

A full-page photograph of actress Clarise Chalmers. She is wearing a black, sleeveless, sequined gown with a deep V-neckline and a high slit on the left side. She has long, wavy blonde hair and is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a blurred outdoor setting, possibly a red carpet event, with other people and structures visible in the distance.

No Wolves in Los Angeles

Top Hollywood star Clarise Chalmers warned her new advisor not to get any romantic ideas but forgot to warn herself.

By M S Lawson

NO WOLVES IN LOS ANGELES

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This book is dedicated to my:

Father, Robert Lawson, a Jane Austenophile or Janite.

Sister Joanne who, when told that I was writing a romance asked if I had ever read one.

Daughter Michelle, another Janite, who as a child was worried that there might be Wolves outside the family home when I read her Little Red Riding Hood.

Other books by M S Lawson

[Dark Ages – The looming destruction of the Australian power grid](#) (non-fiction, Connor Court, 2023)

[Obsidian's War – the winter city](#) (ebook, 2022)

[Obsidian's War](#) (ebook, 2021)

[The Musketeers of Haven](#) – a science fiction story (ebook, 2020)

[Claire Takes on The Galaxy](#) (ebook, published on the web site Dreame, 2019)

[Darth Vader](#) – The good guy who lost (non-fiction ebook, 2018)

[A Planet for Emily](#) (ebook, 2017)

[Disgraced in all of Koala Bay](#) (ebook, 2016)

[The Zen of Being Grumpy](#) (non-fiction published by Connor Court, 2013)

CHAPTER ONE

When Meghan Kowalski's father read Little Red Riding Hood to his daughter, he was amused by the illustration of the big bad wolf in the bedtime storybook the family used. This showed a suave, smiling wolf dressed in a suit hailing Little Red Riding Hood on the way to her grandmother's place.

"You might meet lots of wolves when you are older," said Kowalska senior, as he thought that his Meghan might have inherited much from his mother who had been a beauty queen in her day.

"You mean there are wolves around here?" exclaimed little Meghan.

"No, no wolves now," said her father. "I meant that you might meet them later, when you are older."

"There are wolves, then," said Meghan, looking at the bedroom window in alarm, thinking that there might be wolves right outside.

"No, no, no wolves around here," said Mr Kowalski, sorry he had made this adult comment. "There are no wolves in Los Angeles." That was where the family happened to live. "None at all."

This calmed little Meghan enough to listen to the rest of the story – a sanitised version with the grandmother locked in the closet rather than eaten – although she still found the wolf scary. As she grew up, however, she lost her fear of wolves in dark forests, especially as there were no forests near her up-scale LA suburb. Instead, she became absorbed in school and her friends including Connie Leighton, who also showed promise of being able to catch men's eyes when she got older.

There were sleepovers and shared confidences which developed into confessions of secret crushes and talk about fending off unwanted attention from boys. Then Meghan took drama and was told that she could act. She also took singing lessons and thought she could sing. Connie took singing lessons and was told that she could sing. She also took drama classes and thought she could act. The two girls competed for the lead role of Blanche DuBois in the school's production of Tennessee William's classic *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Meghan won and turned the play into a triumph, much to Connie's dismay. They competed in a local singing contest which Connie won hands down, wowing the crowd, with Meghan coming a distant fourth, mainly on her looks, much to her dismay.

Now each other's nemesis the two girls competed for Prom Queen which, to Meghan's fury, Connie won handily on a school-wide popular vote despite Meghan campaigning hard and having developed into a stunning blonde who was already getting regular modelling work. She had been discovered by a modeling agent at sixteen while at a street fair with her mother. The now not little Megan took the defeat so personally that she even told the principal that the election must have been fixed. This accusation enraged the Leighton family and embarrassed her father, who had to work hard to smooth over wounded feelings. He wondered what had happened to the girl who had to be reassured over wolves.

Both girls easily got into the American Academy of Dramatic Arts joining Connie's older brother Ty, also a singer. Meghan dated Ty for a time, infuriating Connie who was still sore about the vote rigging allegation, then dumped him, which infuriated her even more. She accused Megan

of deliberately breaking her brother's heart. Meghan moved on to a good looking senior with acting talent she met during a staging of Macbeth, only for the boy to drop her in favour of dating Connie, whom he met during the musical theatre programme. Meghan accused Connie of deliberately stealing her boyfriend. Meanwhile, just as Mr Kowalski had warned many years before, both girls discovered that there were plenty of male wolves.

Soon after, Connie dropped out of college and all contact with Meghan in favour of fronting a band performing mainly covers in high schools, hotels, and bars, anywhere there was an audience and a dance floor. That band eventually dissolved but Connie and the drummer found two guitarists with some original material. She had an affair and a hit single with one of the guitarists before the affair, fame and drugs tore the group apart, but not before an agent scouted her for a band to showcase material from a rising songwriter. For Connie could sing, and that counted for something in the music business. The first hit was helped by a video so salacious it had to be re-edited to meet the requirements of the censors and prompted a concerned call from Connie's mother.

"It's the music business Ma," said Connie.

The video helped push that first single up the charts which was followed by another, solid hit by the rising star who found she had a knack for spotting potential chart toppers. Suddenly Connie Leighton was in the big time.

Meanwhile, the bank that Mr Kowalski had worked for as a senior executive hit major trouble and the stress of picking up the pieces, plus a lung infection, brought on a latent heart condition. His wife and two daughters, Meghan and the somewhat younger Madison, then discovered that Mr Kowalski had put the family's fortune, plus money borrowed against the family home, into the collapsed bank. On top of this, a long-standing family friend and financial advisor also caught in the bank disaster responded to the crisis by stealing his client's money, including Meghan's accumulated modelling fees, and vanishing. Meghan's father should have also warned his daughter, and himself, about wolves in the financial world.

The Kowalskis were abruptly reduced to a miserable two-bedroom apartment and to having to borrow from family to pay for a modest funeral. Meghan's degree was abandoned in favour of full-time modeling work, and her mother was forced to take a sales assistant job in an antique furniture store. A keen golfer, Mrs Kowalski also had to give up her expensive golf club membership, declining a well-meant but humiliating offer from friends to pay her dues until she was on her feet.

Fortunately, Meghan was a modeling natural knowing instinctively how to work with the camera. She put off moving to the fashion industry capital of New York to see her mother and sister through the tough time, but remaining in the movie heartland proved an advantage in that she was handed a one-off role in a sitcom, for which she reluctantly took the name Clarise Chalmers.

"It's branding," said the agent she had at the time. "No one pays to see shows with a Meghan Kowalski in it, but they will pay to see a Clarise Chalmers."

As acting and screen presence still counted for a lot in Hollywood, not to mention Meghan-turned-Clarise's considerable beauty, the one-off appearance turned into a recurring role with one episode featuring a shower scene so salacious that her mother expressed concern.

"It's Hollywood, mother," said Clarise-Meghan.

She auditioned for the lead in a major treasure-hunting adventure film not expecting to get it and ended up with the unlikely minor part of a blonde barbarian queen which attracted critical attention. After that came a role as the other woman in a straight-to-streaming-services rom-com movie so syrupy that Clarise had trouble watching it. She acted well enough in another cheap film for the audience to suspend disbelief that a luminously beautiful young woman was somehow a dowdy, lonely New York café waitress.

Her mother and sister now out of poverty, Meghan finally moved to New York to do a season on Broadway plus modeling, sharing a cheap apartment with another actress who drove her crazy, then moved back to Los Angeles when she got her big break playing an international model turned evil mastermind. She trained for weeks with a female fencing grandmaster for a sequence where she duelled with the hero while in her underwear. A role as the girlfriend of a superhero led to a major part in a heist movie. Clarise had decided to show flesh on screen, within reason, and a steamy shower scene that raised questions about the film's classification – which she did despite detesting her co-star - helped make it a box office smash hit.

Abruptly Meghan found that she had bypassed the long-slow grid of auditions to become a star. Offers of all kinds – financial, promotional, romantic, sexual and for media interviews – poured in. She fell out with her first, down-at-heel agent over accepting the lead in a remake of the Audrey Hepburn – Peter O'Toole 60s classic *How to Steal a Million*. The agent thought that the fledgling star should make another film that allowed her to show more flesh and offered more money, meaning a larger fee for him. Meghan proved to be the better judge of projects when the remake became a hit, and the other film bombed.

The rising star signed with a big management company that promised her the world, only for these promises to mean the company took bigger fees, in return for sending her endless scripts featuring empty-headed blondes that never got out of the shower. Meghan accepted that being blonde was part of the Clarise brand, but she wanted roles with more class than simulated sex in showers. She told this to the big agency executives who agreed, nodded vigorously and smiled then sent her more scripts with shower scenes, along with more modelling and endorsement work than she could possibly do.

A major distraction from these career and management issues, however, were very handsome leading men and drugs and partying. Meghan-Clarise never had any trouble attracting men but now they flocked around in packs howling. Hot, rich, successful, single men – at least they said they were single – drove her in expensive sports cars to parties in chateaus, super yachts, converted castles and plush apartments while talking of huge business deals and major movie roles. She discovered a previously unsuspected wild streak, which a rich, handsome man – preferably a Latin type – could bring out.

Meghan went swimming in the Seine in Paris with the cast of one film on a dare only to be fished out and fined by bemused French police.

“The river is being cleaned up, Mademoiselle Chalmers,” explained a senior Parisian police officer in perfect English, “but there is still too much pollution to permit public swimming.”

The Italian police were less tolerant of a similar incident involving the Trevi Fountain in Rome, where Meghan happened to be on a modelling assignment, as they found small amounts of

drugs on some of the party. Fortunately, they did not find drugs on Meghan, but only because she was already high.

“You may be a rival in beauty for Anita Ekberg, Signoria Chalmers,” a senior Italian police officer told her in perfect English, referring to the classic scene in the 1960 film *La Dolce Vita* featuring that star cavorting in the fountain. “But too many tourists have been in the fountain since then. We will have to increase the fine.”

When Meghan’s invaluable assistant and best friend Mia fetched her boss from the Roman lockup, she found the star signing autographs and posing for photos with policemen.

Then there was the party in Meghan-Clarise’s fashionable serviced apartment in London where she was shooting the remake of *How to Steal a Million*. She invited a few friends but they, in turn, invited the wrong people, including top-end drug dealers, representatives of London’s underworld who wanted to meet Clarise-Meghan and members of two rock bands that happened to be deadly rivals. Mayhem! Two celebrities had a fist fight in the apartment’s spa pool, several groupies went topless while another high as a kite invitee emptied the magazine of a small pistol from a balcony into the nearby Thames, at which point the police were called. Meghan hid behind a couch with one of the groupies for the ensuing melee which involved five patrol cars, a police helicopter and the dog squad. One woman constable was slightly injured, a police dog bit a guest and ambulances had to be called for both the brawling celebrities.

“A father of one of our constables says there’s been nothing like it since the Stones’ tours, Ms Chalmers,” said a senior English police officer in a broad Midlands accent to a badly hung over Meghan-Clarise still in her club dress the next day, “and we don’t want to see it again. Given what happened in Paris and Rome, I might also point out that this far downstream you need prior written permission to go swimming in the Thames.”

The incident prompted her mother to suggest rehab.

“I’m having fun, mother,” Meghan said.

But it was the party in New York that turned Meghan from a Diva into a Hollywood bad girl. As she told her mother later it wasn’t her fault that the enormous party in an apartment overlooking Central Park got completely out of control. She hadn’t organised it and only met the owner of the apartment on the night. All she had done was turn up with her billionaire boyfriend of the time. She did not know until interviewed by detectives the next day that two rival sets of gangsters also attended, all of them under the impression that they would have carnal relations with her although she had never met with any of them. Nor did she witness the brawl around the apartment building’s fountain which had to be broken up by police from several squad cars, and subsequent chase through Central Park involving mounted police officers. But because she was the highest profile celebrity at the party her name was mentioned prominently in all the news reports and the public, quite unfairly, came to believe that somehow she was behind the fracas.

Initially horrified by this turn of affairs Meghan found that her new reputation as a party animal (which had some justification) and Hollywood bad girl (which was unfair) meant a huge increase in the fees she could charge. This was helped by the fact that Meghan also had a sense of style that prompted comparisons with the late, great Audrey Hepburn. A bad girl with a sense of style is a winner on magazine covers. She bought a large house in on the edge of Beverley Hills

with a pool to match as a home and headquarters and gave money to her mother to buy a partnership in a fashionable antique furniture store.

All that extra money, however, also meant that consultants offering services of all kinds clustered around her howling for fees. She had PR consultants, styling consultants, tax lawyers, corporate lawyers, physical trainers and a very expensive group that managed all forms of social media for her. Meghan's online profile needed managing, she was told, at a substantial cost. Then there were the website issues, security precautions and legal issues of one kind or another, some of them caused by the high priced consultants themselves who then wanted more fees to resolve them. Other sets of consultants handled whatever money was left over after the fees had been paid.

She invested money with one group, on the recommendation of a family friend. This collective of smooth-talking salesmen, as Meghan thought of them later, put all her money into a high-leverage, high-risk financial product which also happened to pay very high commissions to the salesmen. The product promptly failed miserably with the promoters getting to the airport only a step or two ahead of several Federal agencies. The salesmen got their commissions but Meghan never saw a dollar of her money again. She tried again with another group recommended by someone her mother knew. That group took big management commissions in return for thoughtfully losing only a part of her money – a loss they blamed on “adverse market circumstances”.

“At least Federal agents aren't involved this time,” thought Meghan.

The death of her father and subsequent, brief poverty had marked Meghan more than she cared to admit, in that she wanted to keep the money she earned, but dollars seemed to flow out the door to buy services she did not really understand and did not know why she needed.

Meanwhile, Connie was developing her own reputation. She got back at a boyfriend who broke her heart by releasing a break up song that went to number one everywhere and forced the ex-boyfriend to undertake relief work in Africa. The singer moved to New York where she had the bad luck/judgment to date a rap artist who turned out to be insanely jealous. A chain of events which started with her exchanging a few, friendly words with the rapper's major rival at a party culminated in a studio shootout and both men being rushed to hospital.

Connie's sole contribution to the shootout had been to cower under a music control panel with a back-up singer and her interaction with the rival had been entirely above board, but her boyfriend loudly blamed Connie, and the police interviewed her at length about his allegations before charging both men with various violent crimes. The singer then took her father's very sensible advice concerning the boyfriend “to dump his arse” and move back to LA. There she bought a large house in Beverley Hills proper and filled it up with a floating cast of music industry wannabees and doubtful hangers-on who amused her.

The music diva dated a good-looking Hollywood producer who got her a part in a romantic comedy destined to go straight to a streaming service. Then she found out, to her horror and mortification, that the producer was not only very much married his wife confronted Connie at a swanky Hollywood party to accuse the singer of deliberately seducing her husband. Security had to intervene. This was all covered in excruciating detail by the media. Because the producer's wife defended him with such force, Connie found herself cast in the role of husband-stealer.

“I had no idea he was married, Ma,” she told her mother later. “There was no ring, no wife at his place and he never said a word.”

Her mother believed Connie, but the wife proved better at lying than the singer at telling the truth. Far worse the romantic comedy bombed, with the critics making nasty remarks about the husband-stealer’s acting ability, and the fuss affected her music sales.

Faced with the need to rebuild her public image, and after taking advice from a major public relations firm, Connie started talking about the environment. She owned a jet for touring and saw no problem in also using it to fly to conferences and meetings on the environment to give her opinion on the issue, although all she knew of the environment was the view of her Mansion’s back garden from her bedroom window. To add some media spice to her declarations she thought to revive the old feud between herself and Megan-Clarise.

“Look at the rich movie star,” she told reporters. “What has she ever done for the environment?”

Meghan at first ignored this then took advice from the large public relations firm charging big fees – the same one used by Connie, although she did not realise this. The consultant also told her to talk about the environment.

“What am I to say?” she asked.

“Just say we should reduce emissions,” the consultant replied. “The media don’t seem to care much beyond that.”

Meghan thought that sounded too much like catch-up and that, for the fees she was paying, there could have been more creative thinking but she had no idea what else to say. While she was puzzling over this her assistant and best friend Mia declared that she wanted to go out to have drinks with a mega-rich Silicon Valley type. Meghan’s boyfriend of several months, another successful, good-looking-Latin film star type, was out of town for a few days and Meghan-Clarise had agreed to appear at a party thrown by one of the producers of her latest movie.

“But we have this party to go to,” she said.

“We’ll drop in for a drink and then go on to the party,” said Mia. “We can’t appear too early. If you come, he says he can get someone presentable to keep you company while he talks to me.”

“Urgh,” said Meghan, who had adopted high standards when it came to men. “A rich geek with a presentable friend. Are you really into this guy?”

“Never met him. It’s through friends of friends and a sort-of blind date but he says he wants to find out about the film industry. The upside is that he’s got three hundred million,” said Mia. She was about Meghan’s age, short and stocky, with a mop of curly brown hair and a girl next door appeal that meant she did well for herself in attracting men. “He’s gotta be worth talking to, no matter what he looks like, and it’s at that really ritzy club we were talking about.”

“I want to check out that place out,” admitted Meghan. “I’ll talk to this presentable plus one for a while if you want.”

When they got to the club she wore a hood and sunglasses as she often did in public to avoid attention, but the man at the door still waved the two ladies through without question, directing them to the bar section. They found two men in a booth. One was obviously the mega-rich silicon

valley geek and the other the presentable plus one, standing up and staring so intently at the screen above the bar that he did not turn around when the ladies come in.

Meghan thought that the plus one was not bad looking, tall with an athletic build, olive skin and a square jaw. Okay she would talk to him for a few minutes if he ever paid attention. They sat down.

“I’m Hap,” said Hap, offering his hand. Clarise placed her hand briefly on Hap’s hand.

“Who’s your friend?” she asked.

CHAPTER TWO

Brett knew what had to be done. The first squad could still be heard firing but it was only a matter of time before the base was over-run by Zomian warrior-bots, and his friend squad leader Buddy Wilcox was in a bad way. They had stopped the bleeding from his wounds but the displays on Buddy’s tablet showed they were running out of options.

“Only thing for it,” said Brett, “is to disable the Zomian control centre. I’ve got to blow it.”

“But that’s two levels down, outside the base,” said Frieda, looking at the displays on Buddy’s console. “You’ll never get there, and the centre’s got defences.”

“She’s right, boss,” said Buddy, gasping. “That thing is armoured and got three of those big-ass chain guns that have been cutting our guys to pieces.”

“I’ll have to think of something – it’s either that or let ourselves get over run and Buddy here dies,” said Brett. “I can get to the elevator shaft from here, get the doors open and use the cables to get down to the garage level.”

“Then what?” demanded Frieda. “The warrior-bots are already on this floor. They’ll be at least a couple on that level looking for survivors.”

“I’ll burn that bridge when I come to it. You get Buddy here to a medic, and I’ll see you real soon.”

“I outrank you,” said Frieda. “I could order you not to go.”

“Fleet doesn’t get involved in land operations, Lieutenant,” said Brett.

“Oh! If you won’t give up this madness, at least let me do this.” She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

“Kissing?” said Buck, “We’re into kissing now?”

“Sure,” said Will. “We’re going to adolescent, young adult guy market. They’ll want a lot more than kissing but if we stop at that and go light on the gore then the parents won’t care that their sons are only reading trashy military SF. They’ll be happy that their kid is reading something, instead of playing computer games.”

“I agree,” said Wilma, Buck’s wife, from her desk. “A little gore, a little smooching, have a guy and pretty girl on the cover doing dramatic stuff and the book gets a spot in the son’s bookcase, instead of under the mattress. We’d even get into libraries.”

“Under the mattress would be a lot more profitable,” said Buck, wistfully.

“Not while I’m in this company,” retorted Wilma. “We may be poor but at least we’re ethical.”

“We’ll go bankrupt with dignity,” said Buck.

Buck had a round face, edged with an unkempt beard, lank hair and, to be unkind, a pudgy figure. He had met Wilma, a match in both looks and interests, at a Comic-Con. Almost as part of their marriage vows the pair had set up Buckland Publishing Inc, the international headquarters of which was the garage of their downscale LA home. This company had the honour of publishing the second book in the Stellar Ranger series featuring Technical Sergeant Brett Hardwick by rising author William Moorland. In contrast to the married pair William, or Will to friends, was the square jawed, clean-cut, dark-haired athletic type that could pass muster as an extra in a film pool scene. However, all three spoke the same language of science fiction and fantasy fandom and were dear friends.

“And it marks us out from the Warhammer, Star Wars and Star Trek stuff,” said Will.

Buck rolled his eyes. “Flooding the market – who can keep up.”

“Keep it small scale, personal and mainly human,” said Will, “and maybe we’ll all catch a break.”

“There was some profit in the first one,” conceded Buck, “and a series is always better. We could also try for an audiobook version of the first one and spend a little on marketing.”

“Audiobook?” said Will.

“Sure, growing part of the market, and way easier to distribute,” said Buck. “We can lodge the audio files on a site, nominate the price and it goes everywhere as downloads. We get to keep maybe half the nominated price. The problem is marketing but first, we’ve gotta get the book narrated. You any good at narration?”

“Violet says I’m no actor,” said Will. “Maybe we’d better hire in.”

“Hiring is expensive – couple of thousand to hire through the site, maybe, and you take what you get. But I don’t have a couple of thousand. I have to stall the printer when he wants his money as it is – even pulling casual shifts at Digital Megamall.”

“Times really are tough,” said Will. “I don’t have it either at the moment. Maybe I can find it later; plus money for marketing, you say?”

“Crowded market,” said Buck. “Whatever money you can get and we can split the revenue.”

“After I get the upfront costs back, just like you get your printer costs back before I see a cent on the printed book.”

Buck shrugged. “Fair enough.”

“How is it going with you and Violet?” asked Wilma.

“Pretty good, I’d say,” said Will. “It all seems to be working. Maybe she’ll make an honest man of me.”

“Really?” said Wilma, trying to sound enthusiastic. “That sounds great.”

Wilma had, in fact, spoken with Violet just a few days previously. An aspiring actress Violet had talked of a theatre opportunity back East, and of a major move which did not seem to include

Will. That was the reason she'd asked about Violet. Wilma was now fearful that her good friend would have his heart broken.

"You don't want to rush into anything," was all she said.

"Of course not," said Will, who had a ring in the black canvas shoulder satchel which he always carried with him and planned on presenting it that day. He did not have money for book narration because he had been spending it on rings.

"I've got something else," said Buck grabbing a pile of pages off his desk. "You remember I told you about that college roomie of mine who's done well in Silicon Valley?"

"How could I forget you know someone who actually has money," said Will.

"He knows you," said Buck. "He's read the first Ranger book and wants to read the second."

"He did and he does?" said Will, then shrugged. "Having a mega-rich reader is better than not having one, I guess. Shouldn't you try to get him interested in investing in your business, like fund audiobook development and kickstart those graphic novel projects."

"Yeah – get things moving," said Wilma.

"He's got just three hundred million or so which, according to him, is barely worth mentioning in the Valley," Buck said. "I tried getting him interested in book publishing but he says what he really wants is to produce a film."

"It's LA," said Will. "Everyone wants to produce films."

"He's written this script which he's asked me to get you to look at."

"Me? You've got that graphic novel guy. He's got several books out and he's got a big following – way more established than me."

"He's also read those but thinks you're more serious," said Buck. "If I humour him, maybe I can get some investment out of him."

Will took the manuscript and read the title aloud.

"*Robot Zombie Vampire Strippers from beyond Hell Galaxy*. That's the title? What sort of films did you guys see in college?"

Wilma sighed.

"Those sorts of films," said Buck, ignoring Wilma. "He's really into them."

"It's not so much a title as a list of genres," said Will. "Not that I'm against such films but I'm not sure I want to be involved in one."

"Can you have a look – give him some sort of appraisal?"

Will flicked through the pages.

"Naked girl screaming," he read. "Cut in half with chainsaw by zombie minion as robot overlord laughs. 'The time of the human is over. Hell Galaxy Robots will rule.' At least he keeps the action going."

"It's a little rough," said Buck.

"It's porno," said Wilma. "Check out the sex scene in the middle. I read it; now I can't look at any of my kitchen appliances."

"Kitchen appliances?" said Will in alarm.

"I'm not repeating any of it," she said. "Check it out."

Will sighed. “I’ll look at it but even without reading it I can offer a few comments – getting a production company interested in a script to the point where they are prepared to drop maybe a few million minimum putting it on the screen, is bad enough. Getting interest in anything with a title like *Robot Zombie Vampire Strippers from beyond Hell Galaxy* is a tough ask. In those sorts of films, the producers are pretty much the same people as the directors who’ve managed to get money from somewhere for a cheap film. Good horror films do get made, but not using scripts like this. Your guy’s got money he should do it himself and try to get distribution.”

“He doesn’t know anything about the film industry,” said Buck.

“He can hire people,” said Will. “It’s LA. And he knows about computers. Monster special effects shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Can you look at it and talk to him?” asked Buck. “I said you had contacts in the film industry.”

“Through Vi, sure,” said Will. “Her friends are always talking about films, but they’re mostly bit players. And when I’m not doing trashy SF I’m writing real estate flyers. However, I can find time to talk to a mega-rich person, even if they only have three hundred million or whatever. Just send me his number when you can. Now I’ve got an important date to keep.”

Will noted the strange car in the driveway of the rented condo he shared with Violet but he couldn’t see her car and thought that one of Violet’s friends had given her a lift. Never mind, today was the day. He would pop the question and all would be right with the world. He opened the door and stopped dead. There was a suitcase by the door and cardboard boxes full of her possessions on the table in the kitchen nook. Vi came downstairs at that moment, followed by a man with a full red beard, carrying another box. Will had seen the man before, at a party he thought, but could not recall his name.

