a means to a financial end. My

novel would have tore you apart and stitched you back together.

‘Coffee?’ I say.

You hesitate and then say, ‘No thanks.’

‘You don’t trust me to make you coffee?’

‘I know now, you would never do anything, to me.’

That little pause before ‘to me’, what are you trying to say, Kate? Oh wait, you read my novel, I know exactly what you’re saying.

I pull out the milk, because I can only drink coffee with milk and two sugars, but I know you drink yours with nothing, black as coal, and I put the milk back and I don’t bother with the sugar.

I hate being petty but needs must.

I’ll sup on your perfect coffee and you can watch me enjoy it.

KATE

YOU ACT like nothing has been said between us, nothing that would change the entire fabric of our working relationship, and dare I say it, friendship.

Is it better this way? I should be relieved. I now know the person behind the Elena Cartwright persona, an unknown quantity which almost drove me crazy. The not knowing is the worst part, isn't it? Because my imagination of whom Elena Cartwright really was, was infinitely worse than the reality.

Nigel Carlyle, as I know you, is a pleasure to work with, and setting aside the lie that *you* were protecting me against a stalker, you have been the consummate professional in work. There's not a bad word to say about you, even Tom hasn't any dirt. Had you not confessed, I'd have happily worked with you until retirement.

But how can I work with you now? Knowing what I

know? Knowing what you've done to me for the past twenty years? Knowing what you've allegedly done as written in your novel?

Is it sick that somewhere, deep inside me, I crave your attention? Is it despicable, that I actually feel a sense of narcissistic pride knowing that I'm amazing enough to have someone go to the lengths you've gone to? I know this is unhealthy, yet the dark side of me enjoys it. No man has ever shown a tenth of your devotion, and in a way, I should be flattered, *and I am*.

I refused your offer of coffee, even though I really could use one, and now you're slurping on yours with exaggerated enjoyment, like it's the last cup of coffee in existence. I know you hate coffee black, and I try to not laugh, smile, anything.

'So, eh, you read my novel?' Before I can reply, you continue. 'I can't believe you think it's brilliant. Your words, Kate. But listen, time's of the essence. We need to get on the edits. I know you can make my novel infinitely better. I didn't write that in my cover letters to blow smoke up your arse!'

I shake my head. 'I can't make it better, I—'

'You already have, though, haven't you. You inspired it. It wouldn't exist without you. And let's not forget, the last time you did edits with me, I had full manuscript requests popping out of my ears and an offer of representation.'

It annoys you that I ruined your dream. It's a small victory, but I'll take it, and for the first time, my shame

subsides, the feeling of getting one over you infinitely more appealing in the moment.

‘There are a few points in the novel I’d like to discuss.’

Your left eyebrow rises in curiosity. ‘Such as?’

I’ve thought all night how to broach the subject. To be direct or meander my way to the point? I think we’re past meandering. ‘Did you really take my dog?’

You don’t flinch, nor blink, and I’m caught in two minds. A guilty person would flinch, my question coming out of the blue, catching you off guard. But then again, an innocent person might flinch for the same reasons. It’s not a fair question to ask anyone, to throw this terrible accusation at them like a rag soaked in urine. But you don’t flinch at all, because you wrote it in your novel, a novel you happily shared with me. You expected this question to come.

‘I would say I’m offended at the suggestion, but considering we both dropped some major truth bombs last night, I don’t blame you for asking.’ You’re being too reasonable, Nigel, which can only mean you’re full of shit. ‘All I can say is, I’d never hurt you intentionally.’

‘That doesn’t answer my question.’

‘Fine,’ you turn to look at me, eyes unblinking. Once again, I wonder if you’re about to tell the truth or if you’re simply a fantastic liar. ‘I didn’t take your dog.’

‘But in the book—’

‘It’s fictional!’ You slap my arm, your face smiling, but the slap is anything but playful. ‘Come on, Kate. I know

they say write about what you know, but I'm just working on inspiration. Someone took your dog, still has him, still sending you photos of him. It's terrible, it really is. You might never find the answers, but at least, in my novel, I'm trying to give you some closure.'

I scoff. 'You're trying to help me?'

'Yes, exactly. I'm—'

'By confessing to stealing my dog in your novel, but you haven't actually stolen my dog?'

You pause, and your smile falters. 'I'm not confessing to anything. It's the character in the novel who stole your dog. The *fictional* character? I can't believe I have to explain this to you, of all people.'

'There was so much truth in your novel, I don't know where the lies begin and end.'

'Look, I just thought you needed closure on a few things, is all. Even if it's not real, you can accept it as real, if you catch my drift.'

You're ludicrous, Nigel, you really are. Even if I take you at your word, you haven't provided closure at all. 'Actually, a point I wanted to make was that there's too many loose ends. The dog is taken, but we never find out what happened to him. It's—unsatisfying.'

'Look, I don't want to spell it out to the reader. Not every story has an end wrapped up in a perfect bow tie. A little ambiguity goes a long way.'

‘But readers will care about the dog, they’ll want to know what happened to him.’

You sigh, letting it linger. ‘Fine, I’ll think of something. I suppose he can have a happy ending too.’

‘Speaking of which, I don’t think this novel can end so happily. It’s—ludicrous.’ Your eyes bulge, your mouth slack. ‘After everything that’s happened, there’s no way the main character gets what he wants.’ I continue in this vein, tearing your manuscript to shreds. You want me to make it better, then please, allow me to do so. I watch with utter glee as your chin trembles, your face flushes. I finally see in person what it was like for you to read my revise and resubmit. You don’t like criticism, do you? This is the part you always dread. ‘Lastly, I’m not sure the title will work. *Catfish*. It’s good, but there’s been a few books recently with the same title. It might make it difficult to stand out with the publishers.’

I end there and we stand in silence while you think of a retort. It takes longer than I expected.

‘A new title, eh? Hmm, how about,’ your hands fan out, like jazz hands, ‘*I’m A Gullible Idiot*, an autobiography by Kate Finlay.’ Oh, you’re really showing your true colours now, Nigel. Well, if that’s how you want to play it...

‘I have a better one.’ You cock your head, a smirk forming. I enact quote gestures with my fingers. ‘*How to Write a Novel and Never Get Published In This Lifetime*, a self-help book by Nigel Carlyle.’

Your eyes open wide, the smirk disappears. Your knuckles whiten around your coffee cup. *Do it, hit me, give me something I can use to have you locked up.*

You finally snort. And snort again, followed by raucous laughter.

‘Touché, matey! What are we like, eh? Only besties could take the utter piss out of each other like we do!’

You guzzle the last of your coffee and begin to walk away, leaving me utterly deflated and defeated.

‘What happened to Malcolm?’ I say, desperate, tears streaming down my tired face.

You stop at the doorway, only turning your head and shoulders, smile reaching both sides of your face, all the way to your eyes.

‘Maybe we do need to rewrite that happy ending.’

NIGEL

THIS MORNING, oh, what a rush, Kate.

You had some tough questions for me, no doubt, but I was more than prepared.

You were right, the original ending doesn't work. It's too clean cut, too wishful thinking. Of course the boy doesn't get the girl, not with all those loose ends.

It needs to be brutal, less clear cut. A shocking end that will have the reader disbelieving of what they thought they knew.

But not a cheap ending, no. It has to have some basis in reality, feed-in to what the reader has been promised. No *deus ex machina*.

Think, Kate, this time next year, we'll be celebrating my book deal. What a story, from aspiring author to literary agent assistant to worldwide bestselling author. This will put

me on the map, and you'll be beside me all the way. I smell a Literary Agent of the Year award, I really do.

All you have to do is fight your instinctual need to reject me. Accept me, accept us, and the skies will be the limit.

Now that we're honest with each other, nothing and nobody, can stand in our way.

Mind you, you fairly had me going when you asked about Poe, no amount of practice compares with the real thing, and my best line of defence was to lie with an element of truth. *I didn't take your dog*, were the words that left my mouth, but the words that accompanied them in my head were, *he willingly came to me and my treat*.

You swallowed whole the undeniable truth that it couldn't possibly be me sending you the photos, not when they occasionally arrived in your phone with me sitting across from you.

You asked about Malcolm, but there was less conviction in your voice, unsure what it was you were actually accusing me of. A dog goes missing, you had good reason to believe him taken. A man goes missing, and, well, there were already plenty of theories out there.

What seemed more unbelievable? Him letting me suck him off as relayed in my manuscript, or me being capable of mutilation?

It's lunchtime now and you look dead on your feet, like you could do with a little siesta. Your brain is slowing down. There's probably not a better time to nail down my alibi.

As we do every day, we sit at a small, table, sitting across from each other in confrontation, but really it simply allows us to look at each other while we eat. You're looking at your phone, scrolling through the submissions I sent you this morning, the ones I deemed good enough for your attention.

I do what I do every day. I read the news, and tell you highlights at intermittent moments.

Did you see what they've done to those poor Gazans?

I'd never go abroad to get turkey teeth.

Starmer's cars have been attacked by Ukrainian rent boys!

You sometimes laugh, you occasionally comment, you rarely look up from your own phone, mostly content to treat my voice like elevator music.

I read an entire article and commit it to memory. If you ask me about it, I can tell you anything without actually looking at the page. I start telling you about it while I load up the new Instagram profile I created this morning. You're content to hear, but not really listen, too concentrated on a potential hit from the slush pile, no doubt the one from the queer writer who is disabled.

I take a photo from my hidden folder, Poe with a bone in his mouth. *It's not human, don't worry.* I find your profile. I go to the message tab, and I'm only half-way talking through my highlights. I load up the photo and the anticipation is killing me.

Usually, I'll send you the photo, wait for the ping from

your phone, and keep talking, while watching your face transform. It's quite the thing to behold.

I press send. Your phone pings a second later.

You jump from your chair, startling me.

'Show me your phone!' you demand. 'Show it to me, now!'

KATE

I'VE CAUGHT YOU, you fucking bastard!

You've frozen, you didn't expect me to react so quickly, or react at all. Your eyes are saucers, you're nothing but a gluttonous piggy with his snout caught in the trough.

'Hand it over, let me see what you're doing.'

'Kate, what is—I'm reading—'

'Don't bullshit me!'

Your thumb creeps to the screen.

'Don't fucking touch it.' I lean over the table and point an accusing finger at you. 'I know it's you sending the photos.'

You swallow down hard. 'What photos?'

'The photos of Poe! Hand me your phone. Prove me right.'

'And—what if you're wrong?'

‘If I’m wrong I’ll apologise. It’s that simple. There’s no harm—’

‘There’s every harm!’ Your voice booms, and I pull back my hand. ‘If I show you this phone, and prove that I have nothing to do with your paranoid delusions, sure, you can say sorry. But the trust will be broken between us.’

‘Trust?’ I laugh, an incredulous cackle. ‘You want to talk about tru—’

The lunchroom door opens, only wide enough for Tom to peer around it.

‘Is everything alright? I, uh, heard a commotion.’

‘I-I—’

‘Everything’s fine,’ you say, and you place your phone on the table, the screen dark. ‘Just a friendly disagreement.’ You look at me with your smirking face. ‘Wasn’t it, Kate?’ You tap the screen of your phone, and it lights up, showing it’s locked. *Shit!*

‘Are you sure?’ Tom looks to me, eyes curious.

‘It’s fine.’ My cheeks are hot, eyes wild. He must think I’m a madwoman. ‘Can we have privacy, please?’

He puts up a hand in mock surrender. ‘Sorry for caring.’ His head retreats behind the door, pulling the door with him, and I hear him mutter, ‘Everyone’s on their bloody period today.’

The door clicks shut and you drop the pretence.

‘What a prick.’ You get off your chair, pocketing your phone, and down the rest of your black coffee, grimacing as

you do. 'And I don't know how you drink coffee like this. Fucking disgusting.'

You walk out, leaving the door wide open. I clench my hands, digging my nails into my own palms, and I suppress a scream that would wake up my ancestors.



THE AFTERNOON GOES by without incident. We barely talk. It's probably the quietest we've been with each other in all your time working here.

All the submissions you filtered through to me this morning end up with rejections. I let you do the honours. I offer feedback for one that genuinely did pique my interest. You send her a form rejection instead, misspelling her name, and as I care about my reputation, I want to scold you, but I won't give you the satisfaction. *Pride before a fall.*

A courier drops off a box of books, and you dump it on my desk, that is, you drop it from height and give me a bloody fright.

'Sorry. Butterfingers.' Your apology is anything but sincere. I don't reply.

I pick up a silver packing knife, sliding it into the seams of the box. When I see the contents, I smile, and I allow excitement and joy to fill my voice. 'It's Sarah Barrett's advance reader copies for book two.'

You frown, and I imagine you seething inside, acid reflux

building up inside, your reddening, seething face a clear giveaway.

'You guys kissed and made up yet?' Tom hovers at the doorway, always first one ready to leave the office. I don't rise to the bait, and you're not in the mood to either. 'Okay, I guess not. Bye, then.'

'Bye,' I say, just to be polite. You don't bother.

You lean back in your chair, arms reaching for the ceiling, yawning and stretching like a human-sized cat.

'Time to go home,' you say, and you get off your seat. 'Been a busy day.' I say nothing. 'You look like you'll collapse on the sofa when you get home. Do you want me to come with, make sure you get home okay?'

You won't stop talking unless I reply, will you?

'I'm fine,' I lie. 'I want to catch up with some emails. I need to catch up with Sarah.' You flinch when I say her name. *Good!*

You look at the box on my desk, the box containing arcs of Sarah's novel. Your eyes are envious. I know this now. I pull out a book.

'It's a gorgeous cover, isn't it?'

You roll your eyes. 'Can't you email her at home?'

'I'd prefer to leave work in the workplace for one night.'

'Fair enough,' you say, though your face shows your displeasure. You stand there, like a statue.

'Anything else?'

You sigh. 'I suppose I'll head off then.'

‘I’ll get you out.’ I’m not being courteous and you know it. ‘I’ll lock the door behind you.’

What will happen when I finally go home? Will you follow me on the bus? Will you hang outside my front door, or creep through the woods to my back garden? Your book has told me all the things you’ve done, and I’d be wise to assume you’ll keep on doing them. *When people tell you who they are, you’d be wise to believe them.*

‘I suppose I’ll see you tomorrow?’

I nod in silence.

‘Don’t let this change things, Kate. Nothing has to change.’