“Will, I didn’t expect you home so soon,” said Vi. She was an attractive brunette with a trim figure who favoured pixie cut hairstyles and was obviously embarrassed by the unexpected encounter. “I don’t know if you remember Nolan.”

“Sort of,” said Will, glancing at Nolan.

“I’ll put the stuff in the car,” said Nolan, also obviously embarrassed. He walked out past Will, leaving the pair alone.

“I was going to leave you a note,” said Vi.

“A note?” said Will, “after three years. I even came with you out here.”

“I know, and that was sweet Will,” she said. “But we weren’t going anywhere. You weren’t going anywhere. I wasn’t going anywhere.”

“I was getting books published,” protested Will.

“Your publisher works out of a garage and has to take casual shifts at an IT store to make ends meet,” she said. “You have to write real estate blurbs.”

“I write the real estate copy because I came here with you and it was all I could find. I wasn’t planning on doing it all my life.”

“Then there’s my career,” interrupted Vi. “My agent’s dropped me, and Nolan has got me a part in a production off-Broadway.”

“New York?”

“We’re driving there now,” she said.

“Long drive,” said Will. He had no idea what else to say.

“We’ll do a couple of touristy things on the way. A break.”

Nolan came in through the still open door to pick up the suitcase and left again.

“A break? You’re going with Nolan for a theatre part and putting in vacation time on the way? That’s it after three years?”

“Will, it was time to move on,” she said. “You’re a sweet guy and hot. You’ll find someone else, nice, soon and forget about me.”

“I don’t want to find someone else. I thought we were going well. I thought you were enjoying our time; you were committed to us.”

“Will, I was putting up a front,” she said as if explaining an obvious point to a child. “What can I say, I’m an actress.” She kissed him on the cheek. Will did not move. “Thanks for the good times.”

She left. Nolan came in twice more to pick up boxes. On the second visit he paused to say, “Sorry man.”

Will who had sat down heavily at the kitchen table waved his hand to indicate the door, without looking at the man, but didn’t say anything.

“You want the door left open?”

“Close it and go,” said Will.

He heard Violet and Nolan drive off then pulled the ring case out of his bag and opened it to look at the ring.

“Total idiot,” he muttered to himself. He thrust the case back in the bag and went to sit on the condo’s sofa with his thoughts until long after the sun had set.

The condo in the suburb of Los Feliz, a short distance (in LA terms) from both Hollywood and the Valley and the natural haunt of every acting wannabe was hardly expensive but Will’s royalty income was trivial and writing real estate advertising copy did not pay well. An additional problem was that he did not think to cancel the credit card he shared with Vi until the next day when he checked to see if she had used it. She had withdrawn cash up to the daily limit three times, including the day before she left, as well as charging the first night’s hotel, petrol and meals for herself and Nolan on it. This came to three thousand two hundred and twenty three dollars and forty three cents – Will counted it up carefully. Now that really hurt.

Will sold the ring back to the store he got it from, which he found highly embarrassing – the sales lady smiled throughout – and moved to an even dingier apartment in the same neighbourhood. This he shared with Leo who worked in the same digital superstore as Buck, Leo’s Goth girlfriend Pandora, always shortened to Pan, and a billion cockroaches. Leo was a cheerful man who declared that he was into satanism and old Westerns.

“Anything with a shootout, Will,” he said. “I love those shootouts.”

He didn't say anything about Satanism and Will did not ask.

Pan wanted to set Will up with her Goth girlfriends.

"I have a sad romantic history," he told her, sore over Vi's sudden departure. "If any of your friends are interested in a gloomy affair ending in a suicide pact, let me know."

To Will's alarm Pan reported that there was some interest in the suicide pact idea, and he had to firmly reject all offers, sight unseen.

"Tell them I'm thinking of turning gay," he said, "and I'll have the suicide pact with my new gay partner."

Will reluctantly took casual shifts at the digital superstore as he knew about computers, fumigated the apartment – the cockroaches were initially discouraged – tried not to think about Vi, which was hard, and read the script. He wrote out some of his thoughts, trying to be positive, and sent them to Buck to be relayed to the author, Jason Hap, universally called Hap rather than Jason.

Buck received another request from Hap.

"He wants someone presentable to meet for drinks with a female film industry type," Buck told Wilma. "He's taken Will's advice to heart and is trying to find out more about the industry."

"Is he trying to find out more about the industry or the assistant?" asked Wilma. "If so, why the presentable plus one?"

Buck shrugged. "The assistant is bringing a girlfriend."

"Oh, okay," said Wilma. "Then get Will to go. He's not only presentable he's way presentable, not to mention single, and Hap wants to talk to him too. Tell Will if he wants his books published then he's to quit moping around, get his butt along to this bar and play nice."

Later that day Will fronted up to an exclusive Hollywood nightclub that Violet would have killed to get into, mentioned Hap's name at the door as instructed and had his identity checked. He found the Silicon Valley tycoon sitting in a booth in the bar section which could accommodate four. Hap motioned Will to sit beside him rather than opposite.

"The ladies will sit there," he said. "I see you got dressed for the occasion."

Will was wearing dark suit pants and a sports jacket with a white shirt that was his best outfit, and perhaps the only clothing he had that could be worn in an exclusive club. The tycoon, for his part, was in the Silicon Valley standard of jeans and grey jacket with elbow patches and tee shirt.

"Wilma gave me a talking to about dress standards," Will said. "I had to describe what I was going to wear and get her approval."

Hap laughed. "You don't want to cross Wilma. I was best man at their wedding. I didn't dare mess up."

"You've done well in the valley, I understand," said Will. "Are you still in the same venture? Software development aids wasn't it?"

"Sold out mostly and bought a house closer to Hollywood," said Hap. "Looking for the next big thing, like everyone else. Oh, okay here are the ladies now."

Will would have looked but he was distracted by the site of Violet on the TV screen above the bar. She was presenting an exercise aid in a commercial and looked good. Will was vaguely

aware of someone sitting opposite him but was so absorbed he did not turn around, instead taking a swig of the foreign beer had had ordered.

He heard someone say, "Who is your friend?" then turned around to find himself looking at a woman he recognised instantly as the famous star Clarise Chalmers.

CHAPTER THREE

One reviewer had commented that Clarise Chalmers had a face that started somewhere around Grace Kelly and ended up at Michelle Pfeiffer via a Victoria Secret angel or two. She had silver blond shoulder length hair that recalled Marilyn Munroe and like Munroe herself, as critics also noted, Clarise Chalmers could light up any film just by being in it. Add in her reputation as a party animal and bad girl, of which Will was well aware, and the result was a sexual appeal bombshell that exploded in the writer's face.

About to swallow a mouthful of light beer, Will did what any red-blooded American guy would when do in the circumstances - he choked and sat down coughing so hard that Hap patted him on the back.

"When he recovers his name is Will," said the multi-millionaire.

After some spluttering, thinking how humiliating it all was, Will managed to say "It is a great honour to meet you, Ms Chalmers. I've admired your films."

Hap ordered drinks for the ladies.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Will," said Meghan-Clarise, amused. She never got tired of the effect she had on good looking men, particularly if they were polite about their admiration as Will had just been. "What do you do in Hollywood?"

Will knew that he had not a hope in all creation of interesting Clarise Chambers and, in any case, after Violet he was wary of actresses, so he thought that he would not lose anything by saying the first thing that came into his head.

"I'm the very lowest of the Hollywood low, Ms Chalmers," he said, remembering how Violet had been so dismissive of his books. "You really shouldn't be seen with me. Think of your reputation."

"My reputation is already trash," said Clarise, amused. "But thanks for thinking of it. You're an assistant producer?"

"Royalty compared to me. Their assistants return my calls to tell me to go away." Will had never tried to call as assistant producer and wasn't exactly sure what they did, but it seemed a fair bet.

"I see. Stage hand?"

"They're allowed on set. The likes of me are warned off by security if we're lucky. If we're unlucky we'll get beaten up in a back room."

"That is bad. Executive assistant?"

"When they do return my calls to their bosses, they sneer at me."

“Okay, Will, I give up, what do you do?”

“I’m a writer.”

Clarise laughed, surprising Mia who was engrossed in her conversation with Hap.

“Yes, that is low,” said the star. “But not so low that I can’t be seen in a bar with you. I can always just say I didn’t want to be rude.”

It was Will’s turn to laugh. “You remember that old film *Shakespeare In Love*?”

“Actually, I do,” said Clarise, who had studied Shakespeare as part of her unfinished degree. “Good film.”

“You might remember a part during rehearsals for the first production of Romeo and Juliette when someone points to Shakespeare who’s talking to the actors and asks the theatre manager ‘Who’s he?’ And the manager says, ‘Oh he’s no-one, he’s just the author’. Now if they’re going to say that about the greatest playwright of all time, what are they going to say about someone who writes trashy military SF for fourteen-year-olds? You’ll need a better excuse for talking to me.”

Will had recovered enough to appreciate that Clarise was braless underneath a low-cut, red club dress (the jacket with the hood had been cast aside) and was struggling not to leer.

The actress giggled softly. She had noticed Will’s struggles and was amused by them. “You’re not trying to sell yourself at all here are you, Will. Men usually sell themselves to me.”

“You would have seen through all of that in a split second, Ms Chalmers. I’m also a nerd as well as a writer. I even have a theory about Darth Vader.”

She laughed again. Will thought that Violet would have killed for a chance to have a drink with Clarise Chalmers.

“This keeps getting worse and worse,” the actress said. “Please don’t tell me your theory about Darth Vader. A boyfriend in college got me to watch the first three movies produced. That’s several hours of my life I won’t get back. Let’s talk about something else.”

“You can always turn this meeting to your advantage,” said Will, “you can say you’ve met a nerd and a writer and they’re not so bad. You can’t let them into the neighbourhood as they bring down property prices, but otherwise they’re okay. Shows that you’re broadminded.”

“As it happens, Will, my life is plagued by writers,” she said.

“It is, why?”

“I need them, so consultants tell me, for my website, Twitter – sorry, X – account, as well as for Instagram, Facebook, Tinder and I don’t know what else besides, all to develop my image.”

“Pardon me, Ms Chalmers but what are you doing on Tinder? It’s a dating app and you have a boyfriend, some big star.”

“Robin Hawke. You read the media news, Will?”

“I knew someone in the acting scene here for a time,” said Will. “Also, why bother to develop anything on Instagram? It’s good for Eastern European models who want to build a profile, but you’re already a star with fans in the millions. You use it to boost your next film or endorsement. If you don’t have anything to sell then send off a couple of pics of you, I dunno, looking fabulous at the latest glitzy star event, with details about where it is. Same for Facebook and X and whatever else. Just keep your millions of fans interested with the occasional bulletin until you’re ready to push something. Needs some writing but not much.”

“I see,” said Clarise, leaning back – Will had to be careful not to look down - and eyeing the writer quizzically. “You use social media yourself much, Will.”

“Some, although I have my doubts about how much my fan base, such as it is, looks at X or Facebook. They’ll look at Instagram, but they’d be way more interested in Eastern European models than my stuff.”

“I also get scripts from writers all the time,” Charise said. “All with shower scenes.”

“You have a reputation for such scenes, Ms Chalmers. I hope you don’t mind if I say I have found them interesting myself, but I guess you want to move beyond them,” said Will.

“Maybe,” said Clarise, thinking that Will had been suitably respectful in the way he had admitted to liking her shower scenes.

“You remember Sharon Stone and the film from way back, *Basic Instinct*.”

“With the interrogation scene where she isn’t wearing underwear,” said Clarise. “She says she was tricked into doing that.”

“That’s right,” said Will, “but the film made her, and it otherwise has a certain style. It’s not solely about the characters simulating sex. Then there is the case of Jacqueline Bisset’s wet tee shirt in the film *The Deep*.”

“Haven’t heard of that one.”

“It’s a 70s film so way back. As you’d expect from the name a lot of it is underwater and Ms Bisset wears a wet, see-through tee shirt for the first few minutes of the film. A shot of her in that tee shirt underwater which she did not authorise was a feature of the film’s publicity campaign. She also says that no-one, including her, realised how see through it was until they looked at the actual shots much later. But the sight of Ms Bisset in that shirt made the film. I read one unkind review that said the film was only worth watching for that scene. It’s even credited with starting the fad of wet tee-shirt contests. My point, Ms Chalmers, is that sex still sells, big time.”

“Hmmm!” said Clarise, still eying Will. “How do you know all this stuff?”

“My life at the moment is so interesting I’ve had time to look at film clips on YouTube,” said Will. “On the other side of the sex coin, there’s Charlize Theron in the film *Monster*; a biopic about the only known female serial killer. She deliberately put on thirty pounds for the role and won both the Academy Award and the Golden Globe for best actress that year. More importantly, as far as Hollywood was concerned, the film was also a big commercial success.”

“Thirty pounds!” exclaimed Clarise.

“And she lost it again – an important point for most women.”

“Look at the time,” said Mia, suddenly, getting up. “We want to be just fashionably late to that party. Good to meet you, Will.”

“And you,” said Will.

“This has been most interesting Will,” said Clarise, also standing up. She turned to go then turned back again. “Before I go what is your take on this thing with Connie Leighton.”

“The singer?” said Will. “You ladies have some sort of history I seem to recall reading. She’s been saying stuff about you.”

“I’m not jetting around talking about the environment enough.”

“Oh right, now I remember,” said Will. “But there is an obvious snap back, isn’t there?”

“Is there?”

“Sure, all she’s really doing is flying into climate conferences on a private jet, telling poor people not to use energy, and flying away again. Doesn’t sound very constructive to me.

Clarise thought about this. “Should I say that?”

“Not quite like that,” said Will, a little surprised that she was taking him seriously. “Maybe say if Leighton really wants to save emissions she’d do a lot more by trading in her private jet for a bicycle than talking about it.”

“Hmmm!” said Clarise.

“If reporters persist say that emissions are a complex problem and governments should do more, which is basically all Leighton is saying. Then walk away.”

“Okaaaay.. most interesting to meet you, Will,” she said and left.

Will’s first act after the ladies left was to bury his head in Hap’s shoulder.

“All I did was babble,” he said, his voice muffled by the entrepreneur’s jacket. Hap patted him on the head with his other hand in mock sympathy.

“There, there,” he said, amused.

At the door to the bar, Clarise looked back, saw this byplay, and giggled. Most gratifying.

“I almost told her my theory on Darth Vader. Thank the lord she stopped me.”

“I heard the name. What is your theory on Darth Vader?”

Will sat up. “That he’s really the good guy trying to hold the empire together, and that the real villain is Luke Skywalker, who was out to grab parts of the Empire for himself”

“Okay,” said Hap, nodding. “I understand. It’s a good theory but maybe someone like Clarise Chalmers is not quite ready for it.”

“Maybe,” said Will. “You didn’t tell me a famous star was coming?”

Hap spread his hands. “I didn’t know. I just thought the assistant would bring another assistant type, not the star herself. Anyway, don’t beat yourself up, you made her laugh a couple of times.”

“I guess,” said Will.

“You can now tell cute girl next door types that you’ve met Clarise Chalmers. It’s a good first date story.”

“Hap, I like your thinking,” said Will, brightening up. “First dates with cute next door types sound more viable if I have a story like that to tell, and I might not babble.”

“There’s room for hope,” said Hap. “I also wanted to talk about the script. You say there’s no point in trying to show it around?”

“Nope. I wouldn’t know where to start but you certainly wouldn’t get any of the major agents, producers or studios interested in anything like that. You want to get out of here and grab some fast food? I’ll offer comments then. This place is way too fancy for my tastes.”

“Why not,” said Hap.

They adjourned to a burger place down the road, sitting opposite one another on the communal table.

“You could make the script more palatable while leaving in some of the elements you have.”

“I’m listening,” said Hap.

“First off let’s dump the sex and slaughter scene involving kitchen appliances. That’s non-negotiable.”

“Awww!” said Hap. “I liked that scene.”

“Poor Wilma read it and now can’t bring herself to turn on her kitchen blender. The world is not ready for such a scene. There are also continuity issues as it doesn’t really fit with much else in the story.”

“Suppose...,” said Hap.

“But you have these slasher demons that rise from the depths – this hell dimension – to kill randomly, mostly pretty girls. Let’s keep that as one element.”

“Still listening,” said Hap.

“Have you heard of a music festival called Balaton Sound?”

“Can’t say that I have,” said Hap, surprised at the sudden change in subject. “Where is Balaton Sound?”

“It’s in Hungary,” said Will. “There’s a lake South West of Budapest called Lake Balaton. I only know this because I looked it up after seeing clips on YouTube. Basically, it’s big and loud and features water activities – a swimming pool, people messing around in the lake, pretty girls dancing with hunky, bare-chested guys. All meat for these slasher demons.”

“Okay, you think the massacre should be staged at this festival?”

“The festival itself isn’t important. I just mention it as a starting point. You can saw off something like that, with its unbelievable crowds, entertainments, and even carnival attractions, push it into the distant future and stick it on top of some ruins. Then it becomes a New World Party Town.”

“Party town?”

“Sure, in the far future, after we’ve been through wars, diseases and environmental degradation and whatever, humanity has reached this good place where they can send their young people to these party towns for a break from the grim reality of rebuilding the world - a sort of annual ritual where they can dance and frolic semi-naked in water.”

“I’m feeling this more,” said Hap.

“The trouble is that these wars and troubles have also generated monsters – formerly humans that have somehow mutated into hostile slashing machines. No one has seen them for some time and it’s assumed that they are all dead. Party Town has been put on top of an old war ruin because it still has facilities which can be adapted for the fun and frolicking. Access to the under-layers has been sealed off but, well, these demons find a way in and start taking out party goers. Your heroes – the security team maybe – then find the bodies gruesomely dismembered, but those running the place don’t believe that it’s these demons and so on. It then has elements of a future Jaws out of water.”

“Sounds good, man,” said a student type seated a little down from them getting up to leave. “Hope it gets up.”

“Oh, thanks,” said Will.

“Some of my scenes are part of this?” said Hap.

“Incorporated into the plot – you don’t have much of a plot in your script.”

The entrepreneur was silent for a moment.

“You think I should rewrite with that basic idea? It’s your idea.”

“I have too many ideas,” said Will. “I can give one away and it’s Hollywood, scripts are rewritten all the time.”

“What chance would the script have then?”

“I wouldn’t lie to you – still very little,” said Will. “There are a billion scripts out there and a lot of hard-driving people pushing their ideas. I’m not very competitive, so it’s not the scene for me. I prefer to write military SF novels and have the occasional fan show appreciation. Can’t ask for more.”

“Hmmm!” said Hap. He took another bite of his hamburger. “Buck said something about making it myself. How much would that cost?”

“When a fellow banker once asked J.P. Morgan how much it cost to own a yacht, he replied that ‘if you have to ask you can’t afford it’. A few million at least for anything halfway decent, and it’s got to be money you’re happy to lose. Lots of films don’t make back their production costs. Maybe you can get it into late night sessions at fringe movie theatres, to see what audiences make of it. One of the streaming services desperate for content might pick it up at a cut rate if it’s not too bad. I’ve seen weirder stuff on those things.”

“A few million you say?”

“At least – depending on what you want to do, what sort of actors you want to hire and so on. You won’t get anyone like Clarise Chalmers for that money but there are plenty of wannabes around.”

“Crowd scenes are expensive, aren’t they?” said Hap.

“Computer graphics does wonders. Use blue or black back drops, or whatever it is they use, for everything and add the backgrounds later, like they did for the Sin City movies. You still gotta have actors and a film crew but with CGI you can set it anywhere. If you want to talk about it further I sort of know a director, an Evan Zagame, who’s in this area. He’s been involved in exactly one film for fringe markets.”

“Which film?”

“Zombie Nazis in LA.”

“It was okay,” said Hap. “But cheap. Effects were stupid. How do you know this guy?”

“I was on the fringe of the film industry here for a time through a girl friend who dumped me. We got to talking at a party.” All of the people Will knew in LA had been through Violet and he had not tried to contact any of them since she had left, but he thought he could find the wanna-be director. “He’s never had any money to make a film. Common problem with film makers.”

“What’s the next step?”

“Get the script into shape and show it to him, but as I said he’s got absolutely no money to make anything. You have to pay him. However, that means you have control of the project. Be firm on the story.”

“You know, Jason Hap film producer has a certain ring to it,” said Hap, taking another bite from his hamburger. “And it sounds like way more fun than producing software development tools.”

Maybe I'll take the next step, but I've got to tie up other stuff. Do you want to do this script rewrite?"

"Hap, I'd do it but not for free," said Will. "It's your project and a slasher zombie film is not how I see myself as a writer."

"Fair enough," said Hap. "I can pay out some, maybe a few thousand."

"Okay, ten thousand."

"Five," said Hap, straight away.

Will sighed. He should have made his first bid fifteen. Too late now. "Well, seven and a half then, and that's dirt cheap for a script."

"Done – and I want this director to call me."

"No problem but half my fee up front, Mr Producer, before I start writing."

"You don't trust me, Will?" said Hap, smiling.

"It's Hollywood, Hap. No one trusts anyone. Anyway, I'm broke."

As Will and Hap talked, Clarise and Mia were being driven in a chauffeured, stretch limousine to the producer's party.

"Will seemed nice," said Mia.

"I was surprised," said Clarise. "I mean he not my type at all, but I was interested in what he had to say."

"Not Latino?"

"Rich, successful, drop dead gorgeous will do," said Clarise. "Will's cute but he's not in Robin's class."

"He's tall and he had you laughing."

"He was diverting and interesting, like I said, but I need my men to be impressive, and Will isn't that. How did it go with you and that billionaire?"

"Nah," said Mia. "He's okay but no sparks, even if he is mega-rich. We talked about the film industry."

The arrived at the party which was staked out by plenty of photographers and even reporters. It seemed that a Hollywood star could not even attend a party without being asked for comment. The reporters started calling out the moment Clarise-Meghan stepped out of her limousine.

"Ms Chalmers, Connie Leighton is asking what you've been doing for the environment," said one such down at heel reporter from behind the ring of security guards. Instead of just ignoring the question as she had previously done, Clarise chose to walk up to the reporter.

"Well, what has Leighton done for the environment except tell other people that they should cut emissions while flying around on a fancy jet?" she said. The shouted questions stopped. The reporter's colleagues were busy scribbling in notebooks or had recording devices out.

"If Leighton wants to cut emissions maybe she could trade her jet in for a bicycle."

"Do you think emissions are a problem," said the reporter quickly.

"Emissions are a complex problem and government should do more, and that's all Leighton is saying. Thankyou."

Clarise walked away ignoring the other, shouted questions.

CHAPTER FOUR

The beautiful male presenter fronting the daily celebrity news program *Sidewalk Stars* was impressed by Meghan's response.

"Oooooohhhhhweee!" he said, showing gleaming teeth. "Snapback!"

"Yowllll!" said the beautiful female presenter, also showing gleaming teeth. "Imagine Connie Leighton riding a bicycle between gigs."

They showed a brief animated sequence of a cartoon of Leighton riding a bicycle.

"But maybe Clarise Chalmers has a point," said the male presenter. "It doesn't help much just to talk about emissions."

The next day, trying to forget that he had babbled at a famous actress – at least he thought he had babbled – Will was back earning his bread and butter.

He had been sent a picture of what looked to him to be a run-down timber frame house in a doubtful neighbourhood with a wild-looking front garden and sighed.

"This renovators delight has two bedrooms, one bathroom and a natural garden," he wrote, then paused to look at the interior shots of a dingy kitchen and sinister-looking living room. "With an interior of character..."

His mobile rang. A private number. He didn't know anyone who bothered to keep their number private but then thought that it was probably just a new type of scam call.

"Hello, this is Will Moorland."

"Will, this is Clarise Chalmers from last night."

"Whoa! Okay." Will was shocked.

"Mia got your number for me, and I'll say first that you seem nice but you're not my type. Anyway, I have a boyfriend."

"Okaaaay," said Will. "Ms Chalmers, I get that romantically I am but mud on the underside of your fashionable high heels..."

"I didn't mean it like that," said Clarise.

"...Just exaggerating for effect, Ms Chalmers. Guys do that. But women not interested in me usually don't call me in the first place, or they ignore my calls then send a text saying they are sorry they haven't got back to me but they've been so busy. That's when I get the hint and stop calling. Was there a reason you called to tell me you're not interested?"

"Oh yes, what I want to know is what do I do now?"

"Um – I'm still at a loss Ms Chalmers," said Will. "Make another blockbuster film, marry a billionaire and have perfect children. I'm not sure I can help you much in any of that."

"What I mean is I took your advice last night and told reporters staking out the party that Connie Leighton should trade her jet in for a bicycle and it worked."

"Oh right." Will was astonished. "Well, it was just an off the cuff thought, Ms Chalmers. Don't you have high powered consultants who advise you on PR and your public profile and all that?"

“I do, they just told me to also talk about the environment. What I want to know is what do you think I should do next.”

“I see... After babbling at you last night I thought it might be more likely I’d be arrested than consulted. I’d have to think.”

“How did you know what to say, or how to respond when they asked more questions?”

“I worked as a journalist for maybe three years back East,” said Will. “I was never anywhere near the celebrity end and never in public relations, but reporters are reporters anywhere, I guess. Now that I think about it, I can at least ask what you want to achieve.” Will remembered a public relations person saying that he asked this of a client and thought that it sounded as if he knew what he was talking about. “I mean, you don’t need to raise your profile, do you? More fans just means more stalkers.”

“I guess not,” said Clarise.

“Then, maybe, change your image somehow, continue your feud with Connie Leighton...”

“I don’t want to feud with anyone,” said Clarise. “She started this climate thing. I just want to get out in front of her on that, I guess, make it go away. Maybe I could soften my image. The Hollywood bad girl thing has its uses, but it could be softened.”

“Okay, I think I see,” said Will. He could not believe he was discussing Clarise Chalmer’s public profile with the star herself. “You’ve told this to your high powered public relations agency?”

“I did. They said the bad girl image was valuable and I should have some more wild parties.”

“I can see their point,” said Will. “The public is more likely to buy tickets to films with bad girls in them, but you don’t want to lose the image altogether you just want to show you have a good side.”

“Yes, that’s it,” said Clarise.

“And they didn’t listen – or just talked you out of it?”

“Yep. All sorts of soft words to talk the diva down.”

“Do you call yourself a diva often?” Will thought that Clarise Chambers was smart and determined, even if she had trouble getting her own way with fee-hungry consultants. To continue the analogy with old stars, as well as Marilyn Munroe and Grace Kelly, she had a touch of Bette Davis.

Clarise giggled softly. “Sometimes, but this time it didn’t help as they didn’t do what I wanted – they did what they wanted so they could charge more fees.”

“One thought that has occurred to me, if you want to do this softening image thing, is to steer clear of the climate debate altogether – every person and their pet talks about climate – and go in for charity.”

“Hmmm! What do you suggest?”

“Well, wasn’t there a children’s hospital in a depressed area that needed money? I thought I saw it mentioned somewhere. I’ll have to look it up. No one can argue with charity work for a children’s hospital.”

“What, you want me to help out in the canteen?”

“No, no, they need money for equipment and renovations,” Will said. “Hold a benefit. A fund raising dinner dance thing. Charge a lot for tickets and give the profits to the hospital. Politicians and charities do fund raisers all the time. Now that I think of it involve Connie Leighton as well.”

“I’m doing this because she started attacking me.”

“It makes for a better story. Two entertainment bad girls forget their feud and band together to raise money for a children’s hospital – a Bad Girls Benefit. Also, she can’t attack you while it’s going on and she can’t say anything much afterwards, and it helps with her image as well. You and Leighton agree to circulate and meet people on the night, and that should sell tickets. A lot of people will pay good money to just be in the same room with famous bad girls and, let’s not forget, the children’s hospital gets money to buy equipment. Lots of winners and no losers that I can see.”

“Hmmm! I want you to come and see me today but for business. It’s not a social or romantic invitation.”

“Ms Chalmers, I get it, you’re not interested,” said Will. “Keep on harping on that point and you’ll hurt my feelings. I’ve got a couple of things to finish up here. After lunch?”

The house on the edge of the prime Beverley Hills district was not big enough to be considered a mansion, but it was large enough and had a very big door – Will, could never get over the size of the doors in California – which was opened by an elderly housekeeper. She led the way to the house’s ground floor study which Clarise Chalmers used as an office when not on set. She was dressed in jeans and a blue canvas shirt, top buttons artfully undone, with only touches of make-up – not that she needed much make up to be beautiful. Will, who had dressed in California casual of a blazer and jeans with a white tee shirt, in fact the only clean shirt in the house when he got dressed, tried not to do more than glance at the hint of soft cleavage in a byplay that the star noted with quiet amusement. She was well used to the ways of men looking at her and appreciated that the writer was working hard to be polite. That was important for what she had in mind for Will. His next move, however, she did not expect.

“That’s a big pool for a backyard!” exclaimed Will, going to the study window. The window looked onto a back patio with chairs and a table and then a long, straight pool with a spa attachment about half way along its length. A few paces beyond the pool a high stone wall kept out the voyeurs, not to mention the paparazzi. The only sign of life was an elderly ginger cat sunning itself on one of the patio chairs.

“That’s twenty-five metres, isn’t it?”

“I suppose,” said Clarise. “I was told lap pool when I bought this place.”

“That’s twenty-five metres,” said Will, nodding. “I’m impressed.”

“I’m glad my pool impresses you, Will,” said Clarise, amused. “Please sit.”

“Oh right, yes, pardon me,” said Will, sitting. The star had the study set up like an office so that she sat behind the desk in one corner. “You summoned me, Ms Chalmers.”

“Glad you could come in on a Sunday.”

“If a screen goddess summons a mere mortal, Ms Chalmers, the mere mortal should come. Bad things happen to those who defy the gods. Just look at the super hero movies.”

“Doubt that I’m a goddess,” she said, rolling her eyes. “I eat and go to the bathroom like everyone else, and I will grow old. I also have to think about my public profile, so I want to hear more about this benefit.”

“Not much more to add to what I told you on the phone,” said Will. “The place I was thinking of is the Haddenbach Children’s Hospital in South LA. It’s a public institution and cutbacks have hurt. They’ve launched an appeal for funds to fix real problems with the buildings and buy equipment and stuff. The first step would be to contact the administrators and see if they want to endorse a benefit. Then contact Connie Leighton to see if she wants to be in it, which may be difficult if she’s sore over the crack about trading her jet for a bicycle. You market this event using your social media; see if that Sidewalk Stars show will run an item. Set up a website to sell the highly priced tickets, that is after you’ve decided how much to charge which means finding a venue and caterers and security and, well, a billion other issues which have to be sorted out.”

“Sounds like a lot of work,” said Clarise. “How do you know about this stuff, anyway?”

“My parents, my mother in particular, organise an annual, fund-raising benefit for one of the hospitals where I came from.”

“Where is that, Will?”

“Albany, state capital of New York. It’s West of the Big Apple itself.”

“How come you’re out here?”

“It’s a long, sad story concerning a girl.”

“Sad? Did she die?”

“No, she’s fine as far as I know. The story is sad from my point of view.”

Clarise laughed again. “You make no effort at all to sell yourself do you, Will. Look, I want to help out your sad story if I can by offering you work in organising this benefit.”

“Really?” said Will. “I never said I actually organised one, I just sort of know from my parents some of the ins and outs.”

“Will, you’re trying to talk yourself out of a job,” she said. “I intend to make it a per day thing and if it’s not working out I’ll fire you, no hard feelings.”

“Okay, and I can quit at any time, no hard feelings. What sort of per day amount are you going to pay the lowest of the low?”

“You’ve just been talking yourself down Will, and this is on a trial basis. What do you think would get you in here?”

Will looked at the pool and back at Clarise. “Is it just about the event, assuming it goes ahead?”

“Come to think of it, no,” she said. “I liked what you said about the social media stuff. Take it over and do what you said. Keep the fans happy. The people I have at the moment want to tell me about the responses I’m getting on X, and I’m not sure I care.”

“In fact, I’d advise you to ignore comments on X altogether,” Will said. “The service has its place and its uses but the people who offer un-asked for comments on it are the likes of crazed retirees and hard line activists. You don’t try to reason with those guys and you don’t pay them any mind.”

“Huh!” said Clarise. “That sounds good to me. Get rid of the people doing it at the moment and then organise all the social media so that it communicates to my fans.”

“Enough comment about your social life and projects to keep them happy, but otherwise you don’t want to know.”

“Yeah, or pay big fees,” said Clarise.

“What about t...” Will almost said two hundred and then remembered his experience with Hap last night. “Three hundred and use of the pool once a day.”

“Two hundred, and you can use the pool any time if I’m not using it for a shoot,” said Clarise. “Why are you so interested in the pool?”

“I like to swim every day. Split the difference. Two fifty and is there some place I can shower.”

“There’s a small change and shower place just here,” said Clarise pointing to the study wall. “You have to go out to the patio to get to it. You can use that. Two fifty, then.”

“I reserve the right to work on my own projects when there’s nothing to do here – you don’t pay me for that time.”

“That’s fair,” Clarise said.

Will made a showing of spitting into his hand and then offering to shake on it, that being a ritual where he came from. Clarise also symbolically spat into the hand and they shook on it. The by-play amused her.

“Another thing, non-negotiable, is that you don’t get romantic ideas about the person paying your daily fee.”

“Got it, boss. All friendly.”

“And don’t call me boss. It makes me feel old. Call me Meghan in private, and I don’t mind Meg,” she said.

“No problem, but why Meghan?”

“Because it’s my name. I’m still legally Meghan Kowalski. Clarise Chalmers is just a branding thing. I never really liked Clarise especially. A stripper’s name. Now where are my manners? I should have already offered coffee as I would to any guest, but it’s just me to make it. The housekeeper would have gone by now.”

“If you don’t mind I can make it. I worked as a barista for a time.”

“Okay, sure, so there’s something about you that’s not sad or hopeless.”

“Yep, my life’s not totally miserable, just almost so.” They walked through to the kitchen where Clarise sat on a stool while Will looked through cupboards. “I couldn’t help but notice,” he said as he filled the kettle, “that there was some material on a cryptocurrency on your desk.”

“Cryptocurrency?”

“Yeah, Be-coin.”

“Oh that, is that a cryptocurrency?”

“There’s a whole heap of those sort of digital exchange currencies. I’ve heard of Be-coin but never looked at it. Were you thinking of investing?”

“I was asking a friend about investing,” she said - in fact, it was her boyfriend Robin Hawke - “and he gave me that. What have you heard about it?”

“Nothing much about that one specifically. My only comment is that I wouldn’t go into cryptocurrencies lightly; just because a friend gave you a pamphlet. It’s high risk, high reward. You could make a lot of money, but you could also lose your whole investment. It’s for those who want to take the risk and are willing to study the market. You already have money and are too busy making it to have time to work out what any of that stuff means.”

“Well, yes,” she said. “When would you recommend then?”

“Advising anyone on investment is a serious matter, Ms Ch... Meg, but at least as a starting point I can ask how much risk are you willing to take? Do you want to go in for crash through or crash, or better returns than simply putting the money into a bank account?”

“Better returns,” she said after a moment’s thought.

“Then you’re set and forget and to start you might as well use mutual funds,” said Will. “Looks like you’ll have to settle for espresso. I can do a mean Mocha, but not today.”

“That’s fine,” said Meghan. “How do I invest in these mutual funds?”

“Get yourself set up on a digital platform connected with a major bank and then you’ll be able to invest in whatever you want, including index funds, particularly market index funds which are a topic for another time. I can at least show you what to look for and the different classes of investment and lecture you about diversifying your investments, but the choice of the investment must remain yours.”

“That’s on your list when you start tomorrow,” said Meghan. “How do you know about this stuff, anyway?”

“Part of my reporting was on personal investment, on the Lakes Guardian in the Chicago district which competes with the Daily Herald and there is no finer newspaper unless you happen to work for the Herald, the Sun-Times or the Tribune, but let’s not go there.”

“Let’s not,” agreed Meghan, smiling.

“For one reason or another I also did property, and I have to say a high-end apartment building with all the tenants busy paying rent is not such a bad investment if you can get the location and gearing right. You can put a property manager in place and walk away.”

Meghan thought that sounded like an excellent idea.

“Gearing?” she asked.

“How much debt you take on to pay for the building. You want it low enough so that if there’s a problem with a couple of tenants then your interest payments are still covered.”

“Okay,” said Meghan. “You’ve never had money to do any of this yourself?”

“Nope. No-one’s going to pay to see me on the big screen, so I have to toil away at contract work for major stars who go out of their way to tell me how romantically uninteresting I am.”

“I never said uninteresting,” protested Meghan. “I just have to be careful, especially as I rang you. You know how it is.”

“Yes, I know how it is,” said Will. “I’m a dumb guy who has to be warned off or he gets all sorts of ideas. If I ever have a daughter I’m going to warn her about dumb guys.”

They adjourned to the kitchen table and the talk turned to Meghan’s role as a blonde barbarian queen, with the star saying she was a strange choice for the role.

“You made it work, Meghan, I thought. Anyway, guys don’t care whether the eye candy really fits the role.”

Meghan smiled over the compliment.

“The most ludicrous piece of female miscasting must be of Susan Hayward in an old film ‘The Conqueror’,” continued Will.

“Don’t think I’ve heard of it,” said Meghan.

“It was made in the 1950s. The story is John Wayne, the archetype cowboy star, picked up the script in an agent’s office and decided he really wanted the lead role, although it’s about Genghis Khan, the Mongol warlord who conquered most of the world.”

“John Wayne as a Mongol?”

“It gets worse,” said Will. “Susan Hayward, a typical full-figured, red-haired leading lady of the time, was cast as a Mongol princess.”

Meghan laughed. “Now I don’t feel so bad as a barbarian queen who showers under water falls.”

“The actress herself thought it was hilarious but only the critics seemed to notice. It’s on those lists you see of the worst movies of all time ...”

“None of mine are on those lists yet,” said Megan.

“... But the film didn’t do too badly at the box office although it’s still considered a financial failure. Shows you what star power can do, I guess.”

They talked for some time after that before Will declared that he should go, as he had work to do.

“What work do you have now, if you’re going to start working for me tomorrow,” asked Meghan as she walked with Will out to the front gate. With her boyfriend on a film set somewhere, as he often was, she had enjoyed the company.

“I was writing real estate blurbs when you called,” said Will, “and you remember Hap from last night? He is thinking of producing a slasher film and wants me to rewrite the script he’s written for it.”

“That’s more impressive than anything else you’ve told me,” said Meghan. “You should bill yourself as a script writer.”

“You’d be way less impressed if you saw the script he gave me,” said Will. “It has a sex scene with kitchen appliances.”

“Urgh!”

“And he’s paying me a pittance for the rewrite. Like I said I’m at the bottom end of the Hollywood pecking order.”

“Will we’re going to have to work on how you pitch yourself,” Meghan said. By that time they were out in the street, but the star could not see any vehicle apart from what she took to be an abandoned compact in front of her house. “Where’s your car?”

“Right in front of you,” said Will, unlocking the door of the compact.

“This thing?” said Meghan, looking with horror at what she was later told was a Saturn ION. Recognised as one of the models that helped kill the GM offshoot that made it, the red Saturn

showed evidence of a long, hard life. She had a high-end BMW in the garage and her boyfriend drove a Ferrari.

Will leant against the car and laughed. “The look on your face,” he said after a time.

Meghan laughed as well, then looked at the dents in the hood with concern. “It still runs?”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Meghan,” Will said chuckling and he drove off.

The star went back into the house thinking that Will was the most extraordinary man that she knew, although she could not decide whether that was good or bad extraordinary. Later she settled for interesting, extraordinary.

On his way home, Will rang Buck from his mobile phone clamped to a part of the car’s fittings, so that he still had both hands free to drive. Buck was in the middle of a shift at the digimart.

“Buck, hi, I’ve got this strange gig that may make enough to afford the audio project we talked about.”

Then he said who had hired him and why.

“One of her staff called us,” said Buck, “and asked what you were like. Against our better judgment we gave you a good reference. So that’s what it was about, Clarise Chalmers actually rang you?”

“Yep, she went out of her way to tell me it was not a romantic thing, but the result was a paying job. I’m a sort of court Eunuch to a big-time star.”

“You don’t have much experience as a journalist and you’ve never organised a big event like that,” said Buck, evidently astonished.

“Not sure how long this’ll last,” admitted Will, “but I seem to get on with the star herself, so maybe I’ll get enough cash together to pay for the narration, and maybe even marketing.”

“At least someone’s earning money,” said Buck.

CHAPTER FIVE

Meghan was in her kitchen the next day looking for something else to eat besides cornflakes when she was buzzed by someone at the front gate. On the security cam she could see it was Will with a large bag and wearing what appeared to be tee-shirt, shorts and sandals. Thinking that her new hire was already proving surprising, Meghan reassured her off-site security service and let him in.

“You don’t have to come in this early, Will,” she said, “And what’s with the shorts, we’re not that casual.”

“They’re my swimmers, I’m taking my swim before work. Hope you don’t mind. I’ve brought my clothes in the bag, along with the ingredients for a mocha and these,” he produced a package, “English muffins. Cut one in half, toast it, spread it with margarine – I’m not a

mayonnaise or a butter guy – and jam and that’s breakfast. I saw you had a four-slice toaster yesterday. Do you want one?”

Like all movie stars and top models, Meghan was on a perpetual diet combined with an exercise regimen that would do credit to a professional athlete but thought that she could fit in an English muffin with jam. She ate hers sitting on a stool at the kitchen’s central bench, while Will ate his moving around the kitchen, organising a mocha for her.

“You didn’t have breakfast at home before you came?”

“Nope. Put on my bathers and came straight here. If you saw the kitchen at my place you’d understand. Best to come here and avoid food poisoning. I appreciate I may be imposing, if so just tell me so.”

“The muffin buys you kitchen time,” said Meghan, while chewing. “I’m generous like that. Is the kitchen really that bad where you live?”

“The cockroaches like it. If you happen to ring me at home again and a cockroach answers the phone you’ll know what’s happened.”

Will gave her coffee in a mug.

“I’ll have mine when I come out,” he said.

Meghan followed Will out to the pool area and sat down at the patio table with her coffee to watch Will take off his shirt, which she found interesting. Her new hire had a real swimmer’s build, she thought. No wonder he had wanted access to the pool. She watched him wash his swimming goggles in the water, put them on then a swimmer’s cap and start his session with a racing dive. The dive woke up the housekeeper’s ginger cat which had been stretched out asleep on another table. The cat, Gato, glared at Will for daring to disrupt her peaceful day, tail lashing the table top.

Meghan was still there when Mia arrived. Her arrival usually marked the start of her day when they went over her schedule.

“What’s with the beefcake?” said Mia, also sitting down. “And that looks like good coffee.”

“It’s Will,” said Meghan. “You remember I got you to get his number and check him out.”

“So it is,” said Mia, looking closer. “You hired him like you said you might. That was fast ... and he’s using the pool?”

Meghan told Mia about the interview and what Will had suggested.

“A benefit. Is that going to work?” said the assistant.

“Will’s going to start organising when he gets out of the pool, so we’re going to find out.”

“There’s no need for him to get out of the pool just yet though is there?” said Mia. “He’s already doing well from where I sit.”

“No, no need just yet.”

Mia went over Meghan’s day while Will splashed up and down the pool, changing smoothly from freestyle to breaststroke and then to butterfly, while Gato continued to glare.

“You have Julio coming at 10,” said Mia. (Julio was Meg’s personal trainer. One of the rooms was set up as a gym.) “Then a Zoom conference with the director of *The Fermi Interface*” (Meghan was cast as a super spy) “at 12, and not much else today. Tomorrow, you do action scenes at a studio.”

“Will is going to coach me in investment today, I hope,” said Meghan.

The ladies were joined by the only other member of Meghan's small entourage, Emma, a recent college graduate billed as an assistant to Mia but whose main function, as far as Meghan was concerned, was to keep Mia company when Meghan was away. A pretty girl who chatted too much for Meghan's liking, Emma was taken aback by the sight of Will in the pool.

"Is this a new Diva thing?" she asked.

The others laughed.

"You may be organising a benefit with him," said Meghan, and took the opportunity of inviting Will over, all wet from the pool, to be introduced to Emma.

She shook hands with him, round-eyed.

"How come the swimming thing, Will?" asked Meg. "You seem to know what you're doing in a pool."

"I got through college on a swimming scholarship," said Will. "I always liked swimming."

"That's something else that's not sad or hopeless," said Meg.

"True. But you hired me to be a social media-PR type, not to swim, so I'll be out in a minute," said Will and he got back into the pool.

"Josh doesn't have a body like that," Emma said, after he got back in the pool. Josh was her boyfriend and an endless source of anecdotes.

"Let's see if he organises as well as he swims and makes coffee," said Meghan.

Will got out of the pool, had a shower, changed into jeans and a tee shirt, gave Mia and Emma coffee and set Emma to work researching venues.

"Don't call anyone just yet," said Will, "but there'll be websites. We're looking at a dinner dance and will want to seat several hundred."

"Really!" said Emma. "This sounds like fun. Are we invited?"

"You'll be there, but you'll be too busy working to have fun."

"Awww!"

"No fun. Just pain, misery and suffering," said Will. "Think of it as a life lesson."

"You don't mean that."

"Research the venues. Remember life is grim."

That kept Emma quiet, or at least quieter, for a time which Meghan thought was a good thing.

Will started making calls. The fund raising office of the Haddenbach Children's Hospital welcomed the idea but thought the administrator would like to meet with the two entertainers before endorsing the idea. That meant fronting Connie Leighton. A few more calls later Will managed to contact the singer's staff through an agent. An assistant heard Will out, went and spoke to the singer, then set up a meeting.

Will also showed Megan how to operate the investment platform of the bank that she used.

"You can go directly into shares if you want," said Will, "but again that's for those who have the time to research the companies or have some reason to invest in a particular company. Otherwise, you may want to look at a fund that just follows the index or puts money into mutuals that invest in the market, bonds, property and so on."

“I dunno anything about companies,” said Meghan. “Are you really going to meet with Connie?”

“Seems so,” said Will. “If she’s still mad about bicycle crack I may have trouble making it out alive but I will be earning my per day pay.”

Connie Leighton’s house was not far from Casa Meghan, in LA terms, but was a proper mansion with an even bigger door. Will was ushered into the singer’s living room where she sat between two large, male associates who glared at the writer-consultant. While not in the same league as Meghan in looks, the singer was sufficiently easy on the eye to feature on all her album covers and had a body made for cavorting on stage. Leighton was not in the mood to be admired, however, particularly by Will

“Who came up with that line about trading my jet for a bicycle?” she demanded.

“That would be me,” said Will. “I met Meghan in a bar when we were both dragged there by other people. I told her that was an obvious come back and I was surprised when she used it.”

“I’m having venues cancel on me over that affair thing,” said Connie, while her associates continued to glare. “And now I can’t even get between the gigs I’ve got in my jet without the media making nasty cracks.”

“You were attacking my employer and now I’m here to offer you a way out of your troubles – certainly better than the one suggested by your PR agency,” said Will. “Are you using Holstern Media by any chance?”

“How did you know?”

“I didn’t. Meg uses that agency. They seem to be giving the same advice to talk about the environment to everyone. For the record, Meghan doesn’t believe the producer and his wife, and I was surprised with the Me Too movement so active no one took a closer look at the producer.”

“You were surprised?” said Connie forcefully. “I was fucking devastated. Not only are the venues pulling out my label wants to renegotiate my contract.”

“In the hope of making it out of this interview alive,” said Will, “I did some digging, mainly into the wife, as she seemed to be key to the whole affair standing by him the way that she did.”

He took a few sheets of paper out of an envelope he had brought in and passed them over.

“I saw that the wife originally came from New York so I ran her name through a couple of databases I still have access to. Look at the highlighted name on that news item.”

Connie studied it for a moment, then looked up, open mouthed. “She was a sex worker?”

“A high end sex worker, yep,” said Will. “That was a messy divorce and note the name she used when working was different. Once I knew the working name I did some searching online and found the item on the next page. It’s a current listing.”

“This is for the Washington area,” said Connie, after studying the page. “How come she’s attacking me at Hollywood parties?”

“Were you by any chance talking about your future with this guy?”

She sat back. “Yeah, I was. I thought I was in a good place with him. I was talking about the future.”

“The next item in this show and tell,” said Will, “is your former beau’s marriage certificate.”

Connie took the paper offered by Will and studied it.

“He’s not married,” she said, open mouthed, again. “He was divorced two years ago.”

“You’ll note that no children are listed.”

“The children are hers?”

“Couldn’t find any children for her, either.”

“Then where did this happy family I was supposed to have wrecked come from?”

“I’m just guessing at this point but what I think happened was your guy didn’t see things the way you did and wanted out - maybe he had his next girlfriend lined up and was promising to leave you for her.”

“Humph!” said Connie. “Then why didn’t he just dump me? Why do this?”

“Again I’m guessing but you’re a big name who writes a mean break up song. I seem to remember reading that the song about the boyfriend who dumped you made him take up relief work in Africa.”

“You mean, he was worried about blow back?”

“My guess is that he hired this woman to pose as his wife in what was meant to be a minor deception where you’d be the only person to meet her. The moment you realised he had a wife and children and that she was going to stand by him you would have stopped calling – heartbroken but resigned to the fact that you got things wrong.”

“Damn straight.”

“But then the whole thing got completely out of hand. This woman might have got the idea that she was an actual wife, instead of a hired sex worker, along with hired children. Or maybe she threw herself into the role – it’s Hollywood after all. Anyway, I’m pretty sure she wasn’t meant to attack you publicly.”

Connie looked at the pages and then up at Will.

“What can I do with these?” she said.

“There’s not enough there to do a proper job but you can hire a private detective to take a hard look at your guy. Maybe follow him around for a time and do more online searches. Those guys are always serial so there will be others like you, just not as high profile. Maybe the pretend wife’s co-workers can be persuaded to dish some dirt on her, and certainly establish she’s not living with him.”

“This has to be the most complicated way to dump a girl,” said Connie. “And all because I was getting intense?”

“Only scenario I can think of that begins to fit the facts. As for getting intense – I’m the one who gets too intense with girls and gets dumped.”

“Does Meghan get intense?” asked Connie, sharply.

“I wouldn’t know. She spent so much time telling me she wasn’t interested in me romantically when she hired me, I’m now too scared to even comment.”

Connie laughed. “I dunno about intense, but she can be a hard arse. I hire a private detective and then what?”

“I’ve listed someone on the last page, a wannabe actor whose day job is as a private detective. Met him around. He seems pretty good. Once you get some dirt together don’t release it

yourself, the media may suggest you're inventing stuff to get back at your guy. Have the detective tie it all up in a neat bundle and hand it to a media outlet that still does some digging, without saying who's behind the gift. Maybe that Sidewalk Stars program. If they don't want to use it, hand it to another."