You walk out of the office, and I lock the door behind you. It’s dark out, drizzling rain forming puddles where the reflection of streetlights illuminate the ground. I turn off the reception lights, enclosing myself in darkness, and watch as you disappear around the corner. I shut the blinds in reception, and I stand there, peering through a slit. A minute passes. Another. Another. Am I being too paranoid? Another. Ano—

You appear on the other side of the street. I can’t fucking believe it, though having read your manuscript, it shouldn’t come as a surprise at all. You’re creeping. Looking over to the office. *Can you see me?* You come out of the shadows like a rat who fears the open light. *You can’t see me.*

Your pace quickens, you look at the windows you pass on your side of the street. You’re still looking at our office in

the reflection, I know it. You go into the cafe, the one called Chilli Beans, the one I've always wanted to try, but you always told me they support state-sponsored genocide. When I suggested it was Starbucks doing that, you said it didn't matter, because Chilli Beans used unsustainable beans, farmed by slaves who were paid one-dollar a week, and I gave up trying to persuade you otherwise.

You're quick at the counter, like you already know what to buy because you've been there many times before. You plump your rear end on a seat beside the window, your neck craning to look back in the direction of our office. The cafe is lit-up inside, and you have to press your face against the glass to see past your own reflection.

No doubt you're looking at my office window, opaque as it is with blinds, the only room lit up in an otherwise empty literary agency. True of the novel you wrote, you're stalking me. You're actually stalking me!

I back away from the reception blinds. *What to do now?*

I think about phoning the police, tell them about your manuscript. But what could I say?

He's stalking me as we speak. Oh, and in his book he confesses to nabbing my dog, and drugging my husband and cutting off his hand, which he left in a forest over one-hundred miles away.

And the policeman, what might he say in return, how would our conversation go?

Where is the rest of your husband now?

I don't know.

Doesn't it say in the book?

He's saving it for the sequel!

It's ludicrous, it's all too ludicrous.

There's only one thing I can do. I must tumble down your rabbit hole to see how deep it goes. I return to my desk and pull up your details. I enter your home address in Google.

All this time I've had the knowledge, I just didn't know how to use it, or even know I should use it for anything untoward. Maybe your novel is right. The character who would be me, is self-absorbed, full of her own shit. How else to explain the fact I've known you as a workmate, a friend, had you stay over in my own home, *kissed you*, yet not once have I ever been interested in you enough to look up where you live.

We've talked about your commute, I've had a rough idea of the area you live, we've casually chatted about me visiting you one day, and I've known your address since the day you joined us at the agency, yet, not once was I interested enough to take a look.

Only when you plastered your address on the cover page of *Catfish*, did I finally take note.

You live semi-rurally, in a cottage that was sold many years ago. There's no advertisement photos but I know it's a cottage, because it's called Rowan Cottage. On Google Maps, the Street View only goes to the nearest main road,

nowhere near your home. On the satellite images, I see your home beside a smaller one, or perhaps it's an outbuilding, but there's nothing else in the vicinity, apart from one very long driveway leading to a longer road country road, and countless fields.

On Google search, there's nothing of note. No newspaper articles speaking of criminality from a Nigel Carlyle at your address or general area. Old articles report on a Nigel Carlyle, whom went missing over twenty years ago, but that's from the other end of the country, and photos of that Nigel are certainly not you.

I look at an online Electoral Roll, paying for just enough credits to read the entries for your home address.

Two people have lived there in recent years, purportedly living there now. Neither of them share your name.

The first name sends a shiver down my spine, the infamous Elena Cartwright. *So, she's real to an extent?* The other is unfamiliar to me. For a moment, I wonder if you've been lying about Nigel Carlyle being your real name. Perhaps that is another non de plume?

But I search the name Elena Cartwright alongside the other name residing at your home. Google provides nothing of note. I log into my local library's online resources, checking the online newspapers that are stored for posterity and which are not always cached by Google. I finally get a hit. An article from a newspaper, written almost thirty years ago.

When I click on the article, about a local fundraiser that happened almost thirty years ago, a photo loads showing an older woman on the left with a teenage boy on the right, a boy who looks very much like a younger version of you. The photo is captioned with their names, **L-R Elena Cartwright and her nephew—**

A name that matches the pen name on your latest manuscript.

Which means, Elena Cartwright is your aunt, but you're not Nigel Carlyle.

You're someone else completely.

NIGEL

THERE'S SOMETHING NOT RIGHT, Kate, not right with us. Truth has set us free, but it's also become a wedge, creating more space between us than even Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet* would feel comfortable with. I feel it, the distance that wasn't there before. You're withdrawing from me, where once you'd cling to me like an emotional support manifested in flesh.

I've been waiting a whole hour for you to leave the office, putting on the pounds at Chilli Beans. It's been more than a while since I was last in here, the same barista narrowing her eyes when she saw me, and shaking her head at the *deja-vu*-ness of it all. *That's right, bitch, I'm not who you think I am.*

I check your social media with an obsession. You take a photo of the box containing @SarahtheBookieworm's arcs, promising a cover reveal. She comments, her words the equivalent of a pig squealing. I want to retch, but this cake is

just too good, and I'm glad this place stays open later because you're taking your time leaving the office, and I'm in two minds about what I'll do, come the need to pee. Either I hold it in, or I take my chances, and you might leave the office whilst I'm in the loo.

Not to mention, someone might try to nick my seat. Honestly, people think a half-eaten cake has been left there by someone who has already vacated the premises, when I would never leave a crumb. I'll leave my jacket, take my bag with me, I don't have my laptop on me, and if I had, I certainly wouldn't ask someone to watch it for me. *You can't trust people these days.*

It's not like before, Kate, I'm not gonna follow you all the way home. I just want to see you off, make sure you get on the bus okay. As soon as I know you're on the right bus that goes in the general direction of your home, I'll be happy. I can ride the underground in relative peace and tranquility, and because it's the colder months, it doesn't stink as much. Then I'll get the train, and then a taxi with those useless bastards, because they're the only guys in town and they won't even drop me off at the door. *Fuck 'em.*

A car pulls up outside the agency. Doesn't he know you can't park there? He puts on his hazard lights. He's waiting for someone, maybe someone from the office adjacent ours?

Except, the front door to reception opens, and you lock it, and you hop into the strange car with the strange man. He leans over and fiddles with some kind of sat nav. He's a

taxi driver? A private taxi. Maybe one of those you can call with an app from your phone. But where is he taking you?

The car pulls away, and I drop my plate onto the table with a clang, and run out of the cafe. I look around, because usually in films, when the object of your affection is getting away, a yellow taxi pulls up, and you tell the driver to follow that car, and he's speechless, looking at you like you're an idiot, and you thrust a hundred dollar bill in his mouth and say, *Shut the fuck up and take my money!*

But this is London, and the taxis are black, and there's not one in sight, and I think about robbing someone of their bike because robbery has been normalised in this city, but I don't think I have the puff to keep up with you, even if it's power-assisted with electricity.

Your car turns the corner and I realise I've lost you. I'm in full panic mode when my phone alerts me to a new social media post.

From you.

KATE

I KEPT CHECKING ON YOU, every ten minutes, seeing if you'd really stay in that cafe until I left. This time I watched you through the blinds of Tom's unlit office, which offered a better vantage point than reception.

You were waiting for me. As soon as I said I wasn't going home at the usual time, you just had to know where I was going, couldn't bear the unknowing. How does it feel, experiencing this small taste of my life ever since Poe and Malcolm disappeared?

I had intended on going home, perhaps send you some ridiculous revisions to keep you busy while I worked out what to do. And then I found your latest deceit, your fake name, and now, the plan has changed.

Where I'm going is for me to know, and you'll only find out what I want you to know.

I place your manuscript in my bag, and pocket the silver packing knife. I don't go home, allowing social media to confess my alibi. 'Off to see my dearest mother! *#happy-birthdaymum!*

Hook!

I pray that it works. You know my mother lives an hour away on the other side of London's outskirts. A taxi ride and a train. That on its own, is not enough. You might actually believe it. Content to allow me to visit my own mother without you following me all the way there.

I can't have that. Hence the sarcasm, hence the hashtag. You of all people, you who knows everything little detail about me, knows I'm never gushing about my mother, in public or private. Pertinently, because I have to smash this detail over your head, you know that it's not my mother's birthday. Not for another seven months.

What will go through that devious head of yours? Confusion? Wondering if I've gone senile? Will suspicion creep into your mind, knowing that I'm full of shit? I hope so. I pray it does. I need you to be you. You won't pass up this opportunity.

You're first to comment, though gracefully you don't say, *First!*

I thought your mother's birthday was in June?

Line!

I don't reply immediately. I let the machinations of

treachery roll around in your mind, until you come to the inevitable conclusion that you don't trust what I've posted. That the only way to know for sure, is to take a journey to my mother's house and see for yourself. I've checked Google Maps, from the agency to my mother's, from my mother's to where I'm going, buys me around three hours, give or take, owing to traffic and bus/taxi/train reliability and availability.

Plenty of time to see for myself, to peek behind the curtain of what you call your life.

But I have second thoughts. This plan only works if you do what I hope you'll do, but life is rarely so convenient. *Be proactive, not passive.*

I reply to your comment, and then I send a text to your phone. You read it almost immediately.

Ellipses appear as you write a reply, all the while my taxi speeds away from you, on its way to the train station.

The ellipsis disappear but no text is forthcoming. Hesitant are you? Or have you deleted your impulsive reply, opting to think rather than charge ahead? Whatever the reason, I pray that you're the devoted friend you profess to be. You wouldn't abandon me at my time of need, would you?

It takes a full minute before the ellipsis reappears, and your text arrives, confirming you'd never abandon me.

Sinker.

A few minutes later, another text from you, this time

giving me your estimated time of arrival and that works perfect for me.

As I board my train, know this: you'll be travelling in the opposite direction I will, because I'll be going to a place I've never been before.

Your home.

YOU'RE the worst liar ever, Kate. Really, I thought it a compulsive need with you. I could respect, even appreciate, a pathological liar. At least they have a reason for every lie, a lie committed to further their plan.

But you...

Any normal person wanting to visit their mother would just do it. They wouldn't announce it on social media, and they certainly wouldn't create a lie about it being their mother's birthday when that's patently not true.

And I called you out on it, and you said you'd DM me, but you deleted the entire post and text me instead, and I know what it was now, it was a cry for help. You wanted to know who your true friends were, who would notice that something was inherently wrong with your birthday post.

I was your knight in shining armour, the only person to see beyond your bullshit.

It's working, isn't it? This whole truth thing. That's why, in your moment of need, you text me. You were barely in that cab when the first text came through.

I need your help. My mother's having a breakdown.

When the chips are down, I'm the only person you can come to. I typed my reply, ready to hit send, **Bring your taxi back round and I'll come with! x**

I stopped myself just in time. Sure, there was no law against me going into Chilli Beans after work, staying there long enough to see you leave and get in your cab. But, well, you'd read my manuscript, *Catfish*, knew what I'd done in Chilli Beans previously. You wouldn't believe that I wasn't there stalking you again.

I deleted my draft message and typed up a more plausible answer.

It'll take me a while to get there from my house, but I won't let you down. x

I'd have to time this right, Kate. Thankfully, going from my home to your mother's home took longer than going there from our office, what with us staying at opposite ends of outer London. All I'd have to do was wait for a later train.

Once I worked out the best train to take, I sent you my time of arrival, just to confirm that I really was where I said I was. It was, as you like to say, overkill, and call me a cynic, but had this been the other way around, and me asking you to come to my aunt's home, I would've checked that your time of arrival matched up to where you said you left from.

I tested you all the same.

What time are you getting there? x

Your reply was non-committal, and very suspicious.

I'm already on the way.

I replied: **That's not what I asked. x**

You didn't reply immediately, nor were there any abortive ellipsis, and that was fine for now, because I was walking to the train station to waste time.

I'm taking the quarter-past train, so probably there in an hour?

I checked the National Rail website. The train *was* due at quarter-past. Fair enough, Kate, you'll forgive me for a bit of paranoia.

I'm sweating like a bastard when I finally reach the train station. I stand outside, there's more time to burn.

Strange men, speaking strange languages, walk past and look me up and down. I don't know what the problem is with these cunts, but I can't wait to get on the train and get out of here.

I phone you because I'm feeling vulnerable here, but you don't pick up, and I become more irritable than vulnerable.

I enter the station and just my luck, the train I've waited for, the later one that makes my time of arrival more realistic, is delayed.

Well, there's no harm in arriving later than I should.

I text you to update, but you don't reply. The text is

undelivered, so I suppose there's no signal on the train, happens to me all the time.

By the time I get on my train, you'll be getting off yours. Then you can reply.

You'll have no excuse not to.

KATE

YOU TRIED to trip me up, asking what time I'd arrive at my mother's home. Were you suspicious of the time it took to reply? My signal was poor on the train, taking forever to load up the departures page. I chose the quarter-past train, because the previous one left before I even got in my taxi. I just hoped you wouldn't get to the station before the quarter-past train was due to leave, and if it wasn't busy, you'd notice I was nowhere to be seen, least of all boarding that particular train.

But I didn't think you would want to risk being seen yourself, not when you confirmed you were at home when you text me.

On the train, you tried to call me. I wanted to pick it up, indulge in some acting myself; a shaky voice, feigning concern for my poor, old mother.

But the train came into a stop, announcing the name of

a station you'd realise was not on the itinerary of the train you believed me to be on. This is how highly I think of you, that I believe you to be knowledgeable of all things like some kind of omnipotent deity, or at the very least, someone whose paranoia knows no limits.

So, I let it ring out.

Then I really did lose signal, and my phone only alerted me to your latest text when I got off the train. Your train was delayed, you said, you'd arrive at my mother's later than anticipated, and that absolutely worked for me.

I replied to your text.

Sorry, no signal on the train. Just come as quick as you can.

The text was undelivered and I knew you were on your train, suffering with your own signal issues.

I hopped in another taxi and gave the driver your home address.



THE TAXI PULLS UP at a gate. It's been quite a trek getting here. How do you manage it every day, along with stalking me?

'That road is impassable, sorry, chick,' says the driver, an Indian man with a thick English accent, 'I always have to tell him that.'

'Tell him? You mean—'

‘The mad man who stays there. You’re not related are ya?’ I shake my head. ‘Thank god for that. Who are ya then? A social worker? Needs his head checked, that one.’