Connie thought about this for a moment, looking at the pages.

"Will, this is real sneaky."

"I prefer to think of it as a creative solution to a problem," said Will. "But sneaky works. Either way, it's a peace offering."

"Gentlemen let's organise some coffee for our guest," Connie said, and smiled.

Later the singer rang Meghan, being put through from Meghan-HQ by Mia. It was the first time the two former friends had spoken in years.

"Connie here," she said without preamble. "What bar did you meet Will in and were there any more like him? I want one."

"I didn't see any others like Will," said Meghan amused. "We talked, he made sense, so I hired him."

"He's also hot, did that have anything to do with it?"

"An extra benefit," said Meghan. "He looks fine in my pool and makes good coffee."

"Hmmm! hmmm!" said Connie. "All in one package. If you find any others like him, tell them I have an opening."

"I can do that."

"Will says you warned him off hard over any romantic ideas."

"I called him to pick his brains, so I had to," said Meghan. "He's very nice but not my type, and I'm taken."

"You've become real choosy about men," said Connie. "You're still seeing big time movie star Robin?"

"Still going fine."

"Will would do for most girls, and he'd be much less trouble."

"Maybe, and someone nice will pick him up. For the moment he has a sad story about a girl which he won't tell me."

"Are we going to do this hospital benefit thing?"

"It's like Will says, no one can argue with fund raising for a children's hospital," said Meghan. "We get a few edges knocked off our profiles, without losing the bad girl tag and the hospital gets money."

"I'm in, but I want to hold off for a time," said Connie. "I've set stuff in motion at Will's suggestion which I'd like to finish before we do it."

"It'll take us that long to organise, but Will says we've got to go to the hospital first. See the sick children."

"I don't do sick people so well if you remember," said Connie.

"I remember," said Meghan.

"I've said I'm going to do it, so get Will to set up a time."

Meghan was only at home for one day of Will's first week, being at promotional photo shoots for two days and working on the shots for an action film in a warehouse for the other days. This involved actions such as jumping off platforms in skin-tight outfits, while supported by a cable, to land on mats. Then she would send stuntmen flying with pretend blows. Stunt doubles were substituted for anything that required real physical expertise, computer imagery would later add backgrounds such as buildings and bridges and the action occasionally sped up to the point that Meghan had trouble recognising the sequence that she had acted.

In the meantime, the star continued to find uses for her new hire. She got Will to come in a little later so that he could make morning coffee for the other ladies as well as a toasted English muffin for her plus coffee which she could drink in the chauffeured car on the way to the studio while reading the day's script. The ladies would also drink their coffee while watching Will in the pool. This they considered a major improvement in workplace amenities. Meghan's employees then sat around the house's dining table with their laptops and mobiles to do the star's work.

Meg took to calling the writer during breaks in filming or photoshoots to discuss investments, but occasionally to pass the time in a practice that in larger organisations might have been called "hassling the new hire", albeit with the new hire doing some hassling of his own.

"You hardly have any tattoos?" she said one time.

"You called me to point that out?" said Will. "What's the matter you've run out of cat videos to look at on your phone?"

"I'm not into cats and what's the point of paying someone if I can't pass the time hassling them."

"I thought you hired me to do your work."

"That too – what the one word you have in gothic lettering on your shoulder?"

"Mater – it's Latin for mum."

Meghan laughed. "And what about that design underneath it?"

"It's a little fish with a fake shark fin strapped on. That's how I feel sometimes."

"Other guys have tats of eagles and dragons and you have a lame emoji."

"And mum in Latin," said Will. "And I only got those because the guys in the swim team were hassling me about having no tats."

"You're such a nerd," said Meghan. "You also don't have a stubble like most guys."

"Always found them scratchy. Clean shaven is easier in any case."

"I'm supposed to be this style icon and I have a hopeless nerd on my staff."

"It's sad isn't it," said Will, cheerfully. "If important people come to the house you make me go to that change room I shower in until they've gone, then insist I stay there while you watch cat videos."

The conversations occasionally turned to more important matters. Will was astonished to find that the star still handled routine payments herself and suggested that she could reduce her work load by setting up an account with a comparatively small amount that Mia and Emma could access to pay the likes of electricity for the house, and wages for worthy consultants such as himself. They would then present her with an itemised list of payments at the end of the week.

“That way when Mia empties your account to run off with a handsome con man, you’ve just lost what’s in the account,” said Will.

“Is Mia dating a handsome con man?” Meghan wanted to know.

“Not that I know of – it’s still Jake the assistant director,” said Will, putting the phone on speaker, and explaining the conversation to Mia.

“We’ve only just had a second date,” said Mia who had recently connected with the assistant director she had originally met on one of Meg’s film sets, “but the handsome conman sounds interesting. When do I get to meet him?”

“I can adapt the fantasy to your wishes,” said Will. “You can meet him whenever you like.”

“If you going to take my money and leave, I don’t want you to meet this fantasy conman,” said Meghan.

“I could always meet him, have an affair with lots of sex,” said Mia, hopefully. “Then dump him when he talks about emptying bank accounts.”

“I don’t mind that fantasy,” said Meg. She later set up the account.

As part of that change, Will set up a system for reporting total incomings and outgoings per week and per month. With some effort, as he did not have access to the investment accounts and did not want it, he was also able to set up a way of generating reports on Meghan’s growing investment portfolio. For the first time the star felt like she knew what was happening in her own financial affairs.

The actress also discussed scripts with Will, wondering if the writer had any insights into the vast numbers of scripts that seemed to find their way onto her desk.

“I’ll go through them if you like but you know what they say in Hollywood – no one knows anything,” said Will. “The classic, stand out case of professionals being caught out big time is the original Star Wars film back in the 1970s. The script was just corny space opera, with every SF cliché and a couple from the romcom genre thrown in, yet it was such a huge hit that toy stores are still full of Star Wars merchandising. Mind you, the franchise was really made by the sequels which were a step or two above the corny original but still fun.”

“I don’t think I want to be the next Princess Lea,” said Meghan. “See if anything in the scripts stands out.”

“I never got to tell you my theory about Darth Vader,” said Will.

“I headed you off when you tried to tell me, in that club.”

“I could tell you now.”

“I still don’t want to hear about Darth Vader,” said Meg.

“The Jedis were really a sinister organisation.”

“Tell someone who cares.”

“I have things to say about Ewoks,” said Will, hopefully.

“I don’t care about Ewoks,” said Meg, “and before you ask Wookiees are out too.”

Will laughed; Meg giggled.

“Good answer,” said the writer. “But if you want a fresh take on scripts there is an agent who’s supposed to be good who’s going out on her own. She could be the more personal touch you seem to want. I could set up a meeting.”

“How do you know about agents, Will?” asked Meg.

“It’s part of this sad story involving a girl I told you about.”

In fact, Violet had tried and failed to sign up with the agent he had in mind.

“Is this agent the girl?”

“No not her,” said Will. “The girl is gone.”

“You never told us this sad story, Will,” said Emma who had overheard the conversation.

“Yeah, we want to hear,” said Mia.

“I had my heart cut out,” said Will, “and now I hate all women.”

“Not all women are bad,” said Emma. “How did she cut your heart out?”

“If I don’t share the story my hatred will be more focused.”

“Aww you don’t mean that – you’re too nice a guy to hate anyone.”

“Hate,” said Will, doing his best to glare.

“It’s like that is it?” said Mia, smiling, “well, suit yourself, Will.”

CHAPTER SIX

The agent recommended by Will, Stella Bullingham, proved to be a tall, full figured lady with frizzy hair dressed in a powder-blue power suit. She was shown into Meghan’s study/office during the star’s morning routine, when she was at home, of drinking coffee made by Will while watching her consultant in the pool.

“Who’s the pool hunk, Ms Chalmers?” asked Stella, looking out the window.

“I employ him as my consultant” she said, smiling. “Please sit.”

“Uhhh – huhhhh,” said Stella, sitting. “Your consultant fills out his swimmers real nice. I’m sorta curious – what does he consult on?”

“Among other things, he got you to come here,” said Meg.

“Oh right, right, this must be Will, the Olympic swimmer,” said Stella. “A real nice guy I was told.”

“Olympics? Will never said anything about the Olympics,” said Meg. “He just said college swimming scholarship.” She went to the door and raised her voice. “Mia, can you ask Will to come in here for a moment.”

Mia, who had also been drinking coffee on the patio while watching the show walked out to the pool and intercepted the writer at the shallow end. Will appeared at the study door towelling himself.

“I won’t come all the way in, as I’ll get chlorinated water on your carpet,” he said. “You must be Stella.”

He shook hands with the agent who thought that the display of flesh was worth the trouble of coming to the house.

“You never told me you were in the Olympics,” said Meg.

“That’s because I wasn’t,” said Will. He turned to Stella. “You heard this from Violet, right?”

“Others who knew her,” the agent said.

“She was always telling people I was in the Olympics to give herself an edge, I guess. I was in the national swimming team for a time – a few months – but I never got to any international meetings, let alone the Olympics. Best I did was bronze in the two hundred metre butterfly in the nationals.”

“That’s impressive enough,” said Meg. “Why talk yourself down all the time?”

“You mean I should slip in a mention of my time on the national team just to impress people? Seems phony. I prefer to play the victim card and hope for sympathy. Anyway, you didn’t hire me because I could swim.”

“Humph!” said Meg, “and is this Violet the sad story girl?”

“Yes, that’s her. Can I get you coffee, Stella? I make a mean mocha.”

“Sounds good, Will,” said Stella amused.

“Then I’ll get back in the pool if I may, boss. I haven’t finished my session.”

“Yes, yes, but finish quickly as I want to talk,” said Meg.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And don’t ‘boss’ or ‘ma’am’ me,” Meghan called after him.

“Okay,” said Will from the kitchen.

“He seems real nice,” said Stella, after Will had gone. “Shame what happened to him.”

“Why, what happened to him?” asked Meg. “He only says his heart got cut out.”

“Violet is also an actor. I looked at her but decided I couldn’t help her,” said Stella.

“Another client who knows them says that she took up with a theatre producer who could get her a part back East. Will arrived home unexpectedly with a ring in his bag ready to give her, to find Violet loading up the producer’s car for the trip back. Took him completely by surprise. They’d been together for three years. That’s what I heard anyway.”

“Oh my, quite a story,” said Meg. “No wonder he’s not dating.”

“It is a more interesting back story than usual, Ms Chalmers, but yours is the one that has my attention, now. Will thought I might be able to help you.”

“I understand I’m the blonde and sex sells and all that,” said Meghan. “I don’t even mind the beach volleyball movie role.”

Stella chortled. “I’ve placed a couple of the minor characters in that one. It ain’t Shakespeare that’s for sure, but they’ve got a lot of eye candy, boy and girl, lined up. They won’t have to say much to fill the theatres.”

“I have scenes that’ll raise questions about ratings.”

“I was also aware of that, Ms Chalmers,” said Stella, smiling. “Like I said, they’ll be lining up.”

“But my present agents are sending me more of that stuff than I can possibly do,” said Meghan, “and it’s all the same blonde roles. I don’t want to do films as a female weightlifter or a truck driving mama, but I can act. There must be parts a step or two above just playing eye candy. Then there are all the endorsements and appearances at night clubs and promotional parties. It’s

good money, but I'm sure I don't need to do all of it. When I complain, they just tell me it all has to be done or if I don't turn up I'll damage my image or I'm already contracted in even though I didn't agree to it, or some other crap. I don't want to have to argue with them."

"Shower scenes with a hot leading man in a box office hit gets you promotional deals and the brand can look after itself, Ms Chalmers," said Stella. "Sounds as if your agents are milking you for whatever they can get while you're still hot."

"Okay, what can you do for me?" said Meghan.

"In the interests of full disclosure, Ms Chalmers, it would be quite a coup for me if you come on board with me as I'm going out on my own. That said, you're already established and you've got the assets, if you don't mind me saying, and you can act. I saw you when you did Broadway. I was impressed."

"Thank you," said Meghan. She decided that she liked Stella.

"If you sign with me you'll still get scripts sent to you, no problem there, and the choice ones because the producers will want you no matter who represents you. I can certainly promise to listen to what you say and agree on an acceptable work load in appearances and endorsements. It's not good to do too much of that stuff, in any case."

"That's what I thought," said Meghan, "and call me Meg in private, as that's my name. Not 'boss' or 'ma'am' either," she said sternly to Will as he reappeared with Stella's coffee.

"Has she told you yet about how she's not really a diva?" Will said to Stella, unabashed.

"Not yet," said Stella, laughing while Meghan glared. "But it doesn't seem like her staff is afraid of her."

"If signing is an issue a copy of the contract with your present agent is in that folder on your desk, not-boss," said Will. Meghan made a face at him. "Basically, any jobs you've already agreed to, and specifically you not just the agents, has to be done and they get the commission. Otherwise, you can just change – although you have to tell them, formally, and that can be tricky, as they'll be losing fees."

Will got back into the pool while the ladies talked, eventually agreeing to let Stella be her lead agent on trial.

"You're going to tell your present agents?" said Stella, tentatively.

"I'll get Will to do it," said Meghan. "If it's anything like getting rid of the social media consultants I was with he writes a letter which I sign, and he takes the calls. It's very convenient."

Stella laughed again. "He's really a consultant then, and not just a bod in a pool."

"The pool thing is an interesting bonus," said Meghan. "But I'd keep him around just to take the calls from consultants. He put a couple from the social media consultants on speaker while I was here so we could listen. They were nasty, claiming I was destroying my fan base and ruining my future. Will didn't lose his temper with them or even snap back and eventually they gave up."

"I know getting rid of Bennett's" (that was Meghan's present agency) "can be hard, if you're an established, commission-generating star," said Stella. "Wish Will luck for me."

"I dunno if I'll get around to wishing him luck," said Meghan. "I have questions to ask."

Later, when Will appeared at her study door showered and ready for the day, she said in her best boss voice, "come in Will and sit down."

Will did so, wondering if he was about to be fired.

“It looks like I will go with Stella as my lead agent,” she said. “Which means firing Bennett’s.”

Will shrugged. “No problem, Meghan. I’ll write you a polite letter thanking them for their services and listing those events and roles they can expect commissions for, then take the calls. Can they contact you directly?”

“Always through Mia. I also get emails.”

“I’ll brief Mia and I’ll show you how to set your inbox so that the emails are forwarded to me automatically.”

“All good,” said Meghan. “Now!” Will recoiled at the ‘now’ thinking that he was going to be yelled at. “Tell me about this breakup with Violet.”

“But what do you care?” protested Will, taken aback. “You went out of your way to tell me you had a boyfriend and weren’t interested in me romantically during that first call. Harped on the point, in fact.”

“Gossiping about you is way different from dating you, Will Moreland,” she said. “I’m allowed to be curious about the lives of my own staff. Violet is an actress how did you meet her?”

“Through friends at the University of Chicago.”

“This is the college you got into on a swimming scholarship?”

“That’s right. She was in a theatre programme there. I knew her for a while before she took it into her head to date me.”

“She made the first move,” said Meghan.

“Called me, in fact. Now that I look back on it, she wanted someone to take her to a theatre function and that was it, but things went from there.”

“How come you two ended up in LA?”

“She wanted to try the West Coast acting scene, and she asked me to come with her. I gave up my reporting job to come.”

“You couldn’t get a journalist job here?”

“Nope,” said Will. “Traditional newspapers have been dying for some time. Plenty of web sites but none hiring. It doesn’t help that I’m not very competitive.”

“I’ve noted that,” said Meghan, leaning back and crossing her arms. Will thought even in her morning attire of track suit pants and black tee shirt with the words ‘TOP MODEL’ in bold white letters she looked fabulous, but he was careful not to show this. “How come you ended up with that Silicon Valley type you were with at the bar when we met?”

“I hadn’t met Hap before that night, but he was the college roomie of another good friend and he read my book...”

“Book! Now I find out about a book?”

“... I told you I wrote trashy military SF,” said Will. “It’s not the sort of thing you’d read, so what would you care?”

“But it’s still more impressive than real estate ads,” said Meghan. “That’s what you said you were doing.”

“The real estate blurbs paid way more, and you wouldn’t be impressed if you could see the publisher’s office. It’s in a garage, and the chief executive does casual shifts at a computer store to make ends meet – a point that Vi made when I last spoke to her. Writers are low, according to her.”

“At least it makes more sense that you talked yourself down,” said Meghan. “You were in love with this Violet?”

“After three and a half years I thought it would go all the way. Then I came in just as she was about to charge off to New York with this guy who could get her a job. Then she basically said she’d just been acting, and she stole from me by using our joint credit card, knowing she wouldn’t get the bill. Three thousand two hundred and twenty three dollars and forty three cents. I counted carefully.”

“Ouch!” said Meghan.

“Now I’m convinced that all actresses are faithless, heartless, scheming, hateful creatures.”

“Hey, we’re not that bad. I’ve a grudge against men. I’ve been dumped heaps of times.”

“Yeah, right. Clarise Chalmers has been dumped,” said Will.

“I have to.”

As far as I’m concerned all actresses are hateful,” said Will, although without any heat, “and they should all be dumped.”

Meg rolled her eyes. “Oh, suit yourself. Have you spoken to Violet since?”

“You remember when we met, I didn’t see you come in because I was looking at the screen above the bar?”

“And you nearly choked to death when you saw me,” said Meghan, smiling. “I remember.”

“I was distracted because I could see Violet on the screen. She was in a commercial, presenting an exercise machine. Only time I’ve seen her since she left. I haven’t spoken to her at all.”

“No one else since?”

“My roomie’s Goth girlfriend wants to set me up with her Goth girlfriends.”

“Not into Goths?”

“Don’t look so good in leather with purple hair,” said Will. “Can I go now, not-boss Meg? I have your work to do.”

“Are you going to keep playing the victim?”

“I am a victim – of actresses.”

“Ha!”

“I’m a victim in other ways,” said Will.

“How so?”

“I’m a fashion victim.”

Meghan laughed. “I’d noticed,” she said. “Oh, go away and do my work, but this isn’t over, Will Moreland.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And don’t call me ma’am,” she yelled at Will as he retreated out the study door.

“She also isn’t a diva,” he whispered to Mia, who giggled then tried to keep her face straight when Meghan glared at her through the study door.

Shortly after Meghan's interrogation of Will, she was distracted by her boyfriend and major screen heart throb, Robin Hawke, finally coming back to town, and Will had an adventure of his own. This started at a small supermarket close to Meghan's house where he stopped for groceries on his way home. After a day of calls from the sacked agency demanding to be put through to Meghan so that they could lobby for reinstatement, and unhappy with the response that she was on a photo shoot, Will was thinking about the script he was rewriting for Hap.

Will had not written a script before but after reading up online he thought he could present it properly and, more importantly, estimate the screen time required for what he had written. He was aiming for a film of somewhere between ninety to one hundred and twenty minutes. But the real trick was to keep enough of the content written by Hap, the client, to ensure the embryonic producer remained on board while making the film coherent and suspenseful. Will thought he had mostly solved the problems, but there were still details to attend to and, while thinking of those the girl at the checkout counter – the store was too small for automated check-outs – offered him a promotional card, one of a series of cards connected to a popular Disney children's film. Those who collected enough of them would assemble a set and get some sort of prize.

"I don't have any use for them," said Will, taking it. "But perhaps this lady might have," and handed the card on to the woman behind whose very young daughter holding onto the woman's shopping trolley, he realised, was gazing at the card.

"Thanks, mister," she said, "we're trying for that set."

"Thank you," said the girl.

"No trouble. I have no use for them myself at all," said Will, smiling.

He turned away and was outside with his bag of groceries when someone behind him said "that was nice of you".

Will turned around to see a woman perhaps a few years older than himself, with auburn hair in a pixie cut and wearing outsized, red-framed glasses. Her chin was too pointed for her to be considered beautiful, but her features were symmetrical and the eyes behind the glasses sparkled with intelligence. Wearing a smart grey business dress and blazer, she looked as if she had come from a corporate meeting which, in fact, she had.

"It was really no trouble," said Will, surprised. "Like I said, I've got no use for them myself."

"Couple of frozen dinners," she said, nodding at the bag. "A night in?"

"Sometimes my roomie and his girlfriend are there for dinner but I don't think so tonight," said Will. "I just like to buy backups."

She smiled. "You want to grab some coffee..."

"Will, my name's Will and sure, although my frozen stuff will melt if I stay too long. It's a long drive home for me."

"I'm Charlotte, Will, and in that case why don't we have coffee at my serviced apartment? It's not far from here and there's a freezer."

Will thought that was an invitation if ever there was one, and it had been a long time since Violet had left. Why not?

"Sure," he said.

The scriptwriting could wait.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Hollywood Howl had something else to discuss besides the usual fare of babies, divorces and romances of major stars.

“The big news this week,” said Ken Barbie anchorman “is that the wife of major producer Gordon Greenwald, who accused singer Connie Leighton of stealing her man, has been revealed as a sex worker who has never been married to Greenwald and never lived with him. Sidewalk Stars can exclusively reveal that the sex worker, Karen Purbeck, who also has the working name of Larissa Diamond, was paid to confront Connie Leighton and make those claims, as an elaborate way for the producer to end his romantic involvement with Leighton...”

Charlotte had little interest in the preliminaries of chatting, all but dragging Will into the serviced apartment’s large bed and moaning throughout the coupling.

“Sorry about the noise, Will,” she said as they lay, gasping, bodies intertwined. “I was always into sex, and it’s been a while for me.”

“You don’t need to apologise to a guy for that,” said Will. “The noise is a compliment.”

She giggled and ran her fingers over Will’s shoulders, sweaty from the exercise.

“Good body,” she said. “Few tats, that’s unusual these days.”

“Never into them,” he said.

He caressed her breast and side, making her gasp until she wanted to couple again, this time with much less urgency. Afterwards Charlotte rested her head on his shoulder and they exchanged life stories. Violet had gained considerable amusement from drilling Will in what to do and not do in bed, including the need to talk afterwards, for as long as the woman wanted.

Will’s new found sexual partner declared herself to be a divorced head of a small company that specialised in contract marketing, design and image services for law firms. Although she was based in New York, the company had an office in Los Angeles which she wanted to expand.

“Lots of law firms out here,” she said.

Charlotte expressed sympathy over Will’s tale of abandonment by Violet and amusement over his day of stonewalling a sacked agency, although Will was careful not to name the star he worked for – an omission that Charlotte accepted without argument. Will could have his secrets as far as she was concerned. They got up to have the long delayed coffee then Charlotte declared that she had to take a late flight back to New York and would not have time for more than a quick meal at the airport.

Declining Will’s offer to drive her saying that he would distract her, Charlotte took his number while declining to give hers.

“I need to concentrate for a week or so, then I’ll be back for a couple of days and we’ll have dinner then,” she said. She kissed him goodbye passionately at the door and Will left, feeling that

the whole episode had been unreal. As Charlotte had also declined to give the name of her company and even say what part of New York she lived in Will half expected not to hear from her again, but a few days later she called while he was sitting around the dining room table with Mia and Emma. Although he went out to the pool area for the bulk of the conversation as he did when his parents or his sister called, the two ladies immediately suspected it was from a woman.

“Well, yes, an older woman,” he said. “She runs a legal consultancy and comes out to the LA office sometimes.”

“How much older?” Emma wanted to know.

“Few years, not that much older.”

“A junior cougar?” said Mia.

“That’s a thought,” said Will, who declined to give any further details.

Then it was time for the two bad girls to visit the Haddenbach Children’s Hospital. With Connie Leighton publicly acceptable again – her former boyfriend now busy denying all sorts of dark secrets that had crawled out of the woodwork when the public spotlight had turned on him – the administrators were quite happy to have both ladies visit as a way of promoting the benefit, lifting the institution’s rather low public profile and, oh yes, raising the spirits of the hospital’s young inmates.

As the public relations man for both Meghan and, as far as the benefit went, for Connie, Will now had a list of media contacts to alert to the visit. Those who did not have the resources to send photographers, and that was most of the websites and even some of the newspapers would be sent material to be taken by a photographer hired for the day. That photographer was Jake, the assistant director Mia was now dating regularly.

“Will, you’re driving me to this thing,” said Meghan throwing him the keys for her BMW to Will.

“Me, seriously?” said Will.

Meghan paid about as much attention to the BMW series 5 in her garage as she did her kitchen, preferring cars organised by the studios or agencies to pick her up or for boyfriends to drive her in their luxury cars.

“We could always make a statement and take my car,” said Will.

“And put that eyesore you call a car in the spare spot in the garage from now on,” said Meg. “I’m told the neighbours have been complaining about it being in the street.”

“It gets me places,” protested Will, “and I told you I’m a fashion victim. You should be kind to victims.”

“I am being kind to your car,” retorted Meghan, “And I’m being patient with you. Shut up and put it in the garage and get mine out. At least with that grey jacket and khaki slacks look you’ve got going today the police won’t stop you on suspicion of car theft. Come on, chop, chop!”

“Who says chop, chop these days?” complained Will to Mia who shrugged and smiled. But he put his car in the garage as he was told and got into the BMW, relieved to find that, as it was a nine speed automatic, he would not make a fool of himself driving it.

“I hear you’re dating a young cougar,” said Meghan as they drove.

“That’s Mia’s description. She’s not that much older than me, although she did pick me up at a supermarket.”

“Really,” gasped Meghan. “I didn’t hear about that.”

“I didn’t tell the others that part.” Will told her the story.

“It was nice of you to offer your card to that girl,” said Meghan. “And this Charlotte checked on you being single right at the start.”

“Well, yeah,” said Will. “She didn’t have a ring and asked if I wanted coffee at her place. I’m a guy. A good looking woman offers me coffee, I accept.”

“Did you get coffee?”

“Eventually.”

“Ha!” said Meghan, then, “Men!”

“It was her choice all along the line,” protested Will, “and you’re meant to be the Hollywood bad girl remember? You’re supposed to chew guys up and spit them out.”

“That’s my screen image,” she said. “The real Meghan is more conventional. I’ve never picked up a guy in a supermarket line.”

“Would the real Meghan ask a guy out?”

“Hmmm! I’ve never had to.”

“I can well believe that,” said Will.

Meghan liked that compliment. Will was now a friend with whom she was comfortable enough to occasionally argue with, tease, or tell off, without heat, and who didn’t mind being bossed around. But a part of her wondered why Will wasn’t showing more interest. Meghan told herself that romantic overtures from Will would be a major complication and might result in her losing him as a friend, but she was used to men fawning and even fighting over her. An attractive one that she saw shirtless most days that treated her as a friend was an affront. An occasional compliment helped.

“You spent the weekend with Robin,” said Will. “How was that?”

“We went to a party with film types,” said Meghan. “It was fun.”

(Actually, she had argued with Robin about men paying attention to her at the party.

“You encourage those guys too much,” he had said.

“I just wasn’t being rude,” said Meghan, “and so what if they are paying attention? I’m not going to do anything.”

“I don’t like it babe,” Robin had said, “they’ll take advantage.”)

“A party with cool, famous people,” said Will, as they drove. “Did any of them wear khaki slacks?”

“There was one,” said Meghan, laughing, “but security threw him out when someone complained.”

They got to the hospital, a series of white buildings crammed into a suburban site and met Connie – the first time the two stars had seen one another in the flesh in years – as well as the grey-haired hospital administrator, Helen Judson. In short order, they then met the head of surgery, chief of medical staff, director of nursing services and various other hospital executives. Then they met the patients, the children, whose reactions varied – the younger ones didn’t understand who they

were – but all seemed pleased to see them. They met several parents who were too taken up with concern over their child’s health to be overcome by star power.

The cancer ward was the worst with the children looking forlorn, some without hair and tubes in their noses who smiled bravely when the woman approached. Connie was particularly affected.

“The cure rates for children with cancer are pretty good,” said one of the doctors, “much better than for adults, but there is the occasional one of course, which is very sad.”

Then they were out in a corridor and the visit was almost over when they passed a group of nurses and nursing aides.

Will noticed the woman a couple of seconds before she acted. Unlike the others who were smiling, the short, fiery Latin type dressed as a nursing aide was staring at Meghan with what seemed to be real hate. She was also holding a flower vase without flowers in front of her, rather than under one arm. She stepped forward, glaring at Meghan and, suddenly realising what she was about to do, Will swung around in front of the star, putting his back to the woman. Meghan had the sense to duck.

Will felt something splash on his jacket and heard someone scream “Maria, what are you doing?”

“Was that acid?” asked Will, in alarm, hurriedly shrugging his jacket off and letting it fall to the floor. He thought a little had got onto his neck and right hand but there was no burning sensation.

“No, it’s piss from the bed patients,” spat the aide. “Miss high and mighty Chalmers should know what it feels like to be covered with piss.”

“I was just trying to help,” said Meghan, indignantly

Connie, who had been a few paces away, came over. “Are you guys alright?”

“Only casualty is my jacket,” said Will, picking the jacket up with one finger and examining it ruefully as the aide was taken away by security. “But a dry cleaning should fix it.”

The administrator was full of apologies.

“The staff know you’re just trying to help,” she said. “Maria is always angry. We’ll fire her of course.”

“Please don’t fire her over this,” said Will, looking around.

“She should be fired,” said Meghan.

“Damn straight,” said Connie. “Throwing patient’s piss on visitors has got to be worth getting fired.”

“She’s minimum wage, right?” said Will.

“She would be,” said the administrator nodding.

“Then it still looks bad, especially as no real harm’s been done. Star taking vengeance on poor worker. Reprimand her and make sure she’s never anywhere near visitors. If she does it again do what you like, but don’t fire her over this, unless the two ladies here object.”

“It’s up to the hospital,” said Meghan after a pause. “The problem, William Moorland, is that you’re too nice.”

“Yeah, that’s bad,” said Connie, who was pleased enough with Will to hassle him as a friend might. “You’re way too nice, Will.”

“Nice, nothing,” said Will. “I’m looking out for you ladies. If she’s fired that woman will be free to complain, saying she’s got children at home, or whatever, and now no job all because of heartless stars objecting to one of their entourage being splashed with piss. Wacked out crap I know, and she should be fired, but it could get traction. This way the hospital and you guys look like merciful angels doing good deeds rather than divas.”

“Now you’re thinking too much,” said Meghan smiling.

“That’s also bad,” said Connie. “We like our men decorative and dumb. If they think too much, they get ideas.”

“I’ll try to do better,” said Will, then asked the administrator for a bag to put his damp jacket in. After visiting the bathroom to clean the few splashes off himself, Will joined Meg and Connie by their respective cars in the visitor’s car park.

“BMW is that the best you can do?” Connie was telling Meg as Will walked up.

“What’s wrong with a BMW?” asked Meg. “I feel safer in it than I would yours.”

“It’s a series five,” said Will. “It’s not series seven but it’s still six figures.”

“The problem is it’s not a bad girl car,” said Connie. She pointed to her own vehicle. “This is a bad girl car.”

“A red Lamborghini,” said Will. “Just the thing for going to the mall.”

“If you have one of these, you don’t need to go to the mall,” said Connie. “The mall comes to you.”

“I’ve seen videos where guys driving this sort of car can pick up girls without saying a word,” said Will. “They just drive up and the girls get in.”

“I ain’t picking up strange men in this car,” said Connie. “I don’t know where they’ve been. What car do you drive, Will?”

“Don’t ask,” said Meghan, laughing.

“Mine’s a Saturn ION,” said Will.

“A what?” said Connie as the two male members of her entourage – the same good-looking men who had been at the original meeting with Will – laughed.

“I tell people I’m working up a script about an undercover detective in South LA,” said Will, “and the car helps me get a better feel for the part.”

“Your detective needs to trade a little up even for South LA, man,” said one of the good-looking members of the entourage, called Colby.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” said Will. “My other cover story is to say I’m waiting until the car becomes a collector’s item before selling it.”

“Got a few years to wait for the Saturns,” said Colby.

“Anyway, you ladies should have a bad-girl brand,” said Will, “so other bad girls will know what to buy.”

“There’s a bad girl brand already,” said Connie, “but it ain’t a bad idea.”

On the return trip, Meghan said, “I agreed with Connie on one thing while I was there.”

“What’s that?” said Will.

“We agreed that you’re a weird dude, Will Moorland.”

“I prefer the phrases free spirited or independent minded over weird.”

“I’m the diva and I say weird,” said Meghan.

“Sigh! As you like,” said Will.

“You were also talking to Connie,” she said.

“She wanted to know how to respond when reporters ask her about her former lover sinking fast into a sea of shit. I told her just to play it straight. Neglect to mention that she had a detective package up the story for handing over to a media outlet but play up the fact she was devastated that no one believed her story, although it was entirely true. It’s a further illustration of the way that powerful guys are allowed to prey on vulnerable women and so on.”

“I never thought of Connie as vulnerable,” said Meghan.

“It makes a better story if she can play that card,” said Will.

“And she’s using my consultant for advice.”

“Your consultant is trying to stay in one piece. Her entourage is a lot bigger and meaner than yours. As the problems with her label and in booking venues for tours have now vanished, your consultant lives to run away another time.”

Back at Meghan-Diva HQ, the first call Will got was from Hap who had been reading the rewritten script Will had sent back to him.

“Will, that’s a real story,” he said. “They have to hunt for those creatures underneath this Party Town otherwise they rip the people having a good time to shreds.”

“Okay, thanks, does that mean I get the other half of my generous rewrite fee?”

“No problem, but what do we do now?” asked Hap. “We try the studios with this?”

“We might have a chance with it,” said Will, “although I dunno where to start and it’ll probably take months and maybe years to get anyone interested.”

“Years!” said Hap.

“Getting scripts up is not easy, as I told you,” said Will, “and impossible for me as I’m not competitive enough. You need real drive to get those things accepted by any of the majors. The other option is to start the development process yourself, as we discussed. Get a storyboard together and work out some sort of budget you’d be comfortable with.”

“Storyboard?”

“Sure, as I understand it a storyboard is a sort of rough graphic novel of the film,” said Will. “You plot it out, scene by scene from the script with the characters and background in outline.”

“That sounds cool,” said Hap. “I like it. How do we do that?”

“I’ve never actually done it, but there’s plenty of material online, and there’s that director I told you about Evan Zagame. If you pay him he’ll help out. As I’m now the script co-writer who knows the story, I can pitch in but I’d also want to be paid for my time.”

“We get together then,” said Hap, tentatively.

“I dunno how it works but we can spend a few days at your place, say, working up a storyboard. Then you’ve got to decide just how, and if, you’re going to do this – what actors we’d like to get as opposed to those you can afford, where to film as opposed to simply using CGI - a lot of choices to make. Give Evan a call and send him the script. Discuss it with him.”

The next caller was agent Stella Bullingham who wanted to talk to Will rather than Meghan.

“Will, I just got off the phone with the agent for Connie Leighton who wanted to know about this ‘bad girl’ brand proposal. I was told you know something about this.”

“Oh right,” said Will. “That was an off the cuff remark and Connie said at the time the ‘bad girl’ tag was probably taken.” Will told her the story.

“That Lamborghini sounds expensive,” she said.

“Six figures starting with a two. Cruising chicks is no problem with one of those, but we’re talking about bad girls not bad boys.”

“Have you ever cruised chicks, Will?” asked Stella.

“Never really had the right car. With the car I’ve got now the chicks are more likely to call the police than get in.”

Stella laughed. “Does Ford have a bad girl car?”

“Maybe, or maybe we’re really thinking about a clothing brand,” said Will. “What about the words ‘Diva’ or ‘Scandal’.”

“Think Scandal is also taken by a perfume brand,” said Stella. “The name can be workshopped. Will, what I need are some words, a brief, about the proposal. A handful of sentences at most. I can fire that off to Connie’s agent and it becomes the basis for more discussion.”

“Well, I guess I can do that,” said Will. “Although I should warn you that Meghan thinks I’m a sort of fashion black hole.”

“Girls who’ve seen you without your shirt, Will, won’t care about your fashion sense. Just give us some words.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sidewalk Stars anchorman Ken Barbie flashed his brilliant teeth.

“And now to Diana Dupont who has a story on bad girls getting into charity.”

“Yes, Ken,” said Diana in the next shot. “Connie Leighton and Clarise Chalmers are taking time out from affairs, shoot outs and wild parties, and have dropped a feud stretching all the way back to the prom queen contest in the high school they both attended, to jointly organise a benefit for the Haddenbach Children’s Hospital in Los Angeles. Hard hit by cutbacks the hospital ...

After some discussion and Will calling his mother, who was astonished to hear he was organising a benefit, for advice, Will and Emma had opted for a three hundred seat event. Anything larger would be unmanageable and, Will thought, they had enough guaranteed star power to fill the venue. As it was the event sold out in just two weeks, except for a few places which Will held back, following his mother’s advice, for last minute requests from VIPs and as favours.

When Meghan, on one of her days at home, called Will into her study/office the writer thought it was to discuss the details of the benefit. Instead, she wanted to talk about an investment proposal her boyfriend Robin had given to her.

“He wants you to invest in NFTs?” said Will, trying to keep the astonishment out of his voice, as he looked at the proposal document.

“They’re some sort of digital asset,” said Meghan, “Non-funge something.”

“Non-Fungible Tokens. I know what they are, kinda,” said Will, leafing through the proposal which was a few pages stapled together. “You’re not investing directly in these NFTs, according to this, but in a consortium that will trade these tokens for big profits, they hope. The profits will be split among the participants.”

“Okay, that’s what Robin was talking about,” said Meghan. “Some friends of his are in it. Guaranteed big returns, he said.”

Since working for Meghan Will had developed a highly uncomplimentary view of the financial judgment of Robin Hawk, with his string of get rich quick schemes in which he was always trying to involve Meghan. He kept that opinion to himself. Instead, he said: “You remember I spoke of two rules of investing. The first is that if you don’t understand what you’re investing in, then don’t. The second rule is that if it sounds too good to be true then it probably is. NFTs could earn big bucks, sure, but they could also lose all your investment, and they’re difficult for anyone to understand.”

He flicked to the back pages of the proposal.

“You’re relying on the trading skills and judgment of two guys, although there is very little detail about their careers, and they’re both at a brokerage I’ve never heard of. I could check it out further if you want. How much are they asking from the consortium members? It doesn’t say here.”

“Half a million minimum,” said Meg.

“Wow! Well, at least they’re not thinking small,” said Will. “But that still means you’re handing over half a million plus to two guys working in an office somewhere in New York, in the hope that they’ll give it back plus big profits, on the basis of four pages stapled together. If they’re that good, why aren’t they trading for themselves? The choice is yours but maybe you could tell Robin that you’re a conventional, real estate kinda girl who’s saving up to buy the high-end residential tower filled with paying tenants of your girlish dreams?”

Meghan smiled. “I don’t think he’d believe me.”

The star also thought she wished she could get Will to tell Robin she wasn’t going to invest but she suspected that was not going to work. Among other difficulties, she had never mentioned the consultant to her boyfriend, or that she now valued his advice on investment matters far above his. No, she would have to tell her film star boyfriend that she was not getting involved in yet another of his schemes herself.

Later that day a photoshoot team arrived, including the all-important cameraman, but also a makeup lady, a stylist and lighting expert, two other bodies to help with the equipment, and a security guy. All of this was to advertise a major jewellery brand with salacious shots of Meghan wearing the merchandise but little else in the pool and garden. Will, still discussing details of the seating with Emma, paid them little heed until the security guard came into the dining room.

“Sir, you have to leave,” said the guard, a big man in a very official-looking uniform with a pistol in a shiny holster on his hip.

“I do,” said Will, astonished. “Why? Who are you?”

“I’m Ms Chalmers’ security,” said the guard. “She wants the area cleared for the shoot.”

“I’m on Ms Chalmers’ staff and I’ve never seen you before,” said Will. “If she wanted me to go, she’d have told me beforehand in no uncertain terms.”

“I’m Ms Chalmers’ assistant,” said Mia from the other end of the dining room table, “and you’re shoot security, not her security. She didn’t say anything about clearing people out to me.”

“Okay, shoot security,” said the guard. “The photographer told me to clear people out.”

“Now it’s the photographer who told you this,” said Will. “Ms Chalmers has never asked for it before.”

“I was still told that I had to clear out the men,” said the guard. “You need to leave now sir.”

Will looked at Mia.

“You know what, Will,” said the assistant. “Meg has to do some shots like this.” She held her arms in front of her breasts, “and face down topless on towels. She may not be comfortable with you here.”

“Fine,” said Will, standing up and closing up his lap top. He did not look at the annoying security guard. “Event details can wait a day or so. You’ll tell her where I’ve gone?”

“Of course,” said Mia.

Will started walking towards the garage.

“The front door is this way, sir,” said the guard.

“But the garage is this way,” said Will without turning around.

The officious guard followed Will out to the garage and stood, arms folded, while he drove off. He then looked through the rest of the house, even going upstairs, to the astonishment of Mia and Emma.

“There’s no one else in the house apart from the housekeeper,” said Mia.

“Just doing my job, ma’am.”

Later, Meghan came in wrapped in a towel. She had to speak to both Mia and Will, although the mischievous part of her also thought it might be fun to show bare shoulders to Will and was surprised to find the consultant missing in action.

“Where’s Will?” she asked.

“The security guard came in and told him to leave,” said Mia. “He said you had told him to clear the men out.”

“I never said any such thing,” said Meghan. “I know the photographer also didn’t say it. I wanted to see if Will could make the crew, and me, coffee, and I also wanted to talk again about Robyn’s investment stuff. Call him and tell him to get back here at once.”

Mia did so, catching Will still on the road back to his place, or so she thought. In fact, he was not all that far away, having been called by Charlotte to meet her.

“He says there’s no point in coming back today,” called Mia, after talking to Will, as Meghan messed around in an unfamiliar kitchen, making her own coffee.

“I expect my per day consultant to be here on the day when I pay for the day,” called Meghan. “Look! I’m even having to get my own coffee. Tell him to come back, now.”

Mia conveyed this to Will.

“He says you can always call him and if it bothers you, don’t pay him for the day.”

“For heaven’s sake,” said Meghan, “I want my consultant back here. Tell him if he doesn’t come back, he’s fired.”

Mia spoke again with Will. “Okay, he’s fired,” she said. “Thanks for hiring him for those few weeks.”

“What?” said Meghan. “How dare he be fired!”

“But you just fired him,” said Mia.

“I didn’t think he’d take me seriously,” she said, as she emerged from the kitchen coffee cup in hand. “Men! I’ll send the crew in to make their own coffee.”

Mia waited until she stalked back out to the pool area and then laughed.

“Will’s not actually fired, is he?” said Emma, who had followed the whole exchange round-eyed.

Mia shook her head.

“She likes Will and trusts him, but if he’d come back just because she had threatened to fire him, she might have started using him as a doormat. He’ll be back tomorrow.”

Later that day Meghan called Will, who had to excuse himself with Charlotte and step into another room.

“Am I still fired?” asked Will. “If so, I’ll hang up.”

“You are a total pain William Moorland and I hate you,” said Meghan, “and I should keep you fired.”

“People have told me I’m a pain over the years,” said Will. “I thought for a time there might be something to it, and then I thought ‘nah’, I’m Will, I’m not a pain. Anyway, what’s up?”

“I wanted to go over the NFT thing again,” she said.

They talked for a time then Will got back into bed with Charlotte, who had been waiting not very patiently for her lover.

“You still fired?” she asked. Will had told her as much of the story as she needed to know.

“Seems not,” he said. “Back to work tomorrow.”

“That’s good. In the meantime you and I have business tonight,” she said and pulled him to her.

As Meghan had suspected would happen her dinner date at a top Hollywood restaurant with Robin turned sour when she told him she would not be investing in NFTs. Instead, she would keep her money in dull but reliable mutual funds.

“The returns from those things are tiny,” exclaimed Robin. “You’re way too young and hot for dull investment. You want the exciting stuff with big returns.”

“I tried exciting and lost my money,” said Meghan. “I like to be dull and keep my money.”

“Don’t you trust me?” said Robin.

“It’s not that,” said Meghan. “I just don’t understand these NFT things.”

“What’s to understand?” said Robin. “It’s an asset. You buy and sell and make money.”

“Or lose money,” retorted Meghan. “I looked up these things online and I still don’t understand them. I don’t think I should be investing in things that I don’t understand. Anyway, I’d

be giving a lot of my money to two guys in an office in New York, and the paper you gave me doesn't say much about them."

"Two guys? No, it's a consortium."

"Maybe the investors call themselves a consortium, but the business part is just two guys in this office, trading these things," said Meghan, trying to remember what Will had said. "And taking fees as well as a slice of the profits. I don't like it at all."

"Two guys trading?" said Robin. "Where did you see that?" He had not actually read the information pamphlet he had given Meghan.

"It's in that paper you gave me, down the back. There's a sub-head 'trading strategy'. It's under that."

"You read the paper down to there?"

"Of course, I looked through it," she said. "I've had so many investments go bad on me and my family that I now get someone to look at these things."

The last sentence had slipped out.

"An accountant?"

"Well, no," said Meghan, regretting what she had said. "He's just this advisor I have."

"An adviser?" said Robin sharply. "You never mentioned him before."

"He's the one that told me to make that remark that Connie should trade her jet in for a bicycle. He also suggested the benefit we're holding and he's organising it."

"I thought that was being organised by your team."

"He is on the team. I pay him per day, although I fired him today. I didn't mean to, but I fired him."

"How can you fire someone without meaning to?" asked Robin.

Meghan explained the circumstances.

"He should stay fired," said Robin. "You need someone looking out for you, honey, and that someone is me. Invest in this consortium and you won't need to do endorsements and commercials."

Meghan avoided mentioning Will after that and let Robin think that the consultant was still fired but held firm against her boyfriend's pleas that turned into requests and then even angry demands to invest. It seemed that he had even told the people organising this consortium that he would deliver a certain amount of investment to them. Why he would do that when he, like Meghan, earned millions of dollars per film and was in a streaming series that paid him nearly a million an episode, the star did not know. But it made her even more suspicious of the deal.

They spent the night together, but without any real passion and Robin left early the next day, saying he had business on the East coast. He would be back soon.

Meghan continued to find uses for her consultant, including rehearsing parts in her films. The first Will knew of this was one morning when he was handed a script for the streaming series *The Brandenburg Protocol*.

"I want you to help me with rehearsals. Page twenty five. You're Jurgen."

"I'm doing a shower scene with you," said Will, in alarm, looking at the script.

Mia and Emma laughed.

“Lots of guys want to do shower scenes with me,” said Meghan, also amused.

“Lots of guys won’t get fired if their self-control slips during the scene,” protested Will.

“Anyway, Violet always said I can’t act.”

“There won’t be water and our clothes will be on,” said Meghan who was sure Will would behave himself. “As for acting, you don’t have to act the part. I do. You’re there as a prop only, speaking lines. It helps if I can work through the part with a human prop.”

“I’m no good at the guy parts,” said Mia.

“I can’t stop laughing during those,” said Emma.

A few minutes later Will found himself in Meghan’s bedroom with a view over the pool and back garden and a neatly made up bed with a black cover and satin sheets befitting of a bad girl with cabinets on each side. On top of the cabinet on what Will assumed was Meghan’s side was a collection of cigarette-like objects but much longer and thinner, with an external colour and texture close to that of cigars. Will had heard of the soft drug product called Sticks, using a variation of hashish, a drug related to cannabis. But it was not smoked in the traditional joint or bongs – consumers of sticks turned their noses up at such crude methods of consumption – but rolled into the thin pipes he could see on Meghan’s bedside table. The writer was also aware that the habit was widespread in Hollywood. He had seen Meghan glassy eyed once or twice and had thought nothing of it.

The star noticed Will looking at her drugs.

“Do you want one?” she asked, showing them to him.

“Not my scene,” said Will. “It’s soft stuff, I know, but you still shouldn’t keep those things – sticks aren’t they? – in plain sight.”

“Yes, sticks, and I’ll put them away.”

She stuck them in the bottom drawer of her cabinet and they said no more about them. Instead, Will soon found himself in the ensuite’s shower enclosure, script in hand, his peace of mind disturbed by the star having wrapped both legs around him, head on his shoulder, as if they were having sex in the shower. He concentrated on the script.

For her part, Meghan thought that Will was a far more convenient prop than Mia or Emma. For one thing, he could support her weight without effort.

“The guy probably wouldn’t stand like this for any length of time,” said Will, looking at the script. “It’d be easier for him to lean the woman against the tiles or glass with one arm around her back because the surface might be cold, even in a shower.”

“You seem to know a lot about sex in the shower, Will Moorland,” said Meghan, eying her consultant quizzically, as they moved into position.

“There was the occasional for-real shower scene with Violet,” said Will, trying to forget that a woman often voted as ‘most desirable’ in magazine polls was breathing on his cheek. “It’s just a suggestion for your director. What do I do now?”

“Lean in, so my head is on your shoulder.”

“It’s bad of me to seduce you like this,” said Meghan breathing in the writer’s now accessible ear, as she read from the script. Will was glad they had clothes on.

“Um, heavy breathing,” said Will, looking at the script, “um, oh yeah. ‘let’s not talk now’.”

“But I like to talk like this. Heave, heave.” Meghan jerked her body a couple of times.

“Erk! Best not to do the actual action,” said Will. “I don’t want to be fired.”

Meghan laughed. “Poor Will!”

“That’s right, poor me. Okay,” he looked at the script again, “‘we’ll have to talk about Carl’.”

“Oh, I don’t want to talk about him, now,” whispered Meghan in his ear. “I want to talk about us. What you’re doing to me now.”

“Okay, grind, grind,” said Will. “Knife in her hand while bottom heaves. Stabs Jurgen repeatedly in the back... shower runs with blood. My character is killed, messily!”

“Price of sex with my alien character.”

“You’re an alien in this series?”

“Yup, murderous femme fatale alien, working to free comrades held by the US government.”

“Gets them watching I guess, but where does the knife come from? It’s not as if you can hide it on your body or in a shower stall?”

“Hmmm!” said Meghan, flicking through the script. “Good point. Better discuss that with the director.”

“If I may make a suggestion, about the only thing you could have in a shower stall that would hide a blade would be a scrubbing brush. Have one in a brush somehow. You push a button and a blade comes out.”

“I’ll pass it on,” said Meghan thinking that it was a useful suggestion.

“Okay, I say ‘Bitch!’ and fall down clutching at you weakly.”

“I step back and watch you bleed out without emotion, being an alien an’ all.” Meghan stepped back.

Will fell to the floor of the stall hanging half out the door and turned the page. “I go glassy eyed you grab his laptop which he’s brought with him and start hacking it while naked – that’ll get the nerds interested.”

“Hacking now,” said Meghan, picking up her own laptop, and tapping at the keys.

Will flicked over the page. “My body is revived by nanobots! This script is getting out there.”

“Says the guy who writes slasher movie scripts.”

Will thought about that for a moment. “Fair enough. Where do these nanobots come from?”