He’s talking about you, but it’s like he’s talking about another person. The you I know in work is impeccable, confident, everyone bloody likes you. Do you drop the act for those you see during personal time, those nearer to home?

‘I’m a friend.’

He snorts. ‘First friend that’s ever visited him, and I ain’t joking.’

Is it fucked up that I don’t like this cretin? That I recoil at the words he says about you? That I want to hit him over the head for being an ignorant pig? I think I have Stockholm syndrome. It’s okay for me to hate you, but not anyone else.

I get out of the car and say thanks, because I’m polite, and I look at the muddy drive, illuminated by the moon, that allegedly leads to your cottage.

I wait for the driver to three-point turn and head off in the direction we came from, before taking a nosy at the council bins that stand neatly beside your gate. I turn on the torch on my phone. Three bins. Blue, Grey, Green. I take a peek inside, puddles of water splashing to the ground as I lift the lids. *Oh, how the roles are reversed, though you’ll never catch me climbing in one!*

They’re all empty. Spotless. It doesn’t surprise me, you’re the tidiest person I’ve known, but surely you accumu-

late rubbish like any normal person? Surely your bins don't all get emptied on the same day? There's a postbox here too. You don't want anyone coming to your front door. I open it, but it's empty too.

I look at the long, muddy drive, again, and look down at my footwear. Office shoes. *Why I didn't change into boots?*

But it's not like I could go home and do that. This was a one-time opportunity. It wasn't planned, until it presented itself. I'm here now, and I'm more than interested to know who you really are, to see beyond the veil of your deception.

We've known each other in-person for months, yet I'm only visiting your place for the first time now. Uninvited. Is that a reflection on me? Or you? I stumble along the path, potholes the size of craters, filled with puddles that betray their depth. 'Suspension killers,' the driver had said—and I notice again that I didn't pay enough attention to him to remember his name. 'He's a right pain, always asking us to go right up, arguing something terrible when we don't. You're lucky I drop you off at the gate.'

The cottage comes into view, a small, dimly-lit, patio light acting like a North Star whose batteries are running near empty. It's so dark out, I can't make out the pretty garden that you posted on Instagram.

I can't make out much of the cottage's exterior either, though I'm—I won't say shocked—surprised when I reach the main door. Barely illuminated by the patio light, I see that it's not red. It's blue. And the paintwork is chipped, like

peeled off in the sun and not repainted for years, chipped. Nothing like the photo you allegedly took only a couple of months ago, of your red, gleaming door.

Perhaps I'm remembering it all wrong.

I look down at my shoes, covered in mud. I wipe them on the welcome mat that squelches with rainwater. There are no name tags on the front door, but if the Electoral Roll is correct, I'll find your aunt Elena here.

And if your latest novel is to be believed, I'll find Malcolm and Poe here too.

KATE

I TAKE a deep breath and my shaking finger presses the doorbell. But there's no sound. *Another thing that needs fixed?*

I knock on the door, loud enough to disturb wildlife I didn't know was there. *Bats!*

No one answers. I have a rough estimation as to your whereabouts, but where's your aunt?

I use my iPhone torch to peer through your windows, curtains drawn back. I see chairs, a sofa, an old TV. But no one's inside. I go around the cottage, doing the same for every window, but some curtains are drawn and I can't see in. As far as I can tell, no one is home.

There's a small outbuilding at the back of the cottage, but no signs of life around it. I go back to the cottage front door, lifting up the sodden doormat, looking for a spare key.

I lift up pot plants that have dirt and no plants. I lift up heavy stones, hoping one to be a false stone with a key inside. But there's nothing.

I go around the back. There's a door, with rectangular panes on the upper half, leading into your kitchen. I pull on the handle. It's locked. I try looking for a key again, but there's no doormat, no plant pots, only rocks. When I find nothing, I pick up a rock.

I didn't come all this way to turn back now.

I smash one of the door panes and carefully reach inside. There's only a thick latch bolt to pull back, and I let myself inside.

A godawful smell overwhelms my nose, but all I can think about is I'm committing a crime, breaking and entering your home, all on the premise that you are not who you say you are, and your novel is full of confessions that may or may not be true. Will this hold up in a court of law, should you catch me in the act and call the police?

She was stalking me, officer. Broke into my home and urinated on my rug!

I emptied my bowels before leaving the office, though even with nothing in them, I feel the urge to pee. I'm sweating with excitement and fear, as the light from my phone's torch pans over your dirty worktops, cereal boxes of various products opened and torn, stacks of dishes that would reach my knees if they were on the floor. There's

grime everywhere, and a permeating smell that I can't put my finger on. It's like a blocked sink, or a toilet without a u-bend, like the sewer is reaching up from the ground with hands made of noxious gases in order to suffocate me. *Or in this case, the septic tank.*

In the corner, stacked beside, and on top of, what I think is your kitchen bin, countless takeaway trays, uncleaned, flies buzzing around uneaten pieces of chicken, pizza, kebab, noodles. The only hint of organisation is that one pile of trays are plastic, the other polystyrene, yet another pile cardboard pizza boxes, and a large crate full of unwashed tins and cans. You like your Cream of Tomato soup, don't you? And your Diet Coke, Diet Pepsi, Diet Sprite. Perhaps if you laid off the soft drinks, you wouldn't need to buy Diet anything.

But there's no empty cans of dog food. No dog bowl with water. Nothing to suggest you have a pet of any description to feed. If you have Poe, then what have you been feeding him? All this shit?

The light of my torch illuminates your filthy oven. There's something inside. Something black. Something the size of a small—

dog.

My heart pounds. I wanted the truth but I don't know if I'm ready for it.

I pull down my sleeve, over my fingertips. I don't want to leave fingerprints and I don't want caked-in grease on my skin.

The closer I move to the oven, the worse the smell becomes.

I want to hold my nose, but I need to hold my torch and open the oven door. I grab the door handle, and my sleeve sticks to whatever grime is on there. I pull open the door, light shining directly inside. Countless flies escape their prison, and I panic, waving furiously at them with my phone, creating a strobing light-show on the kitchen wall.

Calm down...

The animal inside the oven has been massacred with a knife, maggots feasting on the open wounds. The smell is horrendous and I fight the urge to retch.

I let the door slam shut, and I run to the doorway for air.

Why would you leave a chicken in your oven, to fester and rot?

Thank god it's not Poe.

I come back inside, having a quick search through the kitchen drawers and cupboards. But there's nothing of interest, other than to note how filthy and cluttered everything is. Your kitchen is a hoarder's heaven, and I wonder if you'll be the best prepared survivalist should World War Three break out, though I don't know how all this rubbish will help you survive the night, never mind the fallout.

Do you really live here, in these conditions? I would pity you, it's obvious you're mentally ill, but if your novel is to be believed, you deserve judgement, not sympathy. I'm not saying I'll be the one to judge you, I'm not a hypocrite, but

society will. They'll read your book and know you for the lunatic you are, but I suspect you'd take that, anything to be traditionally published.

I step into the hallway, but think better of turning on the light switch. Who knows how far away your lit-up cottage can be seen across the fields and roads.

There's a door across from me, and two further up on my side, another at the very opposite end. I walk along, passing your toilet, the awful stink reminds me of walking past a mens' urinal. I take the final door on the left that leads to your bedroom. The decor is old and there's a musky, damp smell. Lamps from another era, moth-eaten blankets. Twin beds. One is made up and caked in dust, the other has blankets half on the floor, a pile of books stacked on the bedside cabinet beside it, chocolate wrappers in the bed, stuck to the pillow, the bedsheet.

I open your bedside drawer. I carefully fish out a pile of photos from under a rather large, pink—I don't know the word, but it's obviously a fake, vagina toy, an unwashed one judging from the white stains. *Shudder!*

The photos are of you and your aunt, at various stages of life. She's miserable in every single photo, but you're not. You're an angel. Innocent like butter wouldn't melt. Smiling in every photo. *A demon. The best actor in the business.*

An antique wardrobe holds your clothes, pressed shirts, a suit, a few ties, this is relatively clean and organised.

Keeping up appearances is important to fulfilling your dreams.

I come out of your bedroom and walk across to the other door. The living room is relatively huge, making up almost half the cottage, more a lounge-diner space, with two doors allowing entry, the one I came through beside the cottage's front door, and another at the other side, across from the kitchen door.

In the lounge section, I go over to the television. Square-shaped, small but bulky. A CRT from decades prior. Underneath, an old DVD player and an assortment of DVDs scattered on and around it. A boxset of *Strictly Come Dancing*.

I pan my light across the walls of the room, and come across your bookshelves. At the bottom, books and collections from yesteryear. What looks like the entire collection of *Country Companion*.

Your aunt's books or yours?

What's noticeable about your bookshelves is, they're organised, tidy, like the you I thought I knew. There's even a duster, and a quick swipe of my finger on the shelf attests to the duster's usage. It's as if the only thing that deserves your respect and devotion is literature itself.

Then I notice, what looks like *every* book ever written by *my* clients, even clients I no longer represent, but only the books I represented for them. Did you really buy them all? Or beg, borrow and steal? Did you use them for inspiration, hoping they'd help you gain me as an agent?

I pick one at random, and on the first page, an inscription from the author in barely legible writing.

To Kate, you're the best! XOXO

I open another. And another. They're all inscribed to me. Each and every one of them.

Just what is going on?

KATE

HAVE you pilfered my collection of books at the office? I haven't ever noticed any books go missing, but perhaps you replaced the irreplaceable, Tesco deals for signed books, which to my shame, shows how often I look at my clients' old books. *There's never enough time.*

Stealing from the office is a sackable offence, but it's bottom of the list of my priorities at the moment.

I continue my search for anything that will bring me answers. Scattered across your dining table, tens of letters in torn-open envelopes, addressed to you—your real name that is—and your aunt Elena.

You keep our office so tidy, how can you come home to this? How can you pretend to be OCD when you're anything but?

I take an opened brown envelope, and remove the letter. It's from the Department of Work and Pensions, dated

months ago in March before the new financial year, notifying your aunt of an increase to her State Pension.

So she is alive.

I don't read any more letters, only scan through the addressees, trying to find any other names than the two I already know of, but I come up short. There's not one mention of a Nigel Carlyle in this cottage, *and* there's nothing that proves you had anything to do with Malcolm's disappearance, or even that of Poe. No smoking gun. Nothing.

All I've established is that your aunt still lives here. Which begs the question, where is she, and how does she manage living in this squalor?

But something's missing, isn't it? From my bag I pull out your manuscript, flipping through the pages until I get to the part where in your fantasies, my husband allows you to fellate him.

He rejects you. He tries to leave. But you burst his tyres with nails. You stab him with a knife and drag him to your *writer's den*.

I've checked all rooms, and there's no sign of this writer's den you mention.

I flick ahead a couple of chapters. Malcolm's in the den. You cut off his hand. But that's the last time you mention being in his company. Wherever your den is, is where Malcolm is. Wherever it is, it's not in this cottage.

I head for the front door, and that's when I see a set of

small keys, hanging on a hook. It has a tag but nothing written on it. All three keys are the same size, flat, no markings or stickers to differentiate their uses. How often have you used them that you know them by key cut alone?

There's no cellar in this home, not unless you have to pull up an entire carpet to reach it. I can't open this front door from the inside, thanks to a mortice lock which none of these keys can open. I go back the way I came, knocking over a stack of polystyrene food trays as I exit the cottage via the kitchen door.

The only other structure that is visible in the moonlight is the outbuilding. I shine my torch on it. It's not ramshackle, it's sturdy enough, and my light reflects off a chain attached to its doors.

On closer inspection, a thick padlock holds them together. This is not just an outbuilding for your non-existent gym equipment. Something is in here, something you don't want others to see.

I creep towards the doors, tilting my head, listening for anything that might reside within.

I hear nothing.

I look back to the cottage, darker than the moonlit sky, and beyond it, in the far distance, the faint glow of the nearest town. I look at the time. I still have two hours at most. Worst-case scenario, you knock on my mother's door, she answers and you realise the subterfuge, spinning on your heels out of there before mother can say, *Get off my porch!*

Best-case scenario, inspired by my social media post, you enter my mother's home, cake-in-hand from Chilli Beans, wishing her a happy birthday even though you know it's bullshit, and my mother will talk your head off, not allowing you to leave, and you'll wonder if she has had a breakdown or if this is merely how she normally is.

But it's still half an hour before you can even reach mother's home. I calm myself. Time is on my side.

I slide a key into the padlock. It sticks halfway. I need to be careful, I can't risk breaking off a key in the lock. I try the second key. A perfect fit. I turn the mechanism, it opens and the heavy chains clang to the ground.

Deep breaths. My free hand shakes as I pull at one of the doors. My senses are overwhelmed with the smell of lavender. *Is this why it lingers on you?* Dust and particles float in the unsteady light of my phone's torch. The light in my trembling hands illuminates the pitch black inside.

From within, a growling sound, and in the darkness, a small, black animal clambers towards me. I panic and then I see what it is.

'Poe!'

He panting heavily. He's huge. You've overfed him. But I don't care. I only care that he's alive.

I lift him with care, tears streaming down my face. I snuggle my nose into his fur. He smells clean.

I shine my torch into the corner he came from. There's a dog basket with a blanket, a dog bowl with a little water,

another bowl with what's left of his food. In a large, white plastic bag, capped off with a clothes peg, countless tins of Pedigree Chum.

You might not look after yourself, but at least you've treated Poe properly, not that this absolves you of anything.

I step into the outbuilding, and find the light switch. I can't risk stepping on a mouse trap or something worse, so I dare to turn it on.

The light flickers, illuminating the entire space, flies swarming and buzzing around the light and the high ceiling with exposed beams.

The walls, aside from one, are all bare stone. To the near-left of the barn doors, a small, steel sink, rusted and dirty, it looks like it's been here since the building was erected. *Did you bathe Poe in that?* Along the left wall, some kind of craft table with decorations and an SLR camera looking down from a small tripod.

To the far left, Poe's makeshift quarters. At the far end, in the middle, an open fireplace with piles of ash and a poker stick, the far end wall covered in wallpaper. Half-obscuring it to the right, a desk, with a closed laptop, its charger plugged into a double-socket with a rectangular, white, device plugged into the other socket, its cool blue LED emitting a flashing light. Exposed cable leads from the socket, up along the wall to the ceiling light, and down along to the light switch.

Along the right-side wall, nearer to me than the desk, an

absolutely enormous, wooden wardrobe. This is your writer's den, as mentioned in your story, isn't it?