“Earlier in the script. I have a vial of them handy.” Meghan took a lipstick off her dresser, as a prop and pretended to feed it to Will.

“I revive and stand up jerkily. I’m still naked too. Something for the ladies.”

The rehearsal went on for some time, with Will also taking the part of Karl returning to the hotel room who was then murdered by his nanobot-revived character. The writer thought it was all exhausting, although the shower scene was interesting. Meghan for her part thought that rehearsing with Will was far easier than using Mia or Emma. She later discussed the knife issue with the director who also agreed that the blade in a brush idea had potential.

Will was able to work out some of his feelings on the issue in a shower scene with Charlotte, who unexpectedly appeared again despite still declining to give Will her number.

A few days after that Will got out of the pool following his morning swim to find three strange females draped over sun lounges beside the pool.

“Ladies,” he said taking off his goggles and swimming cap. “I’m Will.”

“I’m Misty Dawn,” said the blonde on the left, a singer and aspiring actress.

“I’m Bo Jovanovic,” said the auburn haired one on the right, who Will recognised as a top model. She spoke with a faint Eastern European accent.

“We’re friends of Meg. She invited us over for morning coffee,” said Misty.

“I can certainly do the coffee,” said Will towelling himself. “And I know you’re Meg’s sister Madison,” he said to the girl in the centre. “There are pictures of you and your mother in the living room.”

“Hi!” said Madison, shyly. Although she did not have her sister’s beauty, she was pretty enough to have no problem attracting boys. In fact, of late that proved to be a problem.

“How come you’re here instead of college?”

“Guy troubles,” said Madison.

“All men are evil?”

“Some are still interesting,” she said, eyeing Will.

“Incidentally, ladies, have you seen my shirt?” said Will looking around.

“Nope, no shirt,” said Misty, eying Will. “Did you see a shirt, Bo?”

“I never saw any shirt,” said Bo.

“I’m pretty sure I left it on the table here.”

“I didn’t see it,” said Misty. Bo shook her head. Madison grinned.

“Hmmm! Well, I guess I can get coffee without a shirt,” said Will. He saw a shoulder bag under Misty’s chair which seemed to be full but thought there was no harm in playing along for a time. “Where is Meg, incidentally?”

“On a call in her study,” said Madison.

Will took their orders – Meg had bought a coffee machine for the kitchen so that Will could serve the full range – and brought them out to the pool area along with diet cookies that the occasional lady guest seemed to like.

“Can I have my shirt back now, ladies?” he asked when he finished.

“We told you we didn’t see a shirt,” said Misty.

Meg walked up. “Will, I see you’ve met everyone.”

“They’ve got their coffee and they still won’t give me my shirt back.”

“Aw, come on you guys,” said Meg, giggling, “give my consultant his shirt back. I need him for work.”

“Why does he need his shirt to work?” said Bo.

“Just a convention for guys to wear shirts at work,” said Misty.

“It’s a psychological thing,” said Will. “I also have to do a phone conference later.”

“Oh, very well,” said Misty, picking up the bag under her seat and taking the shirt out. “Is this the shirt you want?”

“Thank you,” said Will.

Meghan later spoke privately to Madison.

“Will seems very nice,” said Madison, Maddie to her friends. “What does he do for you?”

“I hired him as a consultant.”

“Really! I want a consultant with a body like that. What does he consult on?”

“Lots of things, as it happens. A more important point now is what’s happened to that expensive college I’m paying for? Why aren’t you at it, studying hard?”

“I broke up with Ethan and, well, the college wasn’t really working for me.”

Meghan sighed. “You’ve told mum about this?”

“Why do you think I’m hanging out here? I’ve gotta wait until she cools down. Let me stay a week or so. Then I thought I could help Mum with the shop. Maybe try the college thing later.”

“Humph!” said Meghan but acquiesced, thinking that she would discuss the matter with her mother. Mrs Kowalski, after cooling down, thought that there was nothing to be gained by forcing matters and that college could be deferred. In the meantime, she could use another hand in the shop. She also wanted to discuss developments in her older daughter’s life.

“Maddie tells me you’ve hired a good-looking man as a consultant who swims in your pool,” she said.

“A woman can hire a man without it getting personal, mother,” said Meghan. “Happens all the time in business. Being allowed to use the pool was part of the package when I hired him, and he’s proved very useful. It doesn’t go beyond that.”

If you say so, dear,” Mrs Kowalski said.

Later in the week, with Will’s permission, Madison took a picture of him emerging from the pool and sent it to her friends with the caption, “My sister’s new consultant, Will. He’s very nice. He also makes coffee.” Some of her friends wanted to know what Will consulted on, others asked what the coffee he made was like.

“I hope he makes good coffee,” said one world-weary college freshman. “Men should be good for at least something.”

CHAPTER NINE

A few days later Meghan found another use for her consultant when her regular trainer, Julio, injured himself at sport and could not come to train her.

“Get Will to lead you through stuff,” said Mia, as they watched the writer go through his morning swimming routine, along with Emma and Madison who had also developed the habit of coming down to watch Will. “He also seems to know what he’s doing in the upstairs gym.”

“Hey Moreland!” said Meghan.

Will stood up and looked around.

“Yeah!”

“I need a trainer for today.”

“You need exercise?” he said. “Okay, then start with a swim. Grab your bathers and - you got a cap?”

Meghan thought for a moment. “I can wash my hair later.”

“I’ve got some spare goggles. We’re set. Let’s see your moves in the pool.” Meghan turned to go. “And, oh yeah, a one piece, Diva. A suit that’s meant to actually go in the water and be swum in.”

“Ha!” said Meghan but came down a few minutes later in a stunning one piece. She thought that Will would say something but, as usual, he did not react, just smiling slightly as she dropped into the water and put on the goggles Will gave her.

“For starters, can you do the fifty metres, down and back again, freestyle?”

“Sure,” said Meghan, who splashed her way down to the deep end and back. “There, Mr Swimmer,” she said. “I can also swim.”

“Very good. What about a comp then? Fifty metres. I swim relaxed. You try and beat me.”

“Hmmm! Okay, but you don’t swim at full power.”

“I’m a laid back kinda guy.”

They set off from a standing start, Will calling ‘Go!’ and he made it back well before Meghan.

“Hey Maddie, throw us that magazine, quick,” he called, pointing to a magazine left on one of the other tables, which the former college girl did.

By the time Meghan touched the pool end Will, goggles on his forehead, was pretending to be engrossed in what turned out to be a fashion magazine. “Glad you could join us,” he said. Meghan crossed her arms and glared at the writer. “Look at this, shoulder pads are back. Can you believe it?”

“You said relaxed,” said the star still glaring.

“I am relaxed,” said Will. “I’ve been reading this magazine.”

“Ha!”

“What about this, then,” said Will, setting the magazine to one side. “I’ll give you a twenty five metre head start. When you touch the other end I’ll start swimming from here, and we’ll see who gets back to this end first.”

Meghan assessed the distances involved for a moment and decided that she had a chance. “You’re on, Moreland.”

“Then get going. I’ll see you back at this end.”

As she splashed away, Will stood up on the end of the pool and prepared for a full racing dive, crouched, arms back. Meghan touched the other end and he dived. To the watching ladies, it looked almost as if Will flew across the pool surface for some time before merging with the water. When the star looked back, she realised that Will had already cut her lead almost in half and set off in alarm, swimming determinedly. Will reached the deep end, did a full racing turn and pulled out all stops on the return leg. He reached the shallow end with just enough time to stand up and pretend to be engrossed in the magazine again, as Meghan touched the side.

“I don’t agree with the colors for this season at all,” he said, pointing at the magazine. “Do you?”

“How dare you beat me, Will Moreland,” she said and pushed him. Meghan had been in films where her character had beaten up stunt men heavier than Will, even knocking them down with one punch. In real life, she made little impression against the human wall that was her adviser, although she thought that the sensation of her hands on his bare chest was interesting. Will chortled.

“What’s this?” said someone. They looked up to see Robin Hawk just above them. The Latin-featured star looked a million dollars in black chinos, a white silk shirt and a dark blazer. But when Will climbed out of the pool he realised, to his surprise given the star’s tough guy image, that he towered over the visitor.

“Mr Hawk,” he said, hiding his surprise and shaking the star’s hand. “Ms Chalmers’ usual trainer is out due to injury, and I was just standing in. Swimming is what I do.”

Hawk managed a smile. “I thought I was the only one Meg pushed around.”

“I don’t push anyone around,” said Meghan from the pool. She raised her arms for Robin to pull her out of the pool. “It’s nice that you can be here, darling, but I wasn’t expecting you.”

“Our last date could have been better,” he said. “I thought I’d make amends.”

Will left to shower and change noting that the ladies had also moved inside, leaving only the cat to glare at those who remained in her domain. When he got into the house he found Mia, Emma and Madison sitting around, trying to distract themselves as Meghan and Robin had gone upstairs obviously to have sex. Madison, in particular, seemed on edge. She certainly couldn’t go to her room. Will did not know why there should be a problem in that day and age but decided that a distraction was in order.

“Guys, if the star’s gone off to play then we can have a break,” he said. “I know there’s a pack of cards in the kitchen so let’s do coffee and cards.”

When Meghan came downstairs in a light pink dressing gown after what was, for her, a mechanical exercise, she found her staff engrossed in a game of twenty-one. Just as she arrived Madison had been dealt two Queens by Will, she split these and then beat the house on both to a roar from the crowd.

“What’s this?” said Meghan. “Is this what I’m paying you all for - to play cards?”

“If you want to get in, diva,” said Will, unabashed. “Take a chair.”

“Since I’m paying for the whole thing, I might as well,” she said, sitting down. “What are we playing for?”

“Just make a note on paper, Meg,” said Madison. “You show how much you’re betting with these cards. You throw the number of cards you want to bet in front of you from that stack, then count it up at the end of each hand. I made 25 on that hand.”

Meghan picked up what proved to be a standard sized business card from the stack indicated and read, “Will Moreland, journalist and writer.”

“I had them made out East,” said Will. “Now they’re good as counters at least.”

After two hands, with Meghan losing both, Robin Hawke also found the game.

“Hey, coffee guy,” he said.

“Name’s Will,” said Will. “You want coffee – made to order?”

“Yeah, and my security guy.”

“Henry’s already got one,” said Will. “He just preferred to stay in the kitchen and read.”

“He does that,” said Robin.

Will handed the dealer spot over to Mia and then went to the kitchen, followed by Robin. Will thought for a moment the star was going to speak to him about being too familiar with his girlfriend, but instead he produced the same pamphlet he had given to Meghan on the NFT investment consortium.

“You may want to get lucky with this opportunity,” he said. “Better than serving coffee all your life.”

Will noted that bodyguard Henry, a heavy-set, amiable man with whom he had chatted earlier, looked up, rolled his eyes and went back to reading his thriller.

“The NFT thing?” said Will, doing his best to smile. “Ms Chalmers showed that to me. Isn’t it half a million minimum investment?”

“Find half a million,” said the star, shrugging as if it was the simplest thing in the world. “There’s a world of opportunity out there. The important thing is to get in on the ground floor.”

“Pardon me, Mr Hawk but why are you bothering with this stuff?”

“Excuse me?”

“Well, how much do you make for a film?” said Will, “or for a single episode of a streaming series? Wouldn’t it be more than you could hope to get from these sorts of investments, especially as you’re relying on two guys in an office to make good on their promises in trading these things?”

“What does a coffee guy know about any of this?” said Hawk, frowning.

“I was a journalist for a time back East, Mr Hawk,” said Will. “Just regionals but I did some investment stories. But if I’m just the coffee guy you shouldn’t even be showing this to me.”

“Why the fuck not?” said Hawk.

“Because I wouldn’t be considered a sophisticated investor and that’s not a formal offer document. The SEC has set views on procedures for raising money from the public. I’m hazy on the rules but there are exceptions, including crowd funding and one for getting money from investors who would be expected to know what they’re doing but I doubt I’d qualify. In any case, I don’t have half a million to drop on this but thanks for the thought.”

This conversation resulted in another sharp exchange between Hawk and Meghan who had become tired of the whole issue, although just as determined to avoid putting money into the NFT consortium.

“You take investment advice from the coffee guy?” said Hawk. “I thought you’d fired him.”

“He was fired for a while,” said Meghan, carefully. “But he came back because he’s useful. He handles all my social media and PR, all at a fraction of the amount I was paying in fees before and does it better, as far as I’m concerned. The coffee thing is just a bonus.”

“How does handling social media extend to being in the pool with you?” Robin asked.

“My regular trainer sprained his ankle and Will is former national swimming team. He was standing in.”

“Yeah?” said Hawk remembering, with alarm, the way Will had towered over him. “I don’t like this baby. He’s too close to you; he’ll take advantage of you. You’re so beautiful you have to be careful.”

“I can look after myself,” retorted Meghan. “Will doesn’t have access to my money and has never asked for anything, not even for a raise.”

“Does he touch you? Talk dirty to you?”

Hawk thought that if Will had done anything like that he could get bodyguard Henry to confront the writer, but Meg laughed softly over the thought of Will ‘talking dirty’.

“He’s never laid a finger on me and he’s never said anything inappropriate,” she said. Meghan almost added something like ‘darn it’ but stopped herself in time. “He’s been fine. I can handle my staff.”

“I’m just looking out for you, baby,” said Hawk, “I worry about you. Let’s come back to it.”

Meghan wondered why they had to ‘come back to it’ when she had made herself clear that she wasn’t going to invest but did not say anything.

“The good news,” continued Hawk, “is I can be in New York with you.”

The star was due to film on location for a romance/murder mystery *December in New York*, and her status meant she stayed in a suite at a swanky hotel, along with anyone she wanted. This mostly meant Mia in another bedroom but boyfriends as well.

“That’s great,” she said, although she did not feel that it was great, especially if she was to be hassled about the NFT consortium again, “how long are you going to stay with me?”

“Couple of weeks,” he said. “I’ve got meetings and a commercial to shoot. Can you get the producers to arrange an extra room for Henry?”

“I’ll get Mia onto it,” she said.

Later, Meghan called Mia into her study to pass on the request and to laugh with her over the thought of Will ‘talking dirty’.

“I don’t even get compliments,” complained Meghan. “He tells you and Emma you’re ‘looking fine’ or comments on what you’re wearing or has that line he’s used on Misty about how she’s looking too fabulous and it’s distracting him. But I don’t get that at all. He never tells me I’m ‘looking fine’.”

“Since when do you need to be told you’re looking fine?” retorted Mia. “You make the top of any list of desirable women going and you warned him off pretty hard when you hired him he told me, so he probably thinks that any remark would be out of line. Sometimes, when he puts pics of you online, he says stuff like ‘that should get them in’, or ‘that should have them drooling’. That might count as ‘talking dirty’ now that I think about it, but he never says it when you’re around.”

“He shows those pics to me,” said Meghan, “and he doesn’t say anything then.”

“What can he say about those shots of you sitting up in a bed with a sheet around you that wouldn’t sound greasy?” said Mia wrapping an arm around her at breast level to demonstrate. “Of course, they’re sexy. If Will knows what to say he probably doesn’t dare say it.”

“He could say something. I get a lot of compliments from men I don’t know and don’t care about. It would be nice to get them from someone I actually care about.”

“Do you care about Will?” said Mia quickly. She had begun to suspect that her boss liked the writer and was glad of a chance to question her.

“We all care about Will,” said Meghan, carefully. “I’m with Robin.”

“We all do,” agreed Mia although she was not fully convinced by the answer. “Do you want me to say anything to him about comments on the photos? I have to say, it’s weird, as most men would have to be told to shut up.”

“He can say things like ‘getting them in’ when I’m around. It’s what I do, I guess.”

“Should I tell him he can say things like that?”

Meghan thought for a moment, then shrugged. “Whatever.”

Later that same day, Will came into her study as she was reviewing the social media comments. Will selected comments from the different channels, those that were complimentary or interesting, and either sent them to her or left printouts on her desk. As Meghan was not one to put her life online, or broadcast opinions on X, it was the only interaction she had with her professional profile media.

“Boss, I won’t be around for a couple of weeks from next week.,” he said.

“Don’t call me boss, and why not, Will Moreland? I’ll be paying you to be here.”

“You don’t pay me while I’m doing other stuff. That was our deal, remember?” said Will. “That slasher script I re-wrote is going to the storyboard phase and the producer – you remember Hap – is arranging a workshop with me and the director at some country shack he’s got. We’re going to hang out there for a week and more, hashing out the story. Hap is paying me, not very much but some, to be there. As per our deal, you don’t pay me for that time away.”

“Who’s going to be looking after all the things you do, Will?” she said, annoyed at the thought of the writer not being around for her to hassle. “What about the social media? What about my PR? What about investment advice? What about this benefit?”

“I can set up stuff for online before I go, for Emma to release. She’ll be here by herself, won’t she? You and Mia will be in New York. The benefit is arranged – it’s set for when Connie comes off touring. Your investments are as you want them; we can discuss any shifts in your portfolio when you return. As for the PR, you’re doing a radio interview and one of the TV shows, and both of them will be light. Tell a funny story for the radio program – I’ll leave you a couple of pointers – and wear something short and fabulous for the TV show and it won’t matter what you say. Mia can run interference otherwise. Any serious calls refer to me – I’ll handle them free of charge.”

“I still want you to be there,” said Meghan becoming exasperated. “It’s part of your job. I wanted you to come to New York and advise me.”

“You did fine before I came on staff, and this was part of the deal remember?”

“A slasher movie script with a director who makes zombie Nazi films?”

“Evan’s career to date has not been distinguished, that’s true,” said Will judiciously, “but neither has mine, as you’ve pointed out, and we’ve all got to start somewhere. Hitchcock started as a title card designer for silent films. James Cameron worked for Roger Corman, the king of low budget shlock...”

“This is not helping William Moreland. I still need you in New York.”

“You don’t need me in New York and this was part of the deal. If I’m not doing your work you don’t pay me.”

“How about I not pay you, ever? How about I fire you?”

“Fire me, then,” said Will. “I’m still going to this workshop.”

“Fine, you’re fired.”

“Okay, fine,” said Will. “It was a pleasure to work for you, for that time.”

He left. A few minutes later, Mia came in to ask about payments that had to be made.

“I hate Will Moreland,” said Meghan.

“Uh-huh,” said Mia.

CHAPTER TEN

The Sierra Nevada country retreat that Hap had promised Will and Evan Zagame, director of the film now called Party Town Terror (to avoid confusion with a Spanish film called Party Town), turned out to be a nondescript timber house on the edge of a small settlement called Mystery Valley.

“I thought you said water views and near Lake Tahoe,” said Evan, as he unfolded his lanky frame from Hap’s car. About the same age as Will, he was taller than the swimmer but a lot thinner, with dark, lank hair hanging down either side of a pair of large, black-framed glasses. His appearance and usual garb of black tee shirts of varying designs and jeans meant that he was often underestimated, although Will thought he detected a fierce intelligence and willingness to learn that had intrigued him enough to recommend the director to Hap.

Both Evan and Will agreed that there seemed to be little mystery about Mystery Valley. Unlike its namesake in Arizona, the valley had no ancient ruins or anything much apart from a few houses spread along the road with a general store and gas station in the centre. Surrounding hills and forests which showed evidence of logging blocked any view of the mountains.

“Lake Tahoe is two hours that way,” said Hap pointing into the woods at the other end of the valley.

“You’re pointing East,” said Will. “Lake Tahoe would be north of here.”

“Whatever,” said Hap. “Two hours is close in California. The water views are this way.” He led the others to one edge of the unfenced property and, sure enough, a small creek ran past the house then through a culvert under the settlement’s sole, paved road.

“Looks clear at least,” said Will. “Were there any fires near here?”

“Place got logged out of most stuff that could burn, decades ago,” said Hap. “There were fires in the next valley across but not here.”

“You said you fell in love with the place,” said Evan accusingly, looking around, “but this must be the most un-scenic part of the Sierra’s.”

“The price tag on this place is to die for,” said Hap, unabashed, “and it’s quiet. What more can you want?” The multi-millionaire led the way back to the house which, Will noted, was

equipped with security cameras and a satellite dish. A sign said the place was under twenty-four-hour CCTV surveillance. The front door, which looked strong, had a key code lock.

“You keep an eye on the place,” said Will.

“Have to,” said Hap. “Logging camp up the road.”

Inside was comfortable enough but hardly luxurious, with a small stove powered by bottled gas and an ancient ice box that had to be turned on. They settled into the three bedrooms, unpacked the groceries and computer equipment they had brought with them and got to work.

After a brief discussion both Mia and Emma had decided simply not to mention Will, dealing with the writer by email for the matters they had to handle while he was away, and Mia paid Will for the time he spent on those matters. Meghan saw the payments in the list she always reviewed but said nothing.

The assistant had a request of her own.

“Can Jake stay with me in our suite in New York?”

“Okay, I guess,” Meghan said. “Can’t see any harm in it. Have you two gotten that far?”

“Seems so,” said Mia, coyly. “There’s been talk of moving in together, even if only to stop our respective roomies from complaining that three people should be paying rent. He’ll also be taking pictures of you on-set and around New York for the online material.”

“You’ve got words to go with these pictures?”

“We’ve got templates,” said Mia, carefully, “and Emma can adjust to suit.”

“These templates have been set by Will?” said Meghan frowning.

“Well, yes.”

“How dare he go away, like that!”

“Okay,” said Mia.

When Meghan got to New York with Mia and Jake in tow she found that filming included a lot of starts at sunrise, when the streets were mostly still clear of all but the inquisitive homeless. Meghan would have preferred late nights partying in fashionable night clubs with Robin and did not do mornings well, but they were part of the job and she took her job seriously. This time, however, the early morning starts were made worse by confusion over the script and conflict between director Ephron Pereira and the male lead, Morten Dyke. The woman scriptwriter, who had also written the original book, vainly tried to referee between the two men. Meghan thought that Morten was a sleaze bag always trying to get into her pants and Ephron was an idiot and took no part in the arguments. Instead, she spent a lot of time on a director’s chair, yawning, flicking through her phone messages, ignoring stares from early bird New Yorkers and resisting the urge to call Will to hassle him.

Finally, they would shoot a couple of scenes then there would be too many people about, and film production would move to interior shots. On the third day of this, Meghan was dragged into one of these fights over, of all things, how fast she should move up a staircase. Ephron wanted her to move slowly, Morten thought she should move quickly.

“Isn’t that right, Clar?” Morten asked her, as she was standing ready for the shot. He was not close enough to his co-star to call her Meghan or Meg.

“It’s a directorial decision,” said Meghan, exasperated.

“Now you’re taking his side,” snapped Morten.

“I’m not taking anyone’s side,” snapped Meghan. “I’m just doing my job which includes this scene. I’m doing it not you, and if the actual director of the picture says to go slowly then I’ll go slowly. In any case, I’ve just discovered my husband’s body and I’m dreading the fact that you, as my lover in the film, has killed him. Slowly doesn’t seem out of place.”

The film crew would have clapped and cheered if they had dared, especially as Morten then allowed the next couple of scenes to be shot without throwing a tantrum. Instead, the youthful female assistant who brought Meghan coffee spoke to the star.

“The crew really appreciate you standing up to Morten, Ms Chalmers,” she said. “He was less of a pain after that for a while, anyway.”

“Oh right, thank you,” said Meghan. “This film promises to be a nightmare all round.”

“It does,” agreed the assistant.

Then there was the problem of Robin who spent a couple of nights with her but was otherwise mostly missing in action. When he was present, he would pressure her to invest in the Non-Fungible Token scheme, upping the ante to two million dollars.

“Are you crazy?” retorted Meghan. “I’m not giving two million dollars of my money to two guys in an office. I don’t know what they’re supposed to be doing to earn these big profits and I don’t care. I’m not giving them any of my money.”

“Is it that coffee guy? You’re taking investment advice from him over me.”

“He’s got nothing to do with this,” said Meghan. “I don’t want to put money into schemes I don’t understand. It’s as simple as that.”

Robin stormed off, not to be seen for the rest of the day and the night. The thought that the relationship might have reached its use by date drifted through Meghan’s mind, only for her to put it to one side. Then the next morning she was walking through the hotel lobby with Mia for one of the early starts when they met Henry coming through the main entrance.

“Good morning, Henry,” said Meghan, cheerfully. The bodyguard had always been nice to her. “You’ve already been out this morning?”

“Staying in the hotel up the road,” he said. “Just coming in to get the boss.”

“You’ll be disappointed,” said Meghan, puzzled. “He’s not with us, and I thought you were staying in this hotel.”

“No, I’m down the street,” said Henry, after a moment’s hesitation. “Not with you? Thanks, I’ll check my phone.”

He held the door open politely for the two ladies and then went in, reaching for his phone. Meghan waited until they were a few steps further on before speaking to Mia.

“You arranged for a room for Henry, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Check on what’s happening with the room. Try to get the number then see if you can find out who’s staying in it. Maybe Jake can check it out.” Meghan already had deep, dark suspicions

about who might be in the room but thought that she should at least check first, before confronting Robin.

A little later Jake knocked on the door of the room which Mia had arranged with the producers of Meghan's film. He was a man of middling height in jeans and tee shorts with a short beard, carrying a top of the line camera. Eventually, the door opened, still on its chain, and a female voice said "Yes?"

"I had an appointment with Mr Robin Hawke I'm taking a few studio shots."

"Oh, okay," said the woman. "Sorry, but he's gone out for a while. I'm not sure when he'll be back."

"Hmmm! Okay," said Jake. "Maybe I got the time wrong. I'll get the studio to check. Thanks."

The woman was sufficiently reassured to open the door fully. She was a young, pretty brunette, dressed to go out.