I should turn back, but I can't. I need to search every nook and cranny of this den for clues that Malcolm was here. Did he drop his wedding ring? Picked off a fingernail? Anything.

I walk over to the craft table. There's rotted flowers, and tinsel surrounding a book written by—one of my clients. I know what this is. I remember when the flowers were fresh and vibrant. You tagged me in the photo and I left you a sweet comment, because I was a fucking idiot who didn't realise who you really were, your face hidden.

This was the last photo you posted of my clients' books. I noticed that, noticed the other fools who left comments asking where you disappeared to, but I didn't think anything of it. With hindsight, you stopped posting on that account the day the real you—*real, ha!*—accepted the position as my assistant.

Berating myself won't help. I think of looking through the camera's photos, but like much of your home, it's caked in dust, untouched since your last book photoshoot.

I go over to your desk. Flies are crawling all over it and the smell of lavender is overpowering here, but there's another odour mixed in with it, as if the lavender is simply masking something far, fouler. *Are a nest of flies breeding in your chimney?*

I open your laptop. An old MacBook of yesteryear, so

old the Apple logo illuminates at the back. The screen is locked, asking for a password. I try password1234, but it doesn't work. I close the laptop. I'll take it home with me, give it to the police, surely there's something that incriminates you on there. If there's nothing, it'll incriminate me for burglary. *Fuck!*

Inside the desk drawer, nothing of note. Sharpies, pads of unused paper, a stapler, a ruler, a hole punch, at the very back, a—crowbar?

I pull it out. It has heft, and its curved end is splattered with dark, painted flakes on black metal. I drop it on the desk and the flies scatter.

Behind the desk, the wallpaper pattern on this one wall consists of—*letters and printed emails?* I move closer, glancing at the piles of ash and detritus in the fireplace, and see my own name at the bottom of every single piece of paper on the wall.

Rejections. They're all email rejections, aside from one small batch, the back and forth between us regarding the revise and resubmit. You've circled these in a triumphant red marker.

Only one piece of paper has been defiled. I look past the graffiti and read the words of the short email.

Dear Elena,

You didn't really think I would allow you to ruin another agent's life, did you?

Best wishes,

Kate

Scrawled over the paper in large capital letters in red ink:
DIE YOU CUNT!!!

When I sent you that email, I imagined so many scenarios pertaining to how you felt reading it. *This* reaction tops anything my imagination could conjure, which is probably why you're the writer, and I'm not.

All that's left to check is the wardrobe. You mentioned this wardrobe in your manuscript, a brief ominous mention that offered no detail.

What did you write exactly? I place your manuscript on the desk and find the page.

Ah yes, *You don't want to know what lies beyond the door,*
Kate.

Oh, but I do.

Even if the truth will destroy me.

NIGEL

THE TRAIN STOPS at a station I've never been to, because on the couple of occasions I've went to your mother's to, um, surveil, I've taken trains with less stops, wanting to get there faster instead of slower.

My phone bleeps, and the one bar of signal allows your text to come through, the one you sent over ten minutes ago.

Your text is sheer desperation, and my groin starts to tingle at the thought of you needing me, craving my help. I think of replying, but it's best to play it cool. I'll maybe text when I arrive at the last stop, let you know I'm nearly there.

With my phone held up, I now have two bars, and I realise I better phone my local taxi firm, just to give them a heads-up that I'll be needing a car later than usual tonight. They're unreliable, Kate, the amount of times I've had to complain. I give them plenty of forewarning, because I won't tolerate them telling me that no cabs are available. It's not

like I can walk from the train station to my home. Well, I could, and I've done it with Lorraine, but it takes forever and these tootsies were only made for stalking.

'I don't know what time exactly. I'll give you another ring when I'm on my way back.'

'You do that, mate, whatever makes you happy.'

'I will. Thank you, bye.'

'Wait a sec.'

'What? I'll pay in cash, don't you worry.'

'It's not that. As unusual as this is. We had another booking going to your cottage, only half-an-hour ago.'

This was unusual, very unusual indeed.

'Someone went to my cottage? Are you sure?'

'Yes.'

'Do you have their name?'

'I can't give out that kind of information. Data protection.'

'Don't give me that. If you want, I can go into DPA requirements in fine detail.' I'm bluffing, but he knows I'll waffle on if I have to.

He sighs, that long, lingering sigh that I know means he's had quite enough of me and can't wait to put down the phone.

'She said she was a friend of yours, so Pardeep tells me, quite the looker. That's all I can tell ya.'

You're the only friend I have, Kate, though 'quite the

looker' is an understatement, Pardeep is obviously poor of sight or gay.

'Uh huh, I see...'

I have to accept the truth, I've underestimated you, it seems you're a pathological liar after all. My heart fills with pride and MALE FUCKING RAGE!!! *Toxic masculinity with a pinch of misogyny, eat your fucking heart out!*

'Actually, *mate*,' my voice friendly, calm as you like, stunning him into silence, 'I think I'll be needing that taxi sooner than I thought.'

I APPROACH THE OMINOUS WARDROBE, and Poe barks with excitement. What does he know that I do not?

The lavender smell is lessened here, allowing another potent odour to reek from the wardrobe. What smells like a sickly, concoction of vomit and faeces, though I have no reference point for this combination together.

I take a look around the wardrobe and notice something peculiar. There's a thick chain coming out of a hole at the back corner, going down into another hole in the floorboards.

Hairs stand on the back of my neck. *Just what have you done?*

I slip my phone into my left pocket, and pull out the packing knife from my other pocket. I push forward the blade.

What, or who, do you have in here? Malcolm? Your

aunt? Or some other horror that will attack me when I open that door?

There's a lock on the wardrobe door, and I carefully try your keys until one takes. I open the door and see myself recoil in the reflection of the mirror attached to the inside of the door, covering my nose and mouth, the keys smacking against my chin.

I hold out my packing knife at the naked creature, emaciated, bones protruding from its loose skin, head with bald patches from hair that's fell out, *or pulled out*. A human. The smell is overbearing, unwashed, sweat, grime, urine, faeces, and dried blood comes from its person and the half-full bucket that sits astride.

Their ankle is chained with a sturdy lock, the same chain that travels down into the floorboards, most likely dug into the concrete subfloor itself.

An absence of appendage between its two skeletal thighs betrays its gender.

But it's not my husband.

'Lo-Lorraine?'

Skeletal fingers attempt to shield eyes that struggle to open in the harsh light, bloodshot, devoid of life. Dry, cracked lips part, and shaking fingers drift towards me as I edge closer.

'K-K-K-Ka-Ka...'

She opens her mouth wide, yellowed teeth and an

ungodly odour. Her eyes look down, back to me, down again. I lean forward.

She has no tongue...

‘Oh, Lorraine! What has he done to you?’ I retract the blade and place the packing knife on the floor. I hold my breath as I try to lift her, but she moans in pain, a guttural scream that sends shivers down my spine. ‘I’m sorry.’

Lorraine sobs, but no tears come from her dried-up ducts.

‘Wait!’ I pull out the set of three keys. ‘One of these must be...’ One key opened the den doors, the other opened the wardrobe, surely, please God, the third will set Lorraine free. I place the key into the lock, and it opens.

I take off the clamp and Lorraine moans again, her ankle red raw, skin almost down the bone. When I try to lift her again, she screams once more. I cannot move her, not in this condition. Even if I could, how far would we make it before you finally came home?

I take out my phone and press nine-nine-nine, but there’s no signal on my phone. I don’t know what to do. Panic must be written on my face, as I look to Lorraine, back to a panting Poe, back to my phone. ‘I’ll make a run for it. I’ll get a signal somewhere on the road. I’ll have the police here before he gets back.’

‘Wh-wh-wh.’ What is Lorraine trying to say, her lips in a circle, contracting like a dying fish?

‘I can’t understand.’

Lorraine’s gentle hand reaches for me, her nails overgrown and discoloured, and points to the packing knife on the floor.

I pick it up.

She looks at me, eyes pleading. I shake my head.

‘I can’t,’ I say. ‘I’ll get you out of here.’ *I won’t let you kill yourself, Lorraine, no matter how much you think it will end your suffering.* Lorraine shakes her head, and offers me a shaking index finger. ‘I don’t understand.’

She attempts to pull my fingers apart, and I let her. She takes the knife and tries to extract the blade, but she doesn’t have the energy, dropping the knife.

She offers her index finger again, this time using her other index finger to swipe across it, making a whooshing sound with her mouth.

I pick up the packing knife, and gently swipe the blunt end across her fingertip. ‘You want me to—slice?’

Lorraine nods, the corner of her mouth twitching, but not quite creasing.

I extract the blade, and cut the tip of Lorraine’s finger, blood dripping and pooling. She exhales, this pain is nothing to her now, and points over her shoulder to the mirror that’s attached to the inside of the wardrobe door.

How long have you kept Lorraine in here? How long has she only had her darkened reflection as company?

I pull the door to near closing, and Lorraine presses her dripping finger against the mirror. She writes something in blood.

W

I

F

I

‘Wi-Fi! Of course!’ I retract the blade and pocket the knife.

Lorraine points her finger in the direction of your desk.

I nod my head and go over to behind the desk, where the socket has a *Wi-Fi extender!* I bring up my Wi-Fi settings on my phone and search for a network.

There’s only one: **KATE69NIGEL**

God, your obsession makes me sick. The network is password-protected, but there’s nothing written on the extender itself. I’ll have to find the router.

I go to Lorraine and hold her skeletal face in my hands. ‘I’ll get the password. I’ll call for an ambulance, I’ll call the police. I’ll be back, I promise.’

Lorraine groans, nodding with me as best she can.

‘It’s okay. We have time to get out of here. He thinks I’m at my mother’s, followed me there. We’re going to be alright. This ends now, Lorraine. It ends here.’

I go back to the desk, and pick up the crowbar, handing it to Lorraine, its weight pulling her arms down.

‘Just in case.’

I go to switch off the ceiling light, but Lorraine moans, shaking her finger. She’s been kept in the dark long enough.

I leave it on and make my way to the cottage.

LORRAINE

NO WORDS CAN EXPRESS how I feel, Kate, how I've felt. Time has had no meaning for longer than I can remember, and for some time now, I've been merely existing, not living.

But it wasn't always like this.

After I read Nigel's prophetic chapter on his laptop, and turned to see a manic version of him standing over me, he knocked me unconscious.

When I woke, it was daytime, light pouring through a skylight in his writer's den. I was lying on a bare mattress that had an overpowering musty smell. I reached for my head, aching as it was, and felt at the thick bandage that was wrapped around it.

My clothes were different. In my unconsciousness he had stripped me bare and gave me an old nightgown to wear, along with freshly washed underwear that looked like they belonged to a pensioner. *Bloomers for god's sake!*

I tried to stand up, fighting dizziness. Something clanged at my feet. I looked down to see a chain wrapped around my ankle, held in place by a large and heavy padlock. The rest of the chain led to the wardrobe, disappearing in its ajar doors.

I pulled at the chain, its snug fit around my ankle offering little-to-no leeway. I spied his laptop, if only I could open it and send someone a message, but the chain didn't go so far. Tantalisingly close, yet so very far away.

With this chain attached to me, I wasn't going anywhere, so I screamed and screamed, but only managed to hurt my pounding head and my vocal cords. But my voice was heard, barking from what I assumed was Nigel's guard dog echoing faintly outside the den.

I wouldn't see Nigel for what felt like days, but in actuality, was probably a few hours.

When he finally arrived, I screamed at him with what was left of my voice, and his eyebrows rose, as if to say, *Really?* and he walked back out without saying a word.

I wouldn't see him again until the morning, and by then I had left a puddle of urine as far away from the mattress as I could get. This time I kept quiet, hoping he would say something to me. And he did, laying out some ground rules, and warning me that another toilet mess would have him literally rub my nose in it.

He acknowledged that I had no choice, given a lack of toileting facilities, and brought me an old, rusting bucket and a roll of toilet paper.

But apart from that mishap, he didn't seem to mind my screaming, my pleading, my self-pitying whining. He kept saying he understood me, understood what it was like to be in a situation you couldn't get yourself out of, as if being unpublished was comparable to being held hostage.

Every morning, he'd come in to give me breakfast, talk about his plans for the day ahead, and every morning, after he left, I'd scream until I couldn't, my only company being Nigel's dog who would occasionally bark back.

'Do you have a dog?' I finally asked. He looked surprised, and immediately checked my chains. 'I just mean, I've heard it bark a few times.'

'Oh!' He wiped non-existent sweat from his forehead and smiled. 'Do you want to meet my dog? Are you lonely when I'm gone?'

His smile was indecipherable. It could've been a trick question, luring me into inviting some kind of rabid Doberman-Rottweiler cross into the den.

But he was right to ask. I was lonely. 'Yes. Yes, I would.'

That night, he brought his dog into the den, and when I saw it, my racing heart calmed to an almost zen-like flutter.

I recognised him immediately.

'Poe!'

I knew better than to accuse Nigel of anything. I took the blessing and turned my cheek. *You'd have been proud, Debbie.*

I knew immediately that I didn't want Poe to ever leave

me, and though it took days of good behaviour, a keen ear, and copious love-life advice, Nigel finally caved, allowing Poe to live in the den with me.

And Nigel cared about my well-being, to an extent. Even though he was tired from a long day at work, he'd come back and make me dinner. Well, he said he made it, it was obviously a takeaway. *Why did no one ever question the fact he was suddenly buying takeaways for two?*

The plastic cutlery helped too. 'You won't be cutting off your foot with these!' he said, as if reading my mind.

He pinched my flabby arms and told me he worried about muscle atrophy afflicting me, even though I had no muscles to speak of, putting on YouTube exercise tutorials and exercising along with me, though I mostly focused on upper body exercises, as anything involving legs meant me trying to lift that very heavy chain.

He bought me supplements; turmeric to keep my joints healthy, saying, *the black pepper really helps with absorption*; bovine collagen, *vitamin C to help keep your skin glowing*, and lutigold, *a natural carotenoid, can't have you going blind on me*.

He even gave me vitamin D for a lack of sunshine, *I don't want you suffering with Seasonal Affective Disorder, because that would make me depressed*, though the skylight often afforded rays on me, and I think I saw tiny aeroplanes go overhead on occasion.

I'd burn down this outbuilding if only anyone would see

it. But I can't reach the fireplace or the poker stick or anything really. I can't even reach the sink to wash myself, or fill it up, put my head in, and end this all—relying on Nigel to bring a basin of warm, soapy water and a bars of carbolic soap that looks like he stole them from a school in the nineteen-eighties.

Sometimes he gave me drink, usually wine, and after the first few times wondering if he was going to poison me, I welcomed the oblivion that came. He put something in the drink, something that sent me to unconsciousness, and every time, he sits there, pen in one hand, pad of paper on his lap, a stopwatch in the other hand.

Every time I wake, I felt my body, wondering if he'd done something to me. But he hadn't. He never does.

Instead, he'd sometimes bring up a slideshow of photos on his laptop, all of you, Kate, allowing me to watch as his flashlight thrust up and down his undeniable lust for you. *I didn't know the name for that toy until he ordered a new one online, asking for my advice as to which one seemed more anatomically correct.*

On occasion, and I think it must've been one week in every month, I touched myself while watching him, because I'm only human, and I'd take a little enjoyment whenever, and wherever, I could get it. Anything to survive mentally.

I once gave-in to my animalistic desires, asked him to put away the toy he called Fake Kate and come to me, a real, breathing, moist person. I had no thoughts of escape, only a

deep longing for human connection. I'd have let him close his eyes and think of Kate. It would have sickened me if I cared.

He turned around, Fake Kate hanging from his hardened penis and said, 'You're not my type and don't you forget it!'

Yes, Kate, only you, or a silicone version of you, is his type.

For a while, we lived in a sick and twisted purgatory, where each day was the same and blended into one another, him going to work, him coming back and spending the night talking about you or talking about his writing, both fruitless dreams by the sounds of it.

But I had Poe for company, a sane companion in an insane world. My feelings regarding Nigel had transformed too. I no longer feared him, though I really should have. He'd shown me his true colours, and I realised, this was a man over his head, doing something he'd never done before. A pitiful, weak man, not quite an incel, he was too old, but not far off.

His self-pity when talking about you was a real turn-off, as was his jealousy of Malcolm. I wanted to say to him, *Challenge Malcolm to a duel, winner takes Kate, and we all get on with our lives*. But I knew better. Though I no longer feared him, he could be petty, and petty might mean starving me for a day, or not cleaning out my shit bucket.

But resentment built inside me—bit by bit, day by day

—for this man who would take my freedom, and for you Kate, because you were the reason he was doing it.

And everything was fine, relative to being held hostage, until one day I slipped up, too full of the anger that had slowly built up inside me. Ironic that it happened on my own birthday.

Nigel came home, pissed off with you. According to him, you'd *depthroated Malcolm* with your tongue in front of him.

I think he wanted sympathy. I should have given it to him, anything to help aid a possible escape down the line. *Win his trust* had become my mantra. But on that day, unknowing that the existence I had was better than the alternative, I thought, *fuck him* and *fuck you!*

I hated you Kate, hated you with a passion. If I didn't know you, hadn't worked with you, I wouldn't have been caught in this psychopathic spider's net.

Still, I kept it to myself, because Nigel had bought party hats, a Paw Patrol birthday cake—possibly because I told him I loved Poe so much, and even gave me a gift, which I unwrapped to find a Chanel No 5 bar of soap. *Cost me over thirty pounds*, he said. I thanked him, hoping I'd find a hidden razor inside, so I could cut him or cut myself.

He lit up the candles and began singing. *Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear—oh, fuck this!*

He lifted the cake into the air, marzipan dogs somer-

saulting their way to the ground, where Poe happily munched at the crash site.

Kate's a bitch, he said, and for the next twenty minutes he continued to berate you and ruin the sham that was my birthday party.

Something inside me snapped, and I told Nigel, *Kate's a gold-digger. Malcolm's family are well-off and she'll never step off that gravy train.* That was bad enough, but adding, *And she'll never step out with a loser like you!* was unadvisable, as was the sarcastic laugh I let shrill from my throat, like I'd been reincarnated as a comedic warbler.

He went quiet, scooped up the cake from the ground, only leaving crumbs for Poe to enjoy. He swiped my Chanel soap too. The party was officially over. He said nothing for the rest of the night, leaving the den without wishing me goodnight like he usually did every night. This had happened only once before, and that time, he left me alone for the entire day and night. *Fair enough*, I thought, *I'll starve for a day. Other people call that fasting or Ramadan.*

I went to sleep, fairly confident he would forgive me and be back to what-he-called normal the next morning, he might've even apologised for ruining my birthday. But the next time I saw him would be before the break of dawn, when he woke me in the night, pulling me off my mattress by the hair, only stopping when my chain wouldn't allow me to go any further. His closed fist crashed into my jaw, breaking it and rendering my teeth a disabled weapon.

He dragged his desk toward me, banging my head off it, and then held my head down with his forearm.

A pair of pliers entered my incapacitated mouth and he said, *You can say what you like about me, but don't you dare say a word against my Kate!* A pair of large, rusting scissors came into view, and I fainted before he cut out my tongue.

Since that day, he barely acknowledges me, other than the brief interactions when he begrudgingly gives me enough food—pureed, naturally—and water to survive. My stinking bucket overfills before he'll think about emptying it. He occasionally gives me a newspaper wrapping, soiled with grease, salt and vinegar, to clean myself. *Occasionally.*

I don't know whether he still hates me because of what I said, or due the fact I can no longer communicate with him verbally. I have nothing to offer him now.

Worst still, he took away my mattress, and locked me in the wardrobe, a darkened prison, where only Poe scratching at the door kept me wanting to live. But even that waned. The absence of touch, Poe's warm fur against my skin, his life force waddling around me. Without it, I was lost.

One day he stripped me naked, and I thought he'd finally given in to his baser urges, but he hadn't, he simply wanted to watch me wither away, a real-time deterioration and degradation.

I've long since lost the energy to fight back. I barely have enough energy to think about fighting back.

My stomach forgot what hunger pains were, and the

sores on my bottom became background noise to the voice in my head begging to end it all.

So when you opened that door, Kate, I was disbelieving at what my failing eyes could see. Were you real? I've seen many people in the dark of this wardrobe, and none of them were real. No, it was obvious, I had died in this wardrobe, and here you were, Lucifer's own handmaiden, opening the gates to Hell.

I saw the packing knife you had dropped to the floor, and for a moment, I wanted to grab it and cut you by the throat. But I didn't have the energy to do anything, and I finally took-in the look on your face, at first fearful, then worried, then overwhelmingly saddened.

I had felt you my enemy since the day I left Manning Agency, but for whatever reason, the universe had conspired to make you my saviour. In all my prayers to any God who would listen, none of them asked *you* to come to my rescue. *It's strange how life works out.*

Now, I focus what life-force I have left on surviving. Just a little longer. I don't know what life will have in store for me after this, but that's for tomorrow's Lorraine to deal with.

I'm a survivor, and soon, Nigel will be rotting in a jail cell along with—

I hear the den's doors creak open. *You're back, Kate!* My weak heart races and I grip tight to the crowbar. If I could

cry, I would. You'll tell me the police are on the way, an ambulance too, and this nightmare will be over.

The wardrobe door pulls back fully, and my eyes strain as light washes over me, trying to make you out from the shadows.

But it's not you and the crowbar is ripped from my weakened grasp. Hope is a dangerous thing, Kate, but I won't allow anyone to take it from me. *Not even him.*

I find energy I didn't know I had, and I scream.

KATE

I KNOW time is on my side, but I panic nonetheless, constantly checking the time on my phone. I let myself into the cottage through the kitchen door, and I make my way to the living room, all the while bumping into all your piled-up shit.

When I enter the room, I think of turning on the ceiling light. It would be easier to find what I need, it'd only take a minute. But I resist. Still fearful of bringing any attention to the cottage itself.

At least the den has no windows. With the doors closed, you'd never know the light was on. *Did I close the door behind me?* Shit, I can't remember. I just can't remember. I could go back and check, but—

No, there's no time to waste.

I look for your router. It has to be here somewhere. Like a mouse that will follow the skirting of a home, I search

along your walls. Surely it'll be beside the television, or near a window, from where a cable will enter the cottage? If there's Wi-Fi, there might be a landline I could use to call the police, whatever works.

I find an old, yellowed, phone socket, with a white cable protruding. But I see no router, no landline phone. The wire goes along the top of the skirting, fastened to the wall with nailed-in, white-plastic cable clips, roughly a foot between each other.

I follow the long white cable, along the living room wall, out through a crudely drilled hole into the hallway, where it connects to an extension cable. The cable goes along into the —kitchen?

It disappears behind your bin and the stacks of rubbish. I think about pulling them all apart, but I look to see if it comes out the other end first. It does, climbing the wall, underneath the window sill, along the wall further, and stops at a router, hidden behind those bloody cereal boxes.

It's the nearest you could get to your writer's den and I walked right past it. *And I see now I left the den door wide open...*

I want to scream. Instead, I dig my nails into my free hand and welcome the pain. Of course, you wouldn't allow anyone to come here and dig under the ground with cables to give your outbuilding proper Wi-Fi. This is a DIY job, the best you could muster. ADSL broadband, connected to your cottage with copper wire, signal going along a wired exten-

sion connected to another wired extension, to a wireless extender. No wonder you never showed your face in Zoom meetings. You weren't kidding when you said your internet connection was barely able to stream audio, never mind upload real-time video.

The password is on the bottom of the router. My fingers fumble with the mixed-case letters and numbers. *Calm down, you have plenty of time.*

There's an error, the password is invalid. I try again, slowing down, making sure each and every entry is correct and in its proper lower-upper case. *Invalid!*

I pull at my hair, almost removing the follicles from my scalp. I need to work this out.

Taking into consideration the name of your Wi-Fi network, KATE69NIGEL, your undying love for me, I try random passwords. **ilovekatefinlay**. No. I add numbers and words written in your text speak. **kateluvsherself69**. No. I add special characters. **k@tefinlayisabitch666**. No. Maybe one is correct, but it has random upper case letters? I don't know. I could be here forever, nothing works!

In work, you're always writing things down on notes. It keeps you organised. There's got to be a password written down somewhere. Somewhere in this bloody pigsty of yours.

I knock over the cereal boxes, Frosties, Cornflakes, Rice Krispies, and tip them upside down, hoping your written password will fall out like a free plastic toy. I open your

cupboards and check under the tins-upon-tins of baked beans, soup, lentils.

I open your fridge and the smell rapes my nostrils, which is quite the accomplishment considering the multitudes of stinks you've subjected me to since I arrived here.

The fridge is on its warmest setting. Vegetables rot, milk has turned, *god it all bloody stinks!* There are a couple of jars, filled with brine. One has two onions and—

No. Not onions. Onions don't have veins. What the hell are they? Another jar is cloudy, opaque. I lift it to the light of the fridge, my hand shaking, rasping breaths. I can't quite make out the contents inside.

I hear a scream come from the den and I drop the jar, smashing it on the floor, brine splashing on my shoes. I palm my chest, willing myself to calm down, but it's not working, I can barely hear myself think over my heartbeat thrashing in my ears. I sink down to the floor, and think about going back to the den, but there's not a second scream. Did Lorraine try to get herself out of the wardrobe? I catch sight of the broken jar, and finally see what was hidden.

Oh god, Lorraine's tongue!

Which means, those meaty onions are something else entirely. They belong to a man.

Malcolm!

I rush to the living room, and tear open at all your letters and papers and notes. There has to be something that has

the Wi-Fi password written on it, but it's all nonsense. Some of these letters are over ten years old.

I can't find anything. There's nothing here. I'm running out of time. There's no other choice. I'll walk to the country road. It's late out, but there might be someone driving home from a drinking session in town.

If not, I'll still make it to town before you step off the train, I've factored in enough time to do so. Perhaps I'll have the police waiting for you.

I creep into the hallway. It feels colder in here, somehow. I probably need food. I've barely ate a thing today, and your kitchen has ruined any appetite I had.

A door slams shut and I go rigid. I turn my head. Someone is standing at the front door, cloaked in shadow.

'Lorraine?' Is that why she screamed? The pain of dragging herself out here. 'How did you—'

A switch is flicked and the light comes on.

It's you! Blood sprayed across your face, crowbar in hand, pounding it into your palm.

'Well, well, well,' you say, 'look what the cat dragged in.'

NIGEL

I'VE NEVER JOGGED in my life, Kate, but there's always a first time for everything. I flung a note at Pardeep, didn't even say *keep the change* and he certainly didn't try to stop me leaving. I made it ten feet before almost rolling over my ankle, to which I told myself to slow down. It would all be for nothing if I injured myself.

As I approached my home, yes, Kate, *my* home, I noticed a bright, white light, shining inside the living room, swaying around like it was the torch of some burglar violating my safe space.

Then I saw another light coming from my writer's den, filtering through the slit of an open door. *Priorities, Kate, priorities.* Whoever was in the cottage could wait. I upped the pace, sneaking past the cottage, straight to the den.

Inside, Poe was gone. The wardrobe door was ajar. Thankfully, my desk was in its normal place, and that was

the main thing. I dumped my bag on the desk next to my laptop.

I approached the wardrobe, wary but ready, and opened fully. I expected Lorraine to be gone, but she was there, with *my* crowbar. I was pretty calm at this point, all things considered, and then I noticed a word written on the door mirror, as if written in blood with the tip of a finger. *Couldn't miss it, really.*

‘Wi-Fi?’

I tell you, I'm not with it today. You've pulled me in all directions, gaslighting me, making me feel like I'm losing my fucking mind. So you'll forgive me for the few seconds it took to realise what this message actually meant.

‘You little fucking cunt!’

I pulled the crowbar off her with ease. Why did you give her it, Kate? Did you think Lorraine had use for it, had enough energy to lift it when she can't lift herself off the floor? Why didn't you take it? Are you above a little violence?

Lorraine screamed and I wondered if you heard it.

Well, let me tell you, I feel like a different person when I do these things. The swing of my arms, the downward motion of the crowbar, it's as if I'm having an out-of-body experience, watching someone else split Lorraine's head open, laughing as she falls out of the wardrobe hitting the floor with a dampened thud, my ears ringing with tinnitus and fury.

Maybe it was the fear of death, but she managed to crawl, heading towards the door, and that's when I realised her ankle was free of its chain. Well, the next four or five strikes were simply me in a blind, fucking rage, smashing at her head like a lumberjack swinging his axe against an unmoving block of wood.