"I'm just going out myself. Do you want me to tell him you were here?"

"Don't worry," said Jake. "The people who want this will get hold of him or that bodyguard Henry, was it? And find out where he is. Hey, you're worth a few shots yourself. You're a friend of Mr Hawke's?"

"Yes, I am," she said, smiling.

"Can I grab a couple of pictures for the producers, so my visit is not a total waste of time? If you're going out, maybe by the fountain out front. Won't take a moment." Jake was fairly comfortable in his role as a photographer to the stars, as he was a photographer and had been taking shots of the famous Clarise Chalmers.

"I suppose I can do that," she said. "I've had parts as an extra."

"I don't doubt that," said Jake, getting into the lift with her. "You got an agency?"

"Turners," she said.

"They're supposed to be one of the best," said Jake. "I am sorta curious about one thing, I thought that Mr Hawke was with that star um.."

"Clarise Chalmers. Yeah, that was a thing but it's over. It just hasn't hit the media yet."

Jake spent a couple of minutes taking the girl's picture by the fountain. Just as he was leaving, Henry, who had come to pick up the girl, drove up to the hotel's entrance in Hawke's limousine. Henry saw the photographer, whom he knew, but Jake did not see Henry. That meant Meghan was looking at the picture of the girl on Mia's phone at about the same time that the male star was told by Henry that his secret was out. Hawke called his publicist.

"I'm sorry," said Mia, as she showed Meghan the picture of the new girl in Hawke's life and repeated what Jake had learned. They were on another break in filming while the director and male lead argued.

Meghan looked briefly at the picture and handed the phone back. She thought for a moment. The news was a blow but not such a bad thing when she thought about it.

"It hurts," she said, after a moment, "and will for a while, but it's also a relief. Robin was fun for a time, but he was never around and when he was he was trying to get me into those weird investments of his. Then he'd get mad if I didn't invest. He'd also get mad if other men so much as

looked at me. Why get mad at me over that? I can't help guys looking at me. The fun's over. Good riddance!"

"Good girl," said Mia. "Lots of guys out there."

The pair were silent for a time.

"Post-relationship cleaning up to be done," said Mia, finally. "Are we doing the exit interview?"

Meghan eyed her assistant. "Are there office procedures for breakups these days?"

"Now that I'm in one, I've been reading up about them," said Mia. "Procedures help. There's the five steps in a relationship. Dating, then meeting each other's co-workers..."

"I don't want to hear about the steps of being in a relationship," said Meghan, firmly. "I want to hear about the steps involved in getting out of one."

"Oh right. Well, Robin still has stuff in your suite."

"Good point," said Meghan. "Does Jake mind clearing Robin's things out? Leave them all at hotel reception, and make sure Robin can't get into the suite. We'd better pay Jake for the work he's doing too."

"Okay," said Mia, putting her phone to her ear.

"And tell the producers they don't need to pay for that room any longer."

"Will do. Is there going to be an announcement?"

"Humph!" said Meghan. That would be the most painful part of all, but it could be put off. "We'll at least wait until after this exit interview you're talking about."

Meghan did another scene before exterior shooting was wound up for the day then agent Stella Bullingham called her.

"Is this a good time to talk?" Stella asked cautiously. "Are you sore about this breakup?"

"How did you know that Robin and I had gone our separate ways?" asked Meghan. "I only just found out myself."

"It's on the Sidewalk Stars website. I thought Will would be on his millionth call about it by now."

"Will's off doing his own work, and I hate him for it."

"Okay," said Stella. The agent thought it was a good idea not to say anything more about Will.

"Just a moment." Meghan took the phone away from her ear. "Mia, can you look at the Sidewalk Stars site?" She went back to speaking to Stella. "We'll get to it. but I was just telling Mia before that sure breakups hurt but this was also a relief. There were problems."

"That's good," said Stella. "I mean breakups are bad but if there are problems then it's better in the long run. Fortune cookie slogans aside, and I hate to bother you at this time, but can you do a Vogue cover? The model they had lined up has fallen though and they're trying to keep to schedule. It's in New York in about a week, and it's good money."

"I wouldn't mind doing it," said Meghan. "The trouble is that filming here is proving such a pain. The director and my co-star are at each's throats, and I think the crew are just about to mutiny. If they can fit in with breaks in the filming as I'm here anyway, then maybe. I'd prefer to keep working. Give them Mia's number and we can try to co-ordinate."

“Can do,” said Stella, “and sorry again about the whole break-up thing.”

Mia handed Meghan her laptop with the Sidewalk Stars website, featuring breaking news concerning her love life.

You read it here first. The talk on the sidewalk is that glamour couple Robin Hawke and Clarise Chalmers are on the rocks. Heart throb Robin decided that the relationship was no long working. Sources in his camp say that incompatible work schedules meant that the two were seldom together and when they were it was for a paid appearance for Clarise, or for her charity work. Robin has not remained single for long, being seen around town with brunette starlet Peggy Blossom.

There is no word yet from the Siren of the Shower...

“That asshole!” exclaimed Meghan.

Mia, who rarely heard her boss use bad language, was impressed.

“He’s always on film sets, then takes up with this girl on the side and lays all the blame on me,” said Meghan. “And what charity appearances? We’ve only organised the one and it hasn’t happened yet. And what sort of name is Peggy Blossom? Makes Clarise Chalmers sound almost classy.”

Mia let Meghan fume for a couple more seconds. “There is one way you might be able to get out ahead of this?”

“Really, what?”

Chris, Danny and Hope discovered what was left of the bodies of the two party goers two levels below Party Town, the music of the main dance floor a muted doof, doof, doof.

“We told ‘em the Crazies were still around,” said Chris, bending to look at the bodies.

“Might be two of those things.”

“We’ve gotta go back and warn them,” said Danny.

“They didn’t listen to us before,” said Hope. “Even with two bodies they might not listen.”

They heard a soft giggle somewhere in the darkness, then a patter of many feet.

“Shit they’re still here,” said Chris. “Guns out everyone.”

“Are we going to show the monsters now?” asked Hope.

“Let the tension build,” said Chris. “Let the audience look for the monsters.”

“I agree,” said Danny, “be sparing with the monsters, like the classics Alien and Jaws, but start the music - that pulse of a drum beat followed by a mechanical rasp were talking about, like in that Tomb Raider game sequence.”

A mobile phone rang.

“That’s yours, Will,” said Hope who was actually Hap. “I thought we agreed that everyone’s phone was to be turned off.”

“Sorry guys, I turned it back on,” said Danny who was actually Will, taking out his phone and looking at it. “I gotta take this.”

Will got up from the dining/kitchen table where he, Hap and Evan and been hashing out the film *Party Town* scene by scene with laptops connected by workgroup software. A rough sketch of the agreed scenes had been printed out and taped to the shack's wall in sequence.

"Just a moment," he said, and walked out to the deck overlooking the shack's 'water views'.

"How is the CGI going for this?" he heard Evan ask.

"Can show you something later," said Hap, who had become absorbed in the project.

Making a slasher film was way more entertaining than devising software development tools, he had decided. "Needs more work but for the scene you'll just need someone with a laser tag on his chest."

"Meg, what's up," said Will once he was out on the deck. Even if he didn't admit it to himself, he had missed the star and hoped that he wasn't really fired.

"I hate you, Will Moreland!"

"Oh, okay, was there any reason to call me to tell me that? A text with a bad emoji might have done it."

"I need a statement. A response." Meghan told him what had happened and read out the web site item.

"Oh wow, and he's blaming you? The bastard."

"Humph! Tell me about it," said Meghan, glad that Will could not see her smile at his response.

"And this is why I've got a heap of voice mails. But you can easily return fire on this and blow your ex out of the water if that's what you want?"

"I'm listening," said Meg.

"You acknowledge that there were strains in the relationship including incompatible work schedules, but you note that Robin Hawke didn't tell you any of this face to face. Instead, the first you heard of the break up and of another person in his life was when you read about it online. He hasn't tried to call you since the news broke?"

"No – I haven't heard from him."

"Then you say also he's made no attempt to contact you since the story broke. All that will instantly get the female half of the population on your side. It's like a school kid sending a girl a text message saying, 'You're dropped'."

"This sounds good," said Meg, "is that it?"

"Then you drop the real bomb. You say Hawke did not mention other strains in the relationship such as his attempts to get you to invest in a string of crazy investment schemes You list the schemes including the last one he wanted you to drop half a million on."

"He upped the amount. Try two million," said Meg.

"What? Is he crazy?"

"That's what I told him," said Meghan, amused and comforted. "Now that I think of it, the last time I spoke to him was when I refused to put up that money."

"Then that's what you want to say," said Will quickly, "and in those terms. Don't attack him. Just keep to the facts. Can I send on those ridiculous investment flyers he was handing out?"

"Doesn't bother me," said Meghan. "Do we still have them?"

“I stuck them in a box in one of the closets – unless they’ve been thrown out as part of the firing process.”

“Not yet,” said Meghan. “Emma is in the house with not enough to do.”

“Then a short statement setting out all of that, Emma gets busy scanning and emailing and you’ll find that the whole debate will shift towards partners who try to get money from their better halves, and how mean they can be when they don’t get what they want and so on. I’ll draft something for your approval. It won’t take long.”

“I still want you in New York.”

“From where I am that’s going to be impossible inside two days and I haven’t finished this workshop thing. I’m being paid to be here.”

It was on the tip of Meghan’s tongue to offer Will double what he was getting to come to New York, but she did not. She knew that Will did not operate like that. Instead, she said: “where is this workshop thing?”

“It’s in an unscenic part of the Sierra Nevadas.”

“How can you have an unscenic part of those mountains.”

“That’s what we said, but Hap, you remember the publisher, sold it to us as close to Lake Tahoe and with water views.”

“Sounds better.”

“Except Lake Tahoe is still two hours away, and the water views are of a tiny creek on one side of the property.”

Meghan laughed. “You never seem to get ab good deal, do you.”

“Nope,” said Will. “Do I get any sympathy?”

“Ha!” said Meghan.

“I’ll come to New York just as soon as I can.”

“Ha! First do the statement, Will.” She hung up.

“Do I start paying Will when he turns up again,” said Mia.

“Ha!” Meghan said, but without any heat.

“We were discussing a deal where he would get paid half the daily rate if he had to do any work while away. Do I do that?”

“Ha!” said Meghan again.

Mia took that as a yes to both questions.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Sidewalk Stars’ Ken anchorman flashed his gleaming teeth. “The big news in the entertainment industry today is Hollywood heart throb Robin Hawk filing for bankruptcy. Take it away Barbara.

“Yes Ken,” said Barbara flashing her gleaming teeth. She was sitting at a desk with a picture of the Wall Street Bull and Bear statues behind her to establish her financial credentials. “The star’s financial affairs started unravelling the moment he split from Clarise Chalmers, the siren of the shower, with Ms Chalmers complaining that the first she heard of the split, or of another girl in Robin’s life, was from an item on our web site. She admitted to tensions in the relationship but said these were about money. Chalmers said that the last she saw of her lover was when she refused to put two million dollars into one of a string of what her office describes as ‘crazy investment schemes’ favoured by the Hawk.

“The amount was large enough for the SEC and the IRS to start kicking over rocks as they say in the investment game, with the help of material provided by Ms Chalmers’ office. It turns out Ken that even with the millions he was earning from acting, Robin Hawk could not stay away from high-risk investment schemes. He lost so much on those schemes that in the end the only way he could get some of this money out of those schemes was to get others to invest...”

The next call Will got, almost the moment he hung up from Meghan, was from Charlotte who declared that she would be in Los Angeles in two days and what about getting together?

“Love to Char,” he said, “but I’m in an obscure spot in the Sierra Nevadas in a workshop for several days and just now I have to do something quickly for my office. There’s a chance I may be in New York in a week or two if you don’t mind getting together then, otherwise, it’ll have to be next time around.”

“New York may be hard, as I don’t know where I’ll be,” she said, carefully. “But I’ve been thinking about what you said about me not giving you my number, so I’ve decided to give it.” She then gave him a number which he noted down.

“That’s great, Char,” he said, “I’ll finally be able to call you. But I gotta dash. I’ll call in a day or so.”

He stayed at Hap’s country retreat for another week and a half, fielding calls from reporters about his boss’s breakup. They wanted to talk to Meghan, but she had left strict instructions that she would not comment further until she was ready to do so, whenever that might be. However, Will was authorised to throw one or two information tidbits to those who called, provided they attributed the points to “sources familiar with the events”. These included Meghan only becoming aware of the other girl in her boyfriend’s life at about the time he broke up with her via media leak. However, they had not been speaking before that because of the star’s demands that Meghan invest millions of dollars in risky schemes. This was close enough to the truth to keep reporters happy. Will was also able to say that he had been approached for investment and could send them the papers outlining the various schemes.

The fuss over the breakup itself died down after a few days, to Meghan’s relief, with the gossip columnists shifting their attention to Robin Hawke’s tangled financial affairs, and reporters writing features on financial abuse in relationships.

By the time Will, Hap and Evan thought they had a viable story sequence in place the breakup was old news, but Meghan still wanted Will to come to New York as Vogue had suggested an interview to go along with the cover about the events in the star’s life. Will could brief her on

what to say. In addition, Stella wanted Will to attend a meeting about what was now being called the *Bad Diva* fashion brand with her in New York.

“Me, at a fashion meeting?” said Will when the agent told her about this. “Security might not even let me into a building with fashion brands.”

“Meghan says you’re to wear something decent,” said Stella, amused. “Her words were ‘the half-drowned pool look works in LA, but not New York’. Wear a good suit. That’ll do.”

“But what am I to do at this meeting, apart from not look half-drowned?”

“You’re decorative enough and that’s not a bad start for this kind of meeting especially as it will be mainly women,” said Stella. “Faking it also helps and that briefing note you wrote shows you can fake it with the best of them. But mostly I need someone from the diva camp who’s got my back. These guys are a top fashion brand. I don’t want to face them alone.”

On the drive back to LA, the Party Town production team kicked around the next, important step – that of trying to find actors who were a cut or two above the run of late night slasher features, but still willing to work for the money Hap was prepared to offer. He had taken Will’s advice about films rarely earning back their cost of production to heart and he was watching expenses carefully.

“What about Violet, Will?” asked Evan. “Do you keep in contact with her?”

“No not at all,” said Will. “She’d be into any acting job, I guess, although when she ran out on me she was heading to an off-Broadway gig. Maybe she’s still doing that.”

“Sounds sordid,” said Hap.

“Sordid and gruesome,” said Will, “but she might spice up the movie. You’re welcome to the number I have for her, especially as you’re the one who has to deal with her – I’ve done the script bit.”

“Bout that,” said Evan. “Hap and I have been talking and we want you to hang around on set as assistant director/script writer.”

“I couldn’t turn down the chance,” said Will. “But you guys saw that I had to break off a couple of times during our workshop to put out fires for my boss. That’d still be a thing.”

“Whatever,” said Evan.

“I also get paid for my time, right?” asked Will.

“Yeah, there’s pay,” said Hap, not very enthusiastically.

“There’s also the question of what you’d want me to do,” said Will. “The film seems set to me, and I dunno just what I can add to issues like camera angles, costumes and props. I never trained in film.”

“You’ve done alright so far,” said Evan. “I’ve been an assistant director and it’s a lot about coordinating all the different teams involved. Coordinating AI backdrops with the action may be a big part of this. The script will probably also need tweaks and we’ll still need someone to blame for things going wrong.”

“Great someone who takes the blame,” said Will. “My career is looking up.”

A day later, Will emerged in the lobby of the Marlborough Hotel within spitting distance of New York’s Central Park, to see Meghan bearing down on him.

“You!” she said. Will had gotten in too late the previous night to visit the star and had been given a separate room, so this was the first time the star had seen her consultant for more than two weeks.

“It’s not that bad, is it?” said Will. “Mia, how do you react knowing Will is here.”

“Yea! Will is here!” said Mia, playing her part. “It’s great to see you again Will!”

“There, see, Mia at least is pleased to see me.

“And what is that?” said Meghan, ignoring Mia and pointing at Will’s tie.

“It’s a tie,” said Will.

“I can see that,” snapped Meghan. “What is the ghastly design on it? I can see bottles but what are the other outlines?”

“I think its baseball bats,” said Mia, craning in to look.

“Thank heaven, I thought it might be something else,” said Meghan. “You are not going anywhere representing me wearing a baseball tie.”

“But I..”

“Come.” She grabbed Will by the forearm and dragged him to a menswear boutique in the foyer of the hotel.

It was interesting, Will thought, to see the male attendant snap to when the famous Clarise Chalmers appeared in his shop.

“Men’s ties please,” she said.

“Of course, madam,” said the attendant who then produced several hangers full of ties.

“Conservative, madam, or more colourful?”

“Conservative with a dash of colour, I think.” She inspected a couple of racks and chose one in a soft, grey fabric with a yellow stripe. “Take off that tie and put on this.”

“Does sir also want a pocket square, madam?” said the attendant. “Two peaks are fashionable just now.”

“Yes, what do you have.”

This resulted in the production of another row of fabrics and, by the time Will had tied his new tie, Meghan tucked a pocket square with two peaks in a yellow shade that more or less matched the tie’s colour stripe into the writer’s breast pocket.

“There that’s an improvement at least,” she said, adjusting Will’s tie with a click of her tongue then stepping back. “Give me that other tie.”

She held out her hand and Will, who had previously put the tie in his pocket, reluctantly gave it to her. She dropped it on the counter.

“Take that away and put it out of its misery.”

“Of course madam. Perhaps Madam may want to rethink sir’s suit?” said the attendant hopefully.

“There could be other improvements,” agreed Meghan. “But I’ll be late on set. Pay the man, Mia and let’s go.”

“Never understood keeping a handkerchief in the breast pocket,” said Will when they got out into the foyer.

“William Moreland!” said the star rounding on him. “You use your pocket square as a handkerchief and you’ll be fired again.”

“Yes, ma.. Meg. Are we all going to have dinner together? Stella said something about it.”

“She did,” said Meghan. “Mia see to the booking. Are you going to see your Junior Cougar at some point? This is supposed to be her home turf.”

“Doesn’t seem like it. Instead, I’m meeting my sister for lunch.”

“You have a sister living here?” said Meghan.

“Lilith is an associate in one of the major law firms, Huntington and Brown, on the fast track to legal stardom.”

Lunch with Lilith was a re-run of many other meetings with his older sister who was ambitious both for herself – she was aiming for partner and would probably get it – and for her two brothers. While Will put up with the hectoring as best he could, his younger brother Caden had taken to hiding whenever she visited.

“Are you going to see mum and dad?” Lilith said the moment Will appeared at the table. Lilith was a severe but not unpleasant looking woman who tied her dark hair back in a bun and wore outsized glasses that reminded Will of Charlotte. He had met her partner Ben, another lawyer, a few times and thought the man always appeared shell-shocked.

“I’ll be able to go down for a day or so on the weekend, then I’ll fly back,” Will said.

“To these non-paying writing jobs.”

“Well, they pay something,” said Will, thinking he should at least be allowed to order before defending himself. The menu looked good.

“Mother says you’re on the staff of one of the big time Hollywood stars, but she didn’t say which one.”

“Clarise Chalmers.”

“Really?” It was one of the few times Will had seen his sister impressed by anything he did. “You’ve met the star herself?”

“Oh yes.”

This led to a question and answer session in which Will told his sister how he had met the star, and how Clarise/Meghan had laid down the law regarding any romantic thoughts he might have.

“Good,” snorted Lilith. “But no doubt you’ll meet starlets and we’ll have a re-run of the Violet disaster.”

Both Lilith and Mrs Moreland had been wary of Violet and Will had to admit that the relationship had ultimately been a disaster. But he didn’t try to defend himself. Instead, Will said he couldn’t help who he liked and could they order now? He was hungry. Lilith relented, then, once the waitress had come and gone, questioned him about how much he was earning. Will told her.

“You get that much per day? Junior associates at my firm get that much per hour.”

“I’m not giving legal advice, Lil. Just handling the PR and social media.”

A little later they got onto Will’s current romantic affairs which were also unsatisfactory.

“Mum says you won’t say anything about this person you’re seeing, only that she comes to LA sometimes on business.”

“Well, yes. I haven’t said anything because the whole thing is strange.”

“Huh! She lives here – are you going to see her?”

“Dunno,” said Will. “The meetings are up to her.”

He eventually left the lunch, feeling drained, but was able to entice Charlotte to his hotel room the next day for what turned out to be an afternoon sex date. She kissed him afterwards and gave him various excuses about why they couldn’t meet for dinner or, indeed, even have a normal date while he was in town. She was just too busy.

A week later, however, she came to LA and they had dinner saw a film and then had a night at her serviced apartment. The next day was Saturday and Will thought to check out Venice Beach where he had never been. As far as he was concerned, Los Angeles was one, big traffic jam and most places in the tourist guides in any city were usually a letdown, but Charlotte also wanted to go before flying out later that day.

Where did she have to be on a Saturday night and then Sunday, Will asked as they ate a breakfast of muffins.

“I’m so sorry I can’t stay over longer, darling,” she said. “It’s just so busy at work at the moment, but I’ll be back soon.”

“Of course,” said Will, “but work can’t be too much of a drag, you looked tanned and fit.”

“Why thank you, Will. I was able to get a little time in the sun on the rooftop at work.”

Just at the moment, she bit into a muffin she was holding with her left hand and Will could not help but notice that there was a band of paler skin on her ring finger. He looked away quickly, thinking that pale skin confirmed a part of what he had suspected, and he wondered whether it mattered to him one way or another. The choice had been Charlotte’s – he was along for the ride – and he had never thought in terms of Charlotte becoming a soul mate with a shared life. But then did it matter that she had a husband and perhaps a family back East?

Charlotte declared she would take a quick shower and pack before they headed off, disappearing into the bedroom and leaving her shoulder bag, a smart item of black leather closed with a zipper, on the kitchen top. Will stared at the bag until he heard the shower start then carefully unzipped it so as not to change the bag’s position. The first thing he noticed was that his occasional girlfriend had two mobiles. He lifted each out. Both were set to silent. The front screen of one showed a generic view of the Brooklyn Bridge. Will supposed that was the one for him. The other had a picture of Charlotte with an older, distinguished looking man and two boys, one a near-teenager and then other somewhat younger. They all looked happy. He carefully replaced the phones, zipped the bag back up and went to get dressed.

Will noticed the car in the street outside Charlotte’s serviced apartment building as they drove past it, only because the vehicle reminded him of his own decidedly down market Saturn, comparing badly with the Porsches, BMWs and even Jaguars of the neighbourhood. Then he thought no more of it – wondering, instead, what he would do with his new found information. Was

it really his problem? After all, Charlotte was not cheating on him, but then what would happen if this dalliance became serious?

Despite what was going through his mind Will still managed to keep up his end of the conversation until they found a place to park and got out of Charlotte's rental, some distance from the Venice Beach skateboard park and recreation centre where they thought most of the action would be. Then the same beaten-up Ford he had seen outside Charlotte's place drove past them. Will glimpsed the driver, a middle-aged, balding man who looked away the moment the writer looked up, then parked within sight of Will and Charlotte.

"Odd," thought Will. But then Venice Beach was a popular attraction.

They walked on with Charlotte saying that she needed the exercise and eventually arrived at Ocean Front Walk.

"Let's go out to that park feature," said Charlotte after a couple of minutes. The weather was California-normal, meaning that there were girls in bikinis and others wearing cut-away shorts riding bikes. Will was distracted by two passing girls and thought he saw the same man who had been in the old Ford move discretely out of his line of sight. Curious, the writer then pretended to look up and down Ocean Front Walk so that he could observe this man out of the corner of his eye. Like Will and Charlotte the newcomer was not dressed for the beach but he had a camera around his neck. He was just standing in the nearby car park but when Will and Charlotte moved further on, down the main drag their new friend came with them.

Will thought this man looked more like an ex-military or law enforcement type than any mobster, and why would someone who meant them harm carry a camera? Then he realised what the man must be and, after a few moments of thought, what he must do. They bought ice creams at a shop and Will saw, through the shop window, their new companion come up closer to take a picture of them as they emerged. He turned his face away and they continued walking.

"I'm afraid there's been a development in our relationship, such as it is, Char," he said.

"Really, what?"

"We're being followed, and I strongly suspect the man is a private detective. Don't look around. Just keep strolling casually."

"How do you know this?" asked Charlotte.

"Saw the man's old car in the street outside your serviced apartment. I think he was trying to blend in, but in that street it stood out. I got a glimpse of him as we drove by. The same car passed us when we stopped and then parked a block or so from us. The guy who was in the car has been behind us since. He's squat, balding, white shirt blue pattern, well back. I think he just took a picture of us."

"But why? Is he following you?"

"Don't think it's about me, Char. Would you say your husband is a jealous kind of guy?"

"Shit!" said Char, after a moment. "How long have you known?"

"I knew something was off right from the start when you wouldn't give me your phone number or even tell me where you worked, but the part about you being married I didn't realise until just this morning at breakfast."

"How?" said Char looking at him.

“You said you’d been out in the sun but I happened to see your ring finger with a much paler patch of skin about where a wedding ring would go.”

Charlotte looked at her finger and said “shit” again.

“I did something a little sneaky. While you were in the shower I looked in your bag and found your two cells. One’s for me, I guess, and the other has a sign-on screen of you with a man and two boys.”

“The younger one is mine,” she said, “the older one is his, staying with us every second weekend.”

“They look like nice kids,” he said.

“They are. Sorry Will, I wasn’t getting what I wanted in my marriage and my husband cheats on me quite a bit – having affairs and buying hookers. But I still didn’t want to break things up.”