Lorraine, her blood sprayed over my face, lay there, body twitching. *Are you still alive? No? Oh.*

I licked my lips and tasted metal. But now was not the time to bask in glory. I wasn't worried, Kate. Lorraine had the right idea, but she's sent you on a fool's errand, she just didn't know it.

I exited the den. Your burglar's light was shining in the kitchen, so I made my way to the front door. It was locked. I let myself in quietly, then your light shone into the hallway, and your shadow followed.

I slammed the door shut, and chuckled when your light froze in midair. Had you not been so scared, you'd have shone it on me first.

'Lorraine? How did you—'

I turned on the hallway light, revealing myself to you. Your jaw slackened, your eyes widened, it was as if someone was pulling your face from forehead to chin, stretching it vertically like the world's worst facelift.

'Well, well, well, look what the cat dragged in.' It was a bit dramatic, and I don't have a cat, but I enjoyed the theatre of it all. 'A pretty little bird who needs her wings clipped.'

And now, you eye the crowbar in my hand, and every time I pound it into my open palm, it leaves visible blood smears.

‘You-you hurt Lorraine?’

‘What makes you say that? Did you hear her scream?’ I hold up my open palm. ‘Or is it the blood?’ I take a step toward you, but you don’t move. ‘I didn’t kill Lorraine. *You did*. When you gave her this crowbar.’

‘Don’t come any closer! I’ve already called the police.’

‘Oh, found the router, did you?’

‘I did.’

‘Found the Wi-Fi password?’

‘I did!’

I laugh. ‘Do you want to be a real boy, Kate?’

‘What? I don’t under—’

‘Look at you, my little wooden friend. Look at that nose grow. You’re good at lying when you have time to plan, I’ll give you that. Sent me on a wild fucking goose-chase. But on the spot? Piss-poor, baby!’

‘I’m-I’m not lying. I found the password and I called the police and they’re on the way right this second.’

‘Oh shit,’ and I act like I’m shitting myself with worry. ‘You mean the password on the router itself?’

‘Precisely.’

I smile. ‘Funny that, because that’s the old password. I changed that password. Only I know the password to the router. Like, a password that only exists in my head.’ I take

another step toward you, and you don't move, you're a rabbit caught in the headlights. 'Fair enough, you live in my head rent-free, but I don't think you've opened all the doors to my disturbed subconscious.'

You look defeated. It's sad to see you like this, but needs must. You have to accept it. The game is up. There's no way out for you that doesn't involve giving yourself fully to me.

There's a bark, and Poe waddles past you, into the middle of the hallway, unsure whether to come to me or you.

I make the decision for him. 'Your daddy's back now.' I lift him with my free arm. Did I take care of him better than you ever could? Is that why he loves me more than you? He did canter past you, after all.

'You stole Poe. You had him all this time. I'm surprised he's alive.'

'You didn't think I killed your dog, did you? What kind of monster do you think I am?' I smirk, wiping at crocodile tears with the elbow of my sleeve. 'As a writer no less, I know, you never kill the dog.'

I place Poe on the floor, and he lies beside my feet, happy with his true master.

I stare at you and we stand there, like gunslingers, waiting for the go-ahead to pull out our pistols and shoot.

'How did you know I was playing you?' you say, and you keep talking. You want answers, but you're also playing for time. 'When did you finally click?'

‘I’d love to say I worked it all out for myself,’ I exaggeratedly breathe on my fingers and pretend I’m shining an apple on my chest, ‘but it was the taxi company. I called them to let them know I’d be coming home late. They happened to mention that a friend had come to visit me.’

You close your eyes and lower your head, lips pursed in regret. You mutter to the floor. ‘I should’ve walked here from the station. Biked it. Something. Anything.’

‘Woulda, coulda, shoulda.’

I take a step forward.

‘Wait!’ you say, and I *know* you’re playing for time, but what do you think you can do?

Your thumb presses your phone. Recording this? No, you’ve turned up the brightness of your phone’s torch. That won’t do you any good, I’m not a vampire, much to my own regret. I’d love to bite your neck and suck, but—

You flick off the hallway light at your end, *fucking two-way switches*, and shine your torch in my face, blinding me, giving me coronas behind my eyelids.

‘Bitch!’ You make a run for it, but where can you go, other than escape from the only other exit in the house, the one I suspect you entered in the first place considering the front door was locked, the same one Poe must have entered.

From the kitchen, you won’t run past the den into the dark of the endless fields. There’s nothing there, no points of reference, no lights to guide the way. You won’t want to be lost in farmland you suspect I know better than you.

You only have one option in your frightened mind. You'll try to get to the driveway, run all the way along to the road, hope a passerby sees your pretty face and pulls over. *But your face won't be pretty for much longer.*

I come out of the front door, hoping to cut you off at the path leading to the drive. But you shoot out from the back, cutting across the garden diagonally, nowhere near me. You're fast, of course you are, my hefty body can't keep up, but your strides are too long and ungainly, you're too scared, running for your life. The light on your phone sways from side to side as you gallop, you don't use it to light the way. I know what's going to happen before your foot splashes into the muddy puddle and you scream in agony and fall to the ground, clutching at your ankle.

I take my time catching up, the cautious tortoise hunting down the impulsive hare, even though I'm more a Snapping Turtle to your Rabbit Stew. You try to stand, hopping on one foot, but you lose balance and fall. You crawl instead, groaning with every movement, dragging your limp leg behind you.

You're not even looking at me when I bring the crowbar down upon your head.

KATE

CONSCIOUSNESS RETURNS. My eyelids are heavy, sealed shut like they've been welded together with a blowtorch. Light shines through, everything a red hue. My head aches, pounding like the worst hangover imaginable. Warm liquid drips down the back of my neck, and I try to feel for it, but I can't. My hands are bound, my arms are bound. The ache in my head competes with a stabbing pain in my ankle.

I take a mental wheel-jack to my eyelids and force them to open, bright light stinging. All is blurry, and it takes a while to focus. I keep my head down, looking at my ankle which has ballooned to twice its normal size. I try pressing my foot down on the floor, and pain shoots up my body, my head thrashing back, and I bawl like a baby.

I'm back in the den. *Your writer's den.*

Lorraine lies on the floor in a pool of blood, foetal posi-

tion, her back to me, unmoving, her skull caved-in and leaking. My stomach twists and I bawl again.

I'm sitting on your desk chair, wrists bound by a zip tie, no, two zip ties. The chain that once kept Lorraine prisoner, is now wrapped over and around me, making it impossible to walk without dragging this chair on top of me, hunch-backed like the man from Notre Dame, not that I could do so anyway. With my mangled ankle, I can barely press my foot onto the floor, never mind put any real weight on it.

The buzzing sound is loud at this side of the room, flies crawling over my bare neck, some must be stuck to the blood congealing on my head.

It all comes back to me. You caught me in your hallway. It happened so fast. I thought about pulling out my packing knife, threaten you with it. But even with my knife, I didn't fancy my chances against a psychopath of a man.

I was scared. I just wanted out of there. I panicked and made a run for it, escaping through the kitchen door. I bolted for the drive. I saw you coming, but I was putting distance between us. In my panic, I forgot that your drive is pockmarked like craters on the Moon. My foot disappeared into a puddle that hid a deceptively deep pothole. I rolled over my ankle and fell. I tried to keep going, I'd crawl a mile if I had to, and suddenly all went black.

Why did it all go dark? I look over my shoulder, at your desk where you've left the crowbar dripping with blood. *You hit me. You hit me with the crowbar.*

The den door opens, and it's you.

'You're finally back with us in the land of the living. Could hear you scream a mile away. Pity I live so far out, eh?'

I try to move, to break free of these shackles, pick up that crowbar and—

It's pointless.

You walk over to me, giving a quick look of disgust at what was once an alive person called Lorraine. You look at my ankle, shaking your head, and tutting.

'I'm very disappointed.'

I snort up phlegm that threatens to dribble down my face. 'Disappointed with what?'

'Not what. Who.' You shake your head. 'I'm disappointed in you, Kate. I'd kept Lorraine alive for all this time, and now look at her.'

'You really killed her.'

'As I said before. I didn't kill Lorraine. You did.' You tut like I'm a naughty schoolgirl. 'Why did you have to come here, eh? Lorraine would still be alive if you had just,' you sigh, 'got on with your life, stuck to the plan, got us both rich and feted.'

How could I get on with my life, knowing what I know about you?

'You're a killer. A cold, calculating, killer.'

'I am not!' you say, with no hint of sarcasm. 'I never planned to kill anyone. You've got me all wrong.'

I look at Lorraine, lifeless and dead forever. 'Tell that to her.'

You point to Lorraine with an accusing finger. 'But that wasn't premeditated. I was angry with her. You turning up here put me on the spot. They were crimes of passion. They all were!'

'They?' My aching eyes bulge in their sockets, and you take notice, regaining your composure. I wish I could contain myself, act like your words have no effect, but I'm not dead inside like you are.

You change the subject and part of me is glad to be spared further horror.

'Why didn't you call the police?'

'I tried, but...no signal.'

Your eyes narrow. 'But you didn't actually try did you?'

What are you getting at? 'There was no signal!'

You shake your head with pity. 'But you didn't actually press nine-nine-nine and try to connect the call, did you?'

'How many times do I have to say it, there was no signal, not one bar, so of course I didn't bother pressing anything.'

You wipe your brow. 'Thank god you're a dimwit at times.' I look at you, incredulous. 'Never heard of Emergency Call Roaming? Would've connected you to my mobile network.'

Is it true? Is there such a thing? It makes sense. But I didn't even know there was a network here. My phone had no signal, it had no—

‘Thank god you’re a liberal and live in a bubble thinking you’ll never need the emergency services because diversity is our strength, eh?’ You tilt your head to the side and wrinkle your nose. ‘I am curious, though. You’ve known my address all this time, yet only now do you come. And you certainly didn’t want me around when you did. What provoked that?’

‘Your manuscript.’

You consider my answer, then shake your head. ‘Fiction. You said it yourself. I mean, no one actually does the things they write about, and then actually write about them wanting to publish it, do they? No, I don’t believe you. Something else spooked you.’

I won’t tell you. I like watching you, lost in the woods, unable to work out how I bested you, *at least for a while*.

‘You think you’ve nothing left to lose, huh?’ You chew on the inside of your cheek. ‘How about your mother? Maybe I could bring her here too? How about it? A little family reunion?’

I let out a sarcastic chuckle. ‘Good luck with that. Mother doesn’t even like you. She wouldn’t leave her front door.’

‘True that. But what if I tell her you’re in trouble?’

‘She likes me even less.’

We both laugh, and for a moment, we’re pretending that this situation isn’t as sick and twisted as it really is.

Your face changes in an instant. ‘You care about Poe, though. You can’t deny that.’

‘You wouldn’t hurt him. You love him.’

‘You’re right, I do love him, but not as much as I love you.’ You turn your head to the open doors. ‘Poe, boy! Come to papa!’

My little, *so much bigger*, boy waddles into the den, panting, tongue hanging from his mouth.

‘You said writers know not to hurt the dog.’ My voice is pleading, I can’t help it.

You look at me, and I want to wipe the smirk from that conceited face. ‘I said I knew better than to *kill* the dog.’ You take the crowbar from the desk, and you drop a treat on the floor. Poe takes it, lying at your feet. ‘Last chance, Kate.’

You lift the crowbar over your head.

‘Stop!’ You hold firm, arms shaking with adrenaline. ‘The electoral roll. I found two names attached to this cottage. Elena Cartwright and the name you used on the cover page of your manuscript.’

‘My real name.’

I nod. ‘I looked up both names and couldn’t find anything. So I checked online copies of old newspapers and found—’

‘A photo of me and my aunt Elena.’ I nod. ‘I always knew that photo would come back to haunt me. Tried the Google right to forget, told them my aunt was a complete cunt. Can’t get the newspaper to strike out that story, though. They told me, news, good or bad, is history.’ You look down at Poe, then back to me. ‘Thanks for being

honest, but you still need to be taught a lesson.’ Your eyes open wide, you tense, arms can go no higher.

I squeeze my eyes shut and blubber. ‘Please...’

I hear no bark, no yelp in pain. No thud from a metallic object tenderising fur and flesh. All I hear is sniggering. I open my watery eyes.

‘I’m just shitting you! As if I would hurt this boy, eh?’ You ruffle his head and he licks at your fingers. ‘In saying that, let that be a warning. I could very well change my mind if you don’t behave.’

I nod, tears streaming down my face, snot too.

‘Look at you, Kate, you’re an absolute mess.’ You pull out a tissue from your trouser pocket, half-used by the looks of it, and dab at my eyes before wiping my nose. You lean behind me, close enough I could bite you and take a chunk out of your shoulder. ‘Your hair’s matted with dried blood, and you’ve got a decent-sized gash, but you’ll live.’

‘Please let me go.’

You take a step back and smile. It looks genuine. ‘I want to. I really do. But knowing what you know, having seen what you’ve seen, I really need to know that we’re on the same page. I need to know that I can trust you.’

‘You can trust me. I won’t say a word, I won’t.’ *As soon as you let me go, you’re fucked.*

You don’t say anything, you just paw at your chin, deep in thought.

‘You know what? I haven’t shown you everything. But I think we need a drink, first. Be right back.’

You place the crowbar on the desk again and walk away, giving another disgusted glance at Lorraine’s unmoving body, *Of course she’s unmoving, she’s dead*. Poe thinks about following you, but decides it’s better to lie down, closing his eyes, the only entity at peace in this horrific room.

I don’t wait long. You come back, a bottle of wine in one hand, two wine glasses grabbed at the stems in the other.

‘You’ll like this.’

You go to the sink, and open the wine bottle. I recognise the bottle from the fridge, it’ll be lukewarm at best. I hear you struggle with it, and that gives me the slightest of comforts, knowing that it’s not already opened and tainted with, *like the jars of brine with those body parts*.

The wine glugs into the glasses, though I can’t see it with your back to me. You place the bottle down on the sink, and come over to me empty-handed.

‘We’re going to have a drink, okay? And we can have a chat about all things. I’ve still got some exciting stuff to tell you about.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like, how does my novel end? Honestly, I thought it would have a happy ending, and maybe it will. But I know now, there can be no happy ending unless both characters know the truth and accept the truth.’

‘So we’re just characters in your novel, are we?’

‘Well, we’re certainly the inspiration.’

You go back to the sink, and bring the two glasses of wine. ‘It’s wine o’clock!’

You motion to give me a glass, and then you realise that although I could hold it, I can’t raise it to my mouth because of the crude restraints that keep me immobile.

‘I’ll help you.’ You lift the glass to my mouth, but I turn my face away. ‘What? Too good for wine now?’

‘It’s not that. I just don’t—’

‘Trust me?’

‘I saw what you had in those jars.’ You look at me with confusion. ‘In your fridge.’

You purse your lips. ‘You think Lorraine was your friend? You should’ve heard how she talked about you! I couldn’t have that! And the other one, well he—’ You stop yourself, and grin. ‘This is just wine. It’s not blood. You’re not gonna drink it and turn into a vampire.’

‘I wasn’t thinking that,’ I say, half-truthfully.

‘Fine, look at this.’ You take the other glass and guzzle half, wiping dribble from your chin with your sleeve. You pull back your lips, showing your teeth and gums. ‘No oversized canines. Happy?’ I say nothing. You lick at your lips, lost in thought, looking me up and down, your gaze settling on my swollen ankle. ‘Look, how about we scratch each other’s backs? You have a drink with me, like the good old times, and I’ll undo the chains. Fair deal?’

I nod. What else can I do? My best, and only chance of getting out of here, means I need these chains off.

You lift the glass meant for me to my mouth, and I tip my head back, drinking as best I can. 'There you go. Drink up, Kate, drink up. We really need to loosen up, don't we? This is all too serious.'

Before I know it, the glass is empty, my mouth a willing recipient to the alcohol that I hope will numb my senses, just enough to allow me to choose fight over flight if need be, to overcome freeze.

I swallow the last drop.

'See, still alive. Feeling good, no? Nothing to worry about at all.' You go over to the sink again.

'What about these restraints?'

You fish out the keys I recognise from your trouser pocket. 'A deal's a deal. It's not like you're going anywhere, not with that busted ankle, you're not.' You slide the key into the padlock, open it, and pull the chains off me. You walk over to the wardrobe, placing the chains where Lorraine once lay.

'And the zip ties?'

'Deal was the chains.'

The den door is wide open, promising freedom. All I have to do is leave. But as I push myself off the chair, unsteady, I have to balance on my good foot. I was hopeless at the one-legged hop race in school, coming last, thirty years later, I have no reason to believe anything has changed.

I place my injured foot on the floor, pain shooting up my leg, making me want to scream and vomit at the same time. But I can leave it there, as long as I shift my weight onto my good leg. It's better than hopping.

You still have the crowbar. I have a weapon too, and this time I'll use it. But with my hands bound together, it won't be easy to access my pocket, nor do it without you noticing my bound hands reaching for it.

I abort the idea as quick as it enters my mind. There's something else I can use as a weapon, something with heft, but I have to get nearer to it without arousing your suspicion.

I see the perfect excuse.

‘CARE TO EXPLAIN THIS?’ you say, pointing to the printed email on my wall, *that* email which nearly broke my heart in two. But you’re not really referring to the email itself, more the words I daubed over it, the ones where I command you to die and refer to you as a vulgar description of a vagina.

‘I’m sorry about that,’ I say, stepping between you and the offensive graffiti. ‘I was feeling emotional. And well, you did fuck me over.’

You hobble away, swaying with a grimace, looking at the other wall and its wallpaper.

‘What is all this?’

I want to say, *Well, it’s like stepping into the past, years of rejections plastered over walls of pain, printed testimony of all the savage ways you and your people treated me, I deserve reparations.* ‘It’s my writing journey.’

‘You kept them all?’

‘I did.’ Of course I did, what did you expect me to do with all that suffering? Shred it?

‘I remember this one. Personalised feedback.’ Yes, Kate, one of the rare times you didn’t treat me like an inconvenience, like shit on your shoes, like— ‘What’s that underneath it?’

Before I can stop you, your bound hands lift the paper which is only secured at the top, and you find the hidden photo underneath. A photo of you, crashed out on your chair, your shirt unbuttoned, only enough to allow the cheekiest glimpse of a nipple.

‘Is this—is this me? How? Did you take this when I was—no, wait—’ It takes you a moment to work it all out. ‘That’s my own chair. The night you stayed over. You—did this?’

I put my hands up in surrender. ‘I may have sniffed your head but I did not touch a hair, scout’s honour. It was simply a wee memento, is all. And it’s not like I made you sleep without a bra, is it? You could have easily made the decision to wear a pushup, or button up your shir—’

‘How dare you dictate what I should and shouldn’t be wearing! You had no right to abuse my trust and—’

‘Look, it was only for my own wall, it’s not like I uploaded it to porn websites! Thank god for small mercies, eh?’

You’re shocked, speechless, shambling near the fireplace,

putting the desk between me and you. You didn't reach for the crowbar, and unless you're thinking of escaping up the chimney like Santa Claus, I'm fine with leaving you there.

'Listen, forget about all that,' I say. 'It's time to show you what you really came for. Answers.'

A moment of hesitation. I could let you walk away now, *ironic in the circumstances, I know!* You have your dog back, our relationship could be salvageable. You know my real name, but that means nothing in the scheme of things. Yes, you know I killed Lorraine, but it's not as if you even liked her, as proven by the way you stitched her up. You could forgive me for that, with time. But I'm not sure you can forgive what I show you next, and really, that's the ultimate test for us.

The lies are a fog that prevent us from seeing each other. I need to be honest with you, Kate, tell you the truth, *show you the truth*. We can only be together if you accept me for who I am. It's a gamble, but, isn't love a gamble, too?

Poe waddles over, giving a scratch to the floorboards near my feet.

'Look at him, scratching away like there's a tell-tale heart under there.' I look at you and smile. 'No Poe intended.'

I pick up the crowbar, its curved end caked in dry blood and fresh blood.

You flinch for a moment, and I don't begrudge you a moment of fear, though I am disappointed that you call for Poe and scoop him up, your arms a shovel, and you hold him

across your chest, using him like a doggie shield. *Or are you protecting him from me?* I lift an open palm, signalling to you that everything is fine.

‘I’m not gonna hurt you, or the wee man, I promise. But I will have to move this.’

I pull the seat away from the desk. I then go to one end of the desk and push it towards the other side of the room. Despite moving the object that created distance between us, you don’t move, content to stand next to the barren fireplace.

‘You look a bit peaky,’ I say, and I drag the chair to you. ‘Take a seat.’ I smile, knowing that your exquisite bottom will soon make itself comfortable once again on the seat that wrote the ideas for a hundred books. ‘No chains this time.’

I return to where the desk originally stood, and thrust the crowbar into the space between the floorboards. One by one, I rip up the floorboards, throwing them to the side, unveiling the horrors I’ve committed.

To your credit, you don’t try to run.

You don’t even scream.

KATE

I SHOULD RUN, hop, crawl out of here. You've given me that opportunity. Every fibre in my being is urging me to flee. But the pain in my ankle is overpowering, and my mind is slowing, muscles are not reacting the way they should, like I'm wading through the shallow end of a pool filled with wet cement. I sat down, not because you asked me to, but because I had to. I physically had to get off this injured foot, and Poe felt heavier than ever, I had no energy in my arms at all.

When you ripped the floorboards off, all I could see and hear at first, were the wriggling maggots and the flies crawling over what looked like a rolls of clear plastic.

'I think next time, I'll leave the nails. It's a hassle getting these things off,' you say, and you beckon me with your fingers. 'Come here, you need to have a look up-close.'

I struggle to get off the seat. Poe escapes my embrace,

and I don't know if I let him go or he wriggled away from me of his own accord. I'm losing feeling in my body. Is it shock?

What's rolled up in these plastic sheets that would have flies and maggots so invested? Why do I feel my head becoming so dizzy? Is this too much for my mind to accept?

I hop forward on one leg, like I'm pushing through an invisible barrier. Unsteady, I approach the exposed subfloor.

'What is this?' I say, unable to comprehend what my eyes are seeing, like, I'm really unsure what it is I'm looking at. Something dark and inhuman is wrapped up in the plastic. Once again, my mind has no reference point.

'Kate, meet my aunt Elena, *the* Elena Cartwright. Auntie, meet Kate.' You cover your mouth, and put on a screechy voice like you're a ventriloquist. '*Hello, Kate! My nephew has told me plenty about you! Mind you, it's not all good.*' You slap me on the arm. 'I'm just shitting you. She died a long time ago. That's why the plastic's a lot more grubby. I know, you have to use your imagination here, what with the fact she's pretty mummified now.'

Mummified? This thing is, was, a person?

'But if I had left her down there, without the plastic, well, she'd probably be gone by now!' You slap your knee and chuckle like this is a rare laugh.

What happened here? I can imagine your aunt dying at home, possibly in her sleep, and you, without a friend in the world, failing to inform the authorities, preferring to keep

her nearby. *That's what ashes can be for.* Did you leave her to decompose, unwilling to face the reality of her death, only burying her, as such, when the stink became too unbearable to keep in your own home?

'The house is still in her name. I still get her pension every four weeks. That'll probably come to an end one day when the government finally realises they're paying out to the oldest person in the world. But we've got plenty of time before that happens, and let's be honest, it says more about an uncaring society than it does about me.'

I don't believe you, I don't believe any of this. This is a Halloween prop. You're doing all this to fuck with my mind, just like you did when you stole Poe and taunted me with his photos. It's all smoke and mirrors. *But Lorraine was real, and Lorraine's really dead.*

Despite what I know, I shake my head. It's all a game. You're pulling out every manipulation trick in the book to break me down. You want me to scream. You want to witness me cry, don't you? But I won't. I won't give you what you want.

'I've got one last one to show you.' You lift up yet more floorboards. *You'll run out of space for all this deception.* 'This one's a bit gnarly, hence the flies and maggots. I wanted to cover it up, air exposure is *no bueno* when it comes to preserving the dead, but, I don't know, I kinda like watching him rot.'

Him?

A second body, unclothed, not a skeleton, but an unrecognisable face, decomposed, very much not a Halloween prop, maggots crawling from the spaces that once held eyes, flies entering and exiting holes once covered by nostrils, mouth lies agape, fearful and in agony, *and oh fuck, the stench, I can't bear the stench.*

Its arms are crossed over its chest, what's left of fingers on one hand, the other arm—

missing its hand altogether...

I let loose with projectile vomit.

Malcolm is dead.

My husband has been murdered.

By you, by you...

'And still you don't scream. I'm beginning to think you've got a taste of this kind of thing. If not the stomach.'

You continue babbling, giving me excuses, imploring me to believe that you tried your best to keep him alive, *Too much blood loss...low pain threshold...he was a quitter...no balls, this cunt, that's why I cut them out!*

The crowbar is still in your hands, and you lodge it into the floorboards once again. *You said this was the last one, just who else have you killed?*

With your eyes off me, I slowly back away, swallowing down the pain and residual vomit.

You remove a floorboard.

I grab the wooden handle.

'It's empty!' you say, pointing to space in the subfloor,

overjoyed with yourself. 'But you know what they say, Kate. Til death do us part.' You look at me and your eyes narrow. 'Hey, is that a poker stick in your hands, or are you just pleased to see me?'

You leap to your feet, swinging the crowbar at me. I try to block your attack and the poker is knocked away from my weakened grip. I turn to flee, but my legs give from under me, and I fall to the floor in a crumpled heap.

I'm dizzy and two of you stand over me.

'Wh-what have you done to me?'

The two of you place fingers on your chins. 'I spiked your drink.'

'But—but you drank—you...'

You both smirk at me. 'Yeah, but I only drugged yours. I mean, really, Kate, I had my back to you when I poured the drinks. What, did you think poison came in a bottle to be shared?'

'P-p-poison?'

You kick at my shoulder with the side of your foot. 'Shitting you again! It's not poison. It's not gonna kill you. It's like a date rape drug. I know what you're thinking. Nigel wants to have his wicked way with me. But you're wrong. I should've done this with Lorraine. Instead, I had to hurt her. I learned from that. I could never hurt you. I wouldn't touch a hair on your pretty head.'

Despite your duplicitous assurances, I reach for my pocket. No, my brain tells my arms to move and allow my

hands to reach for my pocket, but I'm paralysed. I can't reach it, I can't move. *I should have slashed you when I had the chance.*

You straddle me, your weight placed on my hips, and you start to unbutton my blouse. 'It's not like that!' you say, and then you hesitate. 'Actually, we'll strip you later. Trust me, in the long run, it's for the best. I learned that with my aunt. Her body decomposed with her clothes, it kind of melded together, and honestly,' you place two fingers in your mouth and feign a vomiting motion, and I fall in-and-out of consciousness. 'This is all a learning process!'

From somewhere, one last blast of adrenaline, I scream, but you place a meaty palm over my mouth.

'Shh, shh! Don't worry, Kate. I'm not gonna kill you. No, I very much want you alive. For as long as humanly possible. I messed up with Lorraine, let my emotions get the better of me, but I'll do a better job with you. I promise.'

I hear you pulling up more floorboards, and my dizziness subsides long enough to witness you pull out countless rolls of plastic wrap.

You grab me by the ankles, and I only know this because I see you lift my legs in the air. I feel nothing, no pain, nothing. You hold my legs together, and begin wrapping me like a caterpillar in its cocoon.

I try to scream but nothing comes.

I try to plead with you using my eyes, but all becomes out of focus.

All that's left, is my thoughts.

Please, I'll do anything. I'll be your literary agent. I'll introduce you, personally, to all the editors at the big five publishers. I will work my fucking socks off to ensure you have the greatest literary career you can possibly dream of. I'll be your lover. We'll make love every night. I'll be anything you want of me. You can be Poe's dogfather with my blessing, you fucking bastard!

By the time you reach my neck, you're sweating profusely, droplets dripping onto the plastic, onto my face.

'Now, I'll admit, this will scare you a bit. But you trust me, right?'

You wrap the plastic around my head, working your way down over my nose, over my mouth, onto my chin. This is it.

I can't breathe. I can't fucking brea—

Your fingers tear through the plastic, creating an air hole for my mouth. Without thinking I try to bite your fingers off, knowing you could leave them lodged in my throat, choking me to death, but if I'm to die, then at least I'll take a piece of you with me.

But my teeth rest upon your skin, unable and unwilling to penetrate any further. You pull your fingers out of my mouth, and from what I can make out through the opaque plastic, you place them in your own mouth and suck.

You grunt as you get to your feet, and grunt harder when you pull me towards the space in the subfloor.

I hit the concrete floor, beside my rotting husband, and then you pull Lorraine's body beside me.

'I'll wrap her later!'

My thoughts are consumed. Not by pleading, but rather, anger, an infernal rage against the dying light.

But my thoughts are for naught, as you place the floorboards over me, plunging me into darkness and the end of our story.

NIGEL

ONE YEAR LATER

KATE FINLAY IS NO MORE. A missing person, missing in the ether.

Many people asked: *what was the catalyst for her disappearance?* The obvious one, her husband's own disappearance, an event that sent her spiralling behind closed doors. Another, less mooted theory, the stress of her job; in her final days, visible as it was to her co-workers with her unkempt look, her baggy eyes due to lack of sleep, I learned that she had never divulged the terror inflicted onto her by one Elena Cartwright, preferring to maintain a dignified silence and an air of professional detachment.

That was the problem of being stoic, the Great British upper lip, not allowing anyone to know her secret fears, her very real concerns for her mental health and personal safety. She only told three people, and two of them are dead, and the other, well, I always believe *silence is golden*.



IN THOSE DAYS after your death, *sorry, disappearance*, explaining to co-workers about what really resided in your troubled dark mind, putting your mother's mind at ease that it was not her fault, *overbearing old bag didn't deserve the get out of jail card but needs must*, well, all that pretence, really, I think I should move to Hollyweird, *I'd fit right in*. Writing was obviously beneath my innate talents, who knew?

For my part, since the moment I became your assistant, all traces of communication from Elena Cartwright were deleted. *Elena who?*

My writer's den and its walls are no longer papered with rejections, yours or anyone else's, a reflection of the happy space my mind now resides in.

It's not like the police suspect me of anything, they've no reason to, and they're certainly not searching my den with UV light looking for blood-stains that haven't been washed out of the floorboards. They don't do that for a missing person who, according to all concerned friends, family and co-workers, cut an increasingly disturbed individual in the days leading up to her disappearance.

It helped that you phoned your mother in a paranoid state telling her that you believed someone had stolen your dog and stolen your man. I didn't plan for that, but it certainly helped.

Plus, I've rented a little studio flat in London itself. It's

modest, and the only thing I brought from the cottage was my books—of course! A large painting of Buddha hangs on my living space wall, showering me with peace, abundance and keen sense of detachment.

It feels good to finally let go of the past. Let go of you. Lorraine. Malcolm. Elena. The cottage.

How many times did I take a piss on that floor, telling myself that I was pissing on your graves, having to scrub my own waste off the wooden boards?

Well, not anymore, those days are gone. *As are you.*

Not long after your death, I walked into Debbie's office.

It's been a hard time for all of us, she said, as if her pain was anything on the scale of my own. *No one can replace Kate*, but she wanted to replace you. *At the end of the day, we're still a company, championing the creative voices out there, looking for the next big thing*, please would someone step into these Kate-sized shoes and make us some money yesterday? *I'd like you to step-up*. She'd like me to step-up.

It isn't quite what I hoped and dreamed for. That is, to be a published author. To be with you. To conquer this life together, as one and the same.

I'm still as far away from being traditionally published as ever. Though it's not a rare sight to see literary agents moonlighting as authors, I don't think can. I can't spread myself so thin, it's all or nothing with me. I think maybe, the writing game isn't for me after all. Sometimes, I just have to face the inevitable, that the road taken led me to a destination I

didn't necessarily dream of, but one I certainly needed to arrive at. It's time to quit. I forgive you if you don't believe me, I have proven to be unreliable in the telling of my tale.

And I can't be with you now, can I? No one else can though, and that soothes my pain, somewhat, like a cool balm on the maggot-infested lump of meat that was once my heart.

If I couldn't be with you, surely the next best thing was always *to be you*.

'I won't let you down.' I shook Debbie's hand, firm. Her hand made a cracking sound and she winced and I smiled at the subtle shift in our power dynamic.

Balance was restored when she made me delete the agency's Instagram account, the one I'd worked hard to cultivate since I arrived. She'd had enough of social media. *Who can blame her?*

I seem to be doing Malcolm's job too, because what's better than hiring a new admin, when you can get me to do it all? But I do it without complaint. Make myself indispensable.

Should there be any vexatious complaints from desperate writers—involving yours truly—Debbie will think twice before sacking me.

Or I could take up an office masturbating habit. Make me... *untouchable*.

Wouldn't be the first time someone called me a wanker, but this time I'd be bulletproof. Let's see.

I know what you're thinking, *didn't you say we'd share a coffin?* I did think about it, I truly did. But the logistics, you know? I'm capable of many things, but a murder-suicide and get to lay beside my victim who isn't family by blood or marriage? Well, even I'm not that capable. Not to mention, *and this is really important in the scheme of things*, you didn't really love me at all, did you? *I loved you, but love should always be a two-way street.*

No longer stuck in the past, no longer fearful of the future, I live for the day, grateful to be alive and prosperous. I am living with the attitude of gratitude of thankitude, and a random Japanese man on YouTube tells me every day to live life to the fullest, his hand a balled fist, if he didn't live so far away, well, I might've become obsessed with him.

Who am I kidding? I hate lying to myself, and even in death, I know you see through my fibs. I can't be happy, not when I haven't been published yet. I *will* finish that book we were working on. I know I said I wouldn't do it without you and your world-class editing, but hear me out.

I have an ending for it, I have real-life inspiration to work with now, not like before when the ending only existed in my head. Plus, it's so hard to drop that itch, that need to connect, that desire to share. Cutting your soul and bleeding it onto the page, it's addictive, a drug like no other, *you had to be there.*

The best part? Writing about what I know. Hiding my sins in plain sight. Be celebrated for them, *be vilified.* I'll have

to change the names of course, and a few of the details, I'll reluctantly publish it under a pseudonym, perhaps the name of a woman or something gender neutral, but that's fine, considering I'm still living as deed poll Nigel Carlyle—*had I known the agency life would not end in failure, I'd have used my real name, sigh...*

That's the great thing about labelling something as fiction, people swallow it whole, because truth is stranger than fiction and a whole lot less believable anyway.

But it could work, couldn't it? *The greatest love story never told.*

I've been practising the one-sentence elevator pitch in the mirror, the one you wouldn't let me finish telling you.

A fanatical writer's obsession with his first-choice literary agent is reciprocated with terrible consequences.

I think that's intriguing enough.

Don't you?

Three things can not hide for long: the Moon, the Sun and the Truth.

—Buddha

EPILOGUE

FOR A LONG TIME I was scared, Kate. Scared that you'd haunt me after you died, your ghost tormenting me through the night, waking up to apparitions before my very eyes. But I knew, and always have done, that there's nothing after this and only a guilty conscience can disturb my sleep. *If you don't think about it, it can't hurt you.*

I feel like something inside me is broken, and I don't know if it's nature or nurture, or both. Can I be fixed? Am I beyond redemption?

Maybe you *can* want something too much.

In these moments of doubt, I'm sorry, *sorry for everything*, sorry that I did what I did, that I took your life and extinguished your light, making the world that bit darker. If there is a God, I know He won't forgive me. All I can do is make a promise to myself, *to you*, to become a better person. And I'm trying, I really am.

Rex is thriving, cementing his position as office mascot, and he even has his own Instagram, resplendent with puppy-eyed selfies and carefully curated pics, a bit like how I sent you the dognapping photos back in the day.

Occasionally Debbie brings her mangy mutt to the office, and they frequently hump each other

Our co-workers swallowed my story whole, that you, after Malcolm's infidelity and subsequent disappearance, had a nervous breakdown and couldn't cope with looking after the dog, and you gave him to me and swore me to secrecy, telling everyone on social media that your dog had gone missing to simply save face. People show their true colours when faced with scrutiny: not one of them remembered that Rex was taken before Malcolm's disappearance. Of course, I had an excuse ready should any smart-arse provide that tidbit of information, but no one did. None of these fakes loved you, Kate, not like I did.

I keep a photo of you on my work desk, and no one thinks that's creepy, they all empathise. They know I lost someone dear to me, a mentor, a friend, a lov—well, a lover in dreams only, perhaps. They sometimes treat me with kid gloves, as if your alleged mental health issues were somehow transmittable, by fact of us working so close together.

But life as a literary agent—okay, I'm technically under the supervision of Christine but needs must—a proper, gainfully employed, gatekeeper of the publishing industry,

purveyor of hopes and dreams, crusher of hopes and dreams, well, it's been more amazing than I thought it would be.

To finally realise, I'm not alone, I was never alone. All those years feeling like I was the only writer to be constantly rejected and thrown away like a piece of trash. But I'm not. I know this, because I'm the one sending out the rejections now, in my own acquired name. I try to write personalised rejections to those I believe have potential; for others, I send a form rejection, because I know the business now, and there's only so much time in the day; for others yet, those who have no right writing a novel, never mind demanding that I read their shit, I send them an especially encouraging rejection, *I learned that from you, Kate*, inflating their ego, knowing that I've sent them down the road to Hell with my deviously good intentions, setting them up for future failure and pain. I also do this to writers who misgender me or send submissions with another agent's name, or include me in their canvassed emails like they couldn't be arsed doing research on any of us.

To know others are out there hurting, bleeding onto a page that will only ever demand more, well, that comforts me.

That's why, when replying to authors from my den, I converse with you, ask your opinion, beg you to guide me to make the correct decision, looking for signs that you're communicating with me from beyond the grave. I don't

want to be the guy who turns down the literary equivalent of The Beatles.

I even help low-income writers to understand the business, giving them each and every opportunity to succeed. All those webinars you did, I have emulated, and I use a mobile network that has a better reception than my old router, showing my face to the world, with my den in the background.

In every webinar I participate in, I always remember to thank you, my mentor, somewhere out there in the world, hopefully living a happy life and overcoming her demons. How would they all feel, had they known you were lying underneath my feet the entire time?

No matter how busy I get, and I'm so busy I have no time for a proper relationship with anyone, *a guy has needs but flings don't count*, one thing's for certain, I'll *never* hire an assistant. You can't trust assistants these days, I should know. They have one eye on your job and one eye on your man, believe it.

And yet, for all this, I still fear rejection, I'm only human after all, and I care for my clients, more than they'll ever realise. I'm the gatekeeper and I allowed them to pass my test, *they are special*. I know them inside out, gleaned the truth from the fiction in their novels, pried where eyes should not pry. But I only do this to help them, *I must know them*, to fight their corner against those who would reject

them, all those publishers who can't smell a best-seller under their noses, all those readers who can't help but leave a one-star review on a newly published novel, *congratulations on giving birth, I know how hard it is to give birth and respect anyone who has the audacity to do it, and that's why I rounded it up to one star, because my god, your baby is fucking monstrous!*

I've stopped doing that because I know their rejections hurt, *I hurt on their behalf*, and if only I had the time, I would end everyone who caused them harm. But revenge is destructive. I choose to not live that path anymore. I choose the path of least resistance. I choose to *not* suffer and the baby Buddha statue beside your photo reminds me of that every day.

In fact, I could see me doing this as a career, like, until retirement. Much like funeral parlours and death, there will always writers needing, wanting, craving to be published. Their little deaths keep me relevant, and their rare successes keep me financially sustained. We are an ecosystem, we need each other to survive and thrive.

But you know, never rest on your laurels, which is why I've decided to grow as an agent, as a person. Lies are no longer for me, *the truth will set you free*. I can't confess to everything I did, I don't fancy spending time at Her Majesty's Pleasure, no matter how short that would be given the state of lawless Britain.

But I can start telling the truth, starting from today,

starting from now, starting with all the writers who would submit to me.

I say to you, dear writers, there is a novel in everyone. Pick up that pen. Jot down your ideas. Purchase a laptop and type-up your magnum opus, because you know you're not simply writing to entertain, you're writing for all posterity, you're writing so that your name will live on, long after you're gone.

Write down a false name if you must, I will not judge, but do your research, personalise your cover letter and let me know you've looked me up, learned my favourite books and television shows, brownie points if you mention something that could only have been garnered off-line, *wink wink, cough cough*, let me know we're on the same page. Send it to me and I'll write back to you within twenty-four hours, telling you how I read your sample on the train and pleading, almost too politely, for you to send the full manuscript yesterday.

Your response to my email will be almost instantaneous, and you'll fret and worry, wondering if you should have taken more time to polish the rest of manuscript, but don't panic, my next email will espouse my love for your work, and I'll ask to call you, and I'll forgive you for the false name and I'll ask for exclusivity, and we'll meet in person, and you'll sign away your soul to me, and all the time, you'll think, this is life-changing, this is meant to be, I've been waiting my entire life to meet Nigel Carlyle, *who I am really, I'll leave*

that for you to find out, out of all the literary agents in the world I'm so glad I chose him.

But you'd be wrong.

I've waited my entire life to meet you.

I choose you.

And if I can't have you, no one can.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to all the teachers who said I would amount to nothing.

You were right. For a while.

Thank you to the literary magazines, newspapers, and competitions who rejected me. Not only was I incapable of writing a novel worth publishing, I couldn't even get a thousand words past your gatekeepers.

And to the agents who *enjoyed* this novel, yet rejected it anyway—

don't worry. I understand now.

I only really have three people to thank.

My aunt, Elena Cartwright. The OGG—Original Gangsta Granny. You kept me alive. ~~Your name now graces this book.~~ You'd have hated that.

Kate Finlay.

What would I be without you?

Unpublished. Unsatisfied.

A stalker with no deer to hunt.

The hunt is over.

But our story isn't.

And finally—you.

Thank you for staying. Most wouldn't.

You've followed me this far.

Let's see how far you're willing to go.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Nigel Carlyle works in publishing.

He has spent a number of months in close proximity to authors, manuscripts, and the systems that determine who is read and who is ignored.

His interests include submission processes, editorial decision-making, and the private dynamics between writers and literary agents.

He believes that proximity allows for a clearer understanding of how things really work.

Nigel does not write for publication.

He writes to understand.

If you've read this far,
you already know more than you should.

Most people stop sooner.

If you have something to say—
say it directly.

nigel@manningliterary.com

I read everything.

I decide what matters.

This manuscript is the original version of Catfish.

It was not intended for publication.

—

This is the version before it was changed.

Before it was made acceptable.

—

If you are reading this,
you were not meant to access it this way.

—

Nigel Carlyle

Witness Press, Edinburgh

—

Date of submission: April 2025

Status: Withdrawn

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This file should not be in circulation.

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Some access is remembered.