“You don’t have to justify yourself to me, Char,” said Will. “I suspected you weren’t free right from the start, and I took the sex. I can’t point fingers. I also didn’t mind anything that happened. Guys can take being a port of call for sex way better than a girl can. No hard feelings at all; but when it comes to private detectives following us, taking pictures then it’s time for me to depart. I really don’t want to be involved in messy divorces.”

She sighed. “I understand Will, and thanks for the good times.”

They walked on for another few seconds in silence.

“What happens now?” she said.

“I vanish. I don’t think this guy has got his money shot – he seems a bit eager with that camera of his – and once I’m gone all he can do is follow you around.”

“What’s the money shot?”

“The picture of us in some sort of passionate embrace or holding hands or whatever. My mother is a lawyer with a family law practice; she told me about this stuff. The money shot is conclusive proof and helps justify the fees.”

“I see. And he doesn’t have it?”

“Don’t think so, at least he seems to be taking risks to get closer with that camera of his.” They came to a corner store filled with souvenirs and a handy circular postcard rack right next to the corner. He looked at the front rows while talking to Charlotte. “I’ll get behind this, then when the crowd blocks our mutual friend’s view I’ll slip around the corner. Remember to buy something for your kids and maybe mention, casually, to your husband that you met a former colleague on the streets and went to Venice Beach. All good fun.”

“Okay Will,” she said. “Bye!”

“Nice knowing you,” said Will and went around the back of the stand. When Charlotte looked again, he was gone.

Will walked quickly down the side street, thinking that he would walk several blocks over and then call in a taxi or an Uber or something. He had been truthful when he told Charlotte he did not regret the affair. But it had been a strange arrangement, and now that it was over he felt a sense of relief.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“The bad girls’ charity event is almost here Barbara,” said Sidewalk Stars’ anchorman Ken. “What’s the gossip on the big event?”

“After a long delay to fit in with Connie Leighton’s existing touring dates,” said Barbara sitting in front of a picture of a busy night club to show that she knew about the club scene, “the event is on for this Saturday. The long standing feud between Leighton and Hollywood hottie Clarise Chalmers is now coming down to be a stand-off over club dresses. Dress makers are working overtime for both camps, Ken.”

Another question even more important than what to wear to the event was weighing on Meghan’s mind.

“I don’t really want to go alone to this event,” she told Mia, as they scanned through dresses on Mia’s laptop. “It’s depressing sitting alone in a stretch limousine, and you’ll be there already, handling lists.”

“The obvious thing is to ask Will to ride with you,” said Mia. “The event organisers and security are handling all the details he was telling me. He doesn’t need to get in early.”

“Okaaaaay, but what about this junior cougar of his?”

“He’s just keeping you company – it’s not an actual date. There shouldn’t be a problem. Just ask him.”

“I have to ask him?” said Meghan, as if this was some exotic practice of tribes in distant countries.

“Sure,” said Mia. “You haven’t asked a guy out before?”

“I haven’t had to.”

“Well, it’s time for Clarise Chalmers to try something new.”

Later in the day, Meghan called Will into her study and asked if he could ride with her in the limousine and be on her table at the dance.

“I’m going anyway, so it’s no problem,” said Will. Mia had already mentioned that he would be asked. “This is all about me making up the numbers because Robin is now a non-person as far as you’re concerned.”

“That’s right,” conceded Meghan. “But I hope you don’t think it’s a chore to ride in with me Will?”

“No guy would think that,” said Will.

“Ha! Finally, a complement,” said Meghan. “What about this junior cougar of yours; is she going to cause problems over this?”

“No longer relevant,” said Will. “I found out about the other man in her life.”

“Who was the other man?”

“Her husband.”

Meghan gasped. “Let’s hear it, then. I want the story.”

Will told her most of what happened.

“She never wore her ring around you?” asked Meghan, at the end of the story.

“Nope. Now that I think of it, she probably took the ring off just before she spoke to me that first time outside the supermarket.”

“Like I said at the time, opportunistic of her.”

“Maybe she speaks to a few guys before she gets a hit,” said Will. “Like some guys ask a lot of girls hoping to get the occasional yes. But girls wouldn’t have to ask many guys to get lucky, I guess.”

“Humph! Did the marriage thing bother you?” said Meghan.

“If she’d been wearing her ring that first time I would have taken evasive action. You never know who the husband might be.”

“This is true,” said Meghan.

“But when I found out I was wondering what to do. The choice had been hers all along, as a response to her husband stepping out on her and not wanting to break up the family, or so she said. But when private detectives start taking pictures it’s all getting way too serious. I wasn’t really invested in the relationship, nor was she and we both knew it.”

“At least your romantic affairs generate gossip for the rest of us, Will,” said Meghan, amused.

“Tell me about it,” said Will. “Speaking of tangled affairs do you mind if Henry, your ex’s former bodyguard, is the security man for you on the night?”

“Guess not. Henry was always nice to me. Why him?”

“He got left high and dry financially with unpaid fees thanks to his boss’s bankruptcy. He rang me looking for work. If he was working for Robin he would be top of the line, and you need more security.”

“Okay, sure.”

“Say, if I’m going with you even if it’s not a date, I’ll have a chance to tell you about my theories on Darth Vader.”

“Mention Darth Vader and I’ll have Henry put you out of the limo.”

“I could tell you that the Jedis were a power bloc that had to be eliminated.”

“I’ll have him throw you out on the freeway,” said Meghan.

“Vader was justified in wiping them out.”

“And then have him run you over.”

Meghan giggled. Will sighed.

“No theories then?” the writer said.

“About Star Wars, nope,” said Meghan firmly. “You can always talk about other theories, depending on the subject. What we will talk about now is just how you will dress for the night.”

On the day, Will attended casa-Meghan dressed in a tuxedo, with a red bow tie and a red pocket square, as instructed, to find Madison and another, older lady, in the kitchen. The lady was muttering to herself while inspecting the coffee machine.

“Mum, this is Will,” said Madison.

Mrs Kowalski was an attractive woman with a figure kept trim by golf and hair kept dark by careful dying.

“Oh hello, Will,” she said. “You caught me talking to myself.”

“I understand, Mrs Kowalski, you need people of sense and intelligence to speak to from time to time. The real question is, and I have to ask, do you listen to yourself?”

“I answer myself back sometimes,” she said, smiling.

“The issues have to be argued out,” said Will. “You need someone to argue with.”

“You’re taking my Meghan to this thing tonight?”

“Just making up the numbers, Mrs Kowalski. Your daughter wants someone to push around in lieu of an actual date and I’m told I make a decent verbal punching bag.”

“You should be complimented,” said Mrs Kowalski, laughing. “Meg only beats up people she likes.”

“That still means I get beat up – pardon me, Mrs Kowalski, but what are you doing to my coffee machine?”

“Trying to get a cappuccino out of it, Will, and it’s Claire, please.”

“Of course, Claire, just let me around the other side and I’ll get it going. You also want a cap, Maddie?”

“Yes, please, Will,” said Madison. “But I want that nutmeg flavour you were talking about when I was here last time.”

“Oh right, well, okay, that takes some effort. You ladies are staying over, I’m told.”

“I live over my store and it’s being fumigated, as a precaution against nasty bugs in the wood,” said Mrs Kowalski

“Antiques can be difficult to store, as I understand it,” said Will as he messed with the machine.

They talked for a time about types of antiques with Will expressing a preference for Chinese, although he could never afford anything more than reproductions, and Mrs Kowalski saying that there was more money in reproductions than in genuine pieces. Then she asked about Will’s family back East.

“I come from a family of lawyers,” said Will. “Mum has a family law practice in Albany, the New York state capital. Dad specialises in State constitutional law and city charters and the like. My older sister, Lilith, got into Yale and now she’s an associate in one of the big New York law firms, aiming for a partnership.”

“Oh my, she sounds quite the go getter,” said Mrs Kowalski.

“Those guys earn millions. Here we go Maddie, can I have a taste of this to make sure I’ve got it right?”

“Sure,” said Madison.

That meant Will was drinking nutmeg-flavoured coffee just as Meghan floated past dressed in a backless, halter-neck, very short dress of sparkly-red material with a scalloped front, and shoes to match. He choked. This time Mrs Kowalski patted him on the back as he struggled to recover.

“Nice dress,” Will managed to gasp at last. Madison giggled, wishing she could make men choke like that. Meghan rolled her eyes, although she was by no means displeased, then lent across the counter, put one hand under Will’s jaw and pushed his mouth shut.

“Come along Will,” she said. “The limo is waiting. Chop, chop!”

She floated away and Mrs Kowalski gave Will a paper towel to clean his mouth.

“Who says chop, chop these days?” asked Will of no one in particular.

“Meghan it seems,” said Mrs Kowalski, “you’d better go.”

“Nice to meet you, Claire,” said Will, “later Maddie.”

“And lovely to meet you, Will,” said Mrs Kowalski.

The Kowalskis waited for Will to leave and then laughed.

In the limousine, the first time Will had been in such a vehicle, the writer said ‘hey’ to George, riding shotgun, and to the driver a smaller, whippet-like man called Noah who came highly recommended by George.

“Not all that far, folks, for LA,” said George as they drove off.

“We may have to make a stop on the way,” said Will, “as Ms Chalmers wants to run me over if I mention Star Wars.”

“She doesn’t want to hear your Star Wars theories?” said George. “We can find somewhere to run Will over quietly, can’t we?” he said to Noah.

“No problem,” said Noah.

“Come to think of it,” said Meghan, “you might damage to limousine. Maybe you could just push him out into traffic?”

“Even easier,” said George grinning.

“You really don’t want to hear about Star Wars, do you?” said Will.

“Nope! But I do want to hear about this sister of yours Lilith.” The star had heard some of Will’s conversation with her mother. “She sounds competitive enough for the two of you.”

Will was trying not to leer at Meghan’s legs on full display in the back of the limousine. Meghan for her part, noticed Will’s struggle and was amused. Will could look discretely if he wanted, especially if he was entertaining her with conversation.

“You think you’re being determined and tough threatening to have me pushed out into traffic?” said Will. “Compared to my sister Lilith, you’re just a lamb.”

“A lamb!” exclaimed Meghan.

“A fluffy, woolly bah-lamb.”

“I see,” said Meghan, amused.

“She’s still an associate at her firm, but Mum says she’s heard that senior partners are terrified of her.”

“Sounds formidable.”

“Tell me about it. She’s been trying to manage my career since junior high. I had lunch with her when we went to New York.”

“I remember you saying.”

“As far as she’s concerned I’m wasting my time with low-paying, trivial jobs in LA. I should get a proper job in a law firm, give up on actresses and start dating some nice associate at her law firm. And that was before I was allowed to order. The menu looked good and I was hungry.”

“Poor Will,” said Meghan amused. “Your life is hard.”

“I’m a victim – that’s me.”

“A victim of your sister?”

“And in other ways.”

“What other ways?”

“I’m a fashion victim.”

“I knew that,” said Meghan laughing. “You say Lilith got into Yale. Did you also get into there?”

“Me? No, I was University of Chicago.”

“What’s the law school like at the University of Chicago?”

“I wouldn’t know. I’m the black sheep of my family. I did physics and maths, not law. My parents weren’t too worried, but the fight I had with my sister was epic.”

“I thought you must be law or a business major,” said Meghan. “How did you get into reporting from science?”

“I’d done honours focusing on the properties of semiconductors – used in transistors and printed circuits. I was thinking about doing a doctorate in computer modelling of solid state materials but was wondering whether I really had what it took. The likely doctoral supervisors didn’t seem to take me seriously. Too much of a jock for them, or something.”

“Huh!”

“And then I met an editor who was looking for someone to write science and he liked me, so I thought well I’ll do that. I didn’t realise until I was in it that I was really lucky to get a place in newspapers, let alone just walk into it the way I did. The work also seemed to suit me and it was good fun for a while. Then I got cancelled.”

“What? How did you get cancelled?”

“Over not much as it turned out - a story on a place that would compost bodies using solar energy.”

“Compost bodies?”

“Yep. If your mother passes away and you’re really keen on recycling, you can get her composted. Takes some time and energy which this company sourced from wind generators, solar panels and the like. At the end of it, you get a chunk of nutrient-rich soil which you can use to plant a tree or something.”

“I don’t want to have my mother composted,” said Meghan.

“She seems in pretty good shape so the issue may not arise for a long while. When it does just tell her that it’s for the good of the planet.”

“Don’t think I’ll go there, but how did you get cancelled over that?”

“I didn’t take the story sufficiently seriously,” said Will. “I didn’t mock them but I had a lighter touch on the story. A bit of humour. The editor thought it was fun; the copy desk didn’t say

anything when it went through, but the company complained. The journalists had a meeting and cancelled me – wouldn't handle my copy.”

“Over that!”

“Yep, over that,” said Will. “I got on well with those guys – mainly women – up to that point, but they turned on me in a split second just to maintain their green street cred. I was shocked.”

“This is why you thought up that crack about Connie trading her private jet in for a bicycle?”

“I just knew something about the debate,” said Will. “Anyway, the editor had approved the story so he wasn't about to fire me. Instead, he moved me to the property desk, where I also helped out with personal investment stories. The cancelling didn't extend to stories from those desks. That's why I know something about those areas.”

They arrived at the venue, a new hotel, a Regal Grand, in West Hollywood, a little off the boulevard itself which had agreed that the publicity from the event was worth a discount. George opened her door and Clarise Chalmers emerged in a dazzling red club dress in front of a wall of paparazzi held back behind a rope barrier by security. She then worked her way down a host of fans behind another rope barrier who had been waiting for hours, exchanging a few words and stopping for selfies. George followed close behind, constantly scanning the crowd. After that she posed in front of a backdrop featuring the hotel's name for the more formal pictures – the ones that commentators would use to judge the dresses. Apart from Connie and Clarise, four other lesser known but still recognisable personalities had found time to attend the event.

Will, in contrast, slipped out of the limo on the other side and walked around to check in with Mia, nodding at the hotel security guys. As event organiser he was able to move around unchallenged. He was inside the hotel when Connie arrived, with a roar from the crowd far louder than that which had greeted Clarise. This annoyed the star, who was still having pictures taken. Why was Connie always so much more popular than her?

The rest of the evening was a blur of chatting with a host of people, all the way from Meghan's friend Misty Dawn through to an ill-favoured gentleman who wanted to buy a dance with one of the stars, perhaps Ms Chalmers who seemed like a “sporting lady”, as he put it. Will said that there was no space in the schedule for paid dances and told George to keep an eye on the man.

As master of ceremonies for the evening, Will got on the stage to remind the crowd that they were there to raise money for the Haddenbach Children's Hospital – they agreed noisily although they didn't really care – and conducted a small celebrity auction of memorabilia donated by the stars. Meghan still had the underwear she had worn in the famous sword fight which she happily handed over, to be bought by the ill-favoured gentleman, and Connie had found the shoes she had worn in her very salacious first video. A Silicon Valley billionaire type got those. More money for the hospital.

Later, as the attendees mingled with the stars, Will spoke to Connie for a time who took the trouble to hassle him – a sign of her high opinion of him – then said, “I think you better go and get Meg, she look's uncomfortable.”

Will who had lost track of his “date” in the crowd for a few minutes, turned around and did a double take at the sight of Meghan sitting on a table, feet on a chair, surrounded by a dense crowd of men, with another, looser crowd mainly of women surrounding the first crowd.

“Lordy!” said Will.

George was by Meghan’s side, but Will thought the usual bright Clarise smile was a little strained.

“Excuse me. Dance later?”

“We’d better dance, Will, or else,” Connie said.

Will then dived into the crowd declaring “photo call Ms Chalmers”. As he was MC, Meg’s many admirers made way for him. He nodded at George who was glad to see Will, grabbed Meghan’s hand and said, “Time for the pics with the hospital people, Ms Chalmers. Say goodbye to the nice gentlemen.”

“Goodbye nice gentlemen,” said a relieved Meghan, waving.

“Shit!” said someone.

Then came the photo op with the chief executive of the Haddenbach Children’s Hospital where Meghan and Connie symbolically handed over a display cheque made out with the estimated amount for the night. The outrageous ticket price of several thousand a person plus incidentals meant that the event had raised close an amount not far short of one million dollars. That money, plus the much higher public profile making it easier to attract donors, meant that the hospital’s financial future was considerably brighter. It’s very young patients would get better care, which was the whole point of the night. Not incidentally, both Meghan and Connie received grudging praise in media outlets and websites coast to coast. Their image was softened.

With business out of the way and dinner eaten, the two bad girls toured the tables and then got down to the dancing. After some discussion with the Connie camp Will had settled for a top DJ instead of a live band which meant all the hits were played. At Will’s suggestion and with him coordinating, the headliners danced with their own entourages then each other’s entourages and with other stars, rather than mix with the mass of invitees, without seeming to hold themselves aloof.

A lot of dancing later Meghan declared herself ready to go home and Will went with her, leaving hotel security to move on the last of the party goers. Outside he was surprised at the host of determined fans who had hung around out the back just to catch another glimpse of the Hollywood star Clarise Chalmers.

“Your fans are enthusiastic,” he said as they got into the limousine.

“I was overawed when I first met Robin,” she said. “But I don’t think I’d ever hang around the back of a hotel hoping to see him. Anyway, what were you talking to Connie about for a while this evening?”

“You mean while you were surrounded by male admirers ten deep? She was telling me to go and get you as you looked uncomfortable.”

“She told you that? Anyway, I don’t mean then. I mean later. You stopped dancing for a while.”

“Oh right, then,” said Will. “We were arguing over who was the bigger Diva, you or her. We finally agreed that she was the bigger diva.”

“William Moreland!” she said, turning on him and pointing to herself, “I’m the bigger Diva and don’t you forget it!”

Will laughed and, after a moment, Meghan joined in.

“Anyway, coming in we hadn’t finished discussing William Moreland’s life story,” she said.

“I thought we’d covered all the bases,” he said.

“No we have not,” she said, firmly. “Why did you drop out of the national team? It must have been hard to get into in the first place.”

“It was, but I really wasn’t competitive enough for a medal at the international meetings – the ones that count. To win at that level takes a lot of work and it stops being fun. All events at that level are hard, but I’ll put in a word for the two hundred metre butterfly, the four hundred metre individual medley – that’s four different styles in one race – and the big one, the fifteen hundred metre freestyle. When you get out of the pool after one of those events everything hurts.”

“You still keep in good shape,” said Meghan. “Maybe you could still compete.”

“There’s a world of difference between what I do and what I’d need to do to swim at an international level. Nope. Pass! What I could do I suppose is enter a major race and have you by the pool side in that one piece of yours to distract the male swimmers then, while they’re floating open mouthed in the pool, I’ll sneak by to the finish line.”

“William Moreland! I’m not going to help you cheat at swimming,” said Meghan, giggling.

“What I want to know now, is there anything else major you haven’t told me about yourself?”

“You mean apart from two trashy Military SF novels with another on the way, and this slasher film project thing.”

“I wish I didn’t know about those things but I do,” said Meghan.

“Um, well I scuba dive, although I haven’t for a while now and, um, well, the last one is a bit of a shock.”

“Okay,” said Meghan, leaning back, and crossing her legs again for effect. “Hit me.”

“I’m an officer in the naval reserve.”

“What?” said Meghan. “You were in the navy?”

“No, you don’t have to have been in the navy to be in the naval reserve, although most have been. I did three months of training a few years back, a couple of weeks a year and weekly evening sessions which I haven’t been getting to since Vi left. The regular navy looks down on us part timers. Henry you were in the navy.” Meghan had never bothered to raise the partition between the passenger compartment and the front seats. “What do you think of the reserve guys?”

“Weekend sailors who get in the way,” said Henry, looking around briefly.

“There you are,” said Will. “But in my case, it’s not about hanging around on ships and annoying people like Henry. I’m a diver. A specialist. The theory is that if the navy needs a lot more divers than it has for big tasks such as clearing harbours or checking wrecks then guys like me are flown there to take over the routine tasks while the regulars go off and do heroic stuff.”

“Makes sense, I guess,” said Meghan, “but you haven’t been doing it for a while.”

“You can drop out for a while. Now they are trying to tempt me back for a course in really deep diving, where you breathe a helium-oxygen mix and have to spend a long time in decompression stops coming up. Sound interesting. I think I might do it.”

“How long will this course take?”

“It’s one of those things you do properly or not at all, as it’s dangerous. About a month.”

“A month! You’re going to going to leave my work to dangerous underwater stuff for a month?”

“You won’t be paying me and the others can handle all the routine matters. Josh can write captions to his pictures. Just try not to break up with your next boyfriend while I’m on the course, and everything will be fine.”

“Humph! I can’t control that,” said Meghan. “Anyway, I need you for other things.”

“If you want someone to yell out,” said Will, “then hire Henry for a while and yell at him – or Noah.”

“No problem,” said George.

“My wife yells at me all the time,” said Noah. “Being paid to be yelled at sounds good.”

“I don’t have any reason to yell at George or Noah,” said Meghan. “But I will have a reason to yell at you, especially if you’re going to go off for weeks on this course and this film project of yours.”

“The film project will be in LA,” said Will, “and you can always ring me up to yell at me.”

“It’s not the same,” she said. “Why did you get into this navy reserve thing anyway?”

“Money is part of it. I did a few things to keep solvent while at Chicago. My swimming scholarship paid tuition but I still had to live, and Lilith’s Yale foray strained the family finances. She got in but no scholarship.”

“And you still had a big fight with her,” said Meghan, amused.

“And I still got beaten up by her, yep.”

“Poor Will.”

“Yes, poor me.”

They arrived back at the house.

“I want coffee, Will,” said Meghan, getting out “decaf this time”.

As Will got out George nodded towards Meghan opening the front door of her house and spoke softly. “You going to get anywhere?”

“No. Just light entertainment and coffee, that’s me,” said Will. “But as a friend of mine pointed out, a lot of cute girl next door types will be fascinated to hear that I’ve served coffee to Clarise Chambers.”

“That’s what I call a dating edge,” said George.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“The top news is the bad girls’ benefit event results,” said Sidewalk Stars’ anchorman Ken. “And honours are about even between the rivals, Barbara.”

The cameras shifted to Barbara standing by a screen similar to that used by the weather people but filled with stars in dresses instead of atmospheric charts.

“Yes, Ken. Clarise Chalmers scored an average of eight point five from critics with a backless red number courtesy of top designer Claude Petit, while Connie Leighton scored 7.2 with her low cut green dress from up and coming design studio Alessio Ricci.

“But Connie won the popular vote, Ken. Listen to the crowd when Clarise Chalmers arrives.”

The display screen showed Meghan stepping out of her limousine to cheers from the crowd.

“Now hear them when Connie Leighton arrives.”

The screen showed Connie stepping out of her limousine to an obviously louder roar of approval.

“Just as when the two girls were in high school the popular vote is still with Connie, Ken.”

The next day, over a lunch of salad rolls made by Mrs Kowalski, the Kowalskis kicked around the events of the charity bash and the information Meghan had managed to extract from Will.

“Will seems a very nice young man,” said Mrs Kowalski. The writer was, in fact, the type of young man she hoped her Meghan would bring home before fame resulted in a string of men of whom she mostly did not approve. Although she had never said anything to Meghan she had not liked or trusted Robin Hawke, for all his on-screen presence, and her instincts had proven right. Those same instincts found a lot to like in Will and nothing to dislike. “Madison says he’s seeing an older woman.”

“He was,” said Meghan, “until he found out she was married.”

That required an explanation which led to other details of Will’s career such as fights with his sister Lilith, and his description of Meghan as a “lamb” compared to Lilith – a comparison which made the other Kowalskis chortle.

“A fluffy, woolly bah-lamb, is how he put it,” said Meghan. “But he means I can push him around,” she made a pushing motion with her hands, “and he doesn’t care much. He’s used to it.”

Madison and Mrs Kowalski thought that Meghan sounded as if she was talking about Will as a boyfriend but decided not to make that comment.

“Maybe don’t push him around too much, dear,” said Mrs Kowalski. “He’s very nice.”

Later in the week the question of who might go with Meghan on a well-paid appearance at a plush new LA night club, The Boulevard Studio, arose.

“I’d love to go,” said Mia. “But wouldn’t you really want to ask Will? If you want to ask Will that’s fine, I’ll check out this club another time.”

“Do you think he would?” said Meghan looking coy. “This is different in that he’s not going anyway.”

“The way to find out is to ask him,” said the assistant. “I don’t think he’ll mind. Do you want me to check things out?”

“Well...” said Meghan.

“I’ll ask,” said Mia.

Later an amused Will came into Meghan’s study/office.

“I understand that Clarise Chalmers is sufficiently desperate for a date to ask a lowly writer to keep her company as a friend,” he said.

“You’re right it is desperate,” said Meghan. “But sometimes us girls just have to make do. Will you come with me?”

“Sure. It’ll be interesting to turn up to a place like that and be allowed in, instead of being beaten up by security.”

“Have you been beaten up by club security?” Meghan asked.

“Well, no,” said Will, “but they might unless I’m with you. I’m no A lister.”

“You brush up well enough in a suit. This time more of a lounge suit – a smart one - and lose the tie and the pocket square. No one cares if the guys are dressed the same but I’ve got to wear something different.”

“If I come in with you, nobody is going to look at me.”

“Will, another compliment!” said Meghan, laughing. “I won’t know what to do.”

“This thing is late too, I see,” said Will. “Do we have dinner beforehand?”

“Are you asking me to dinner, Will?” said Meghan, leaning back, amused.

“Well, um, friends going to dinner is different from friends going to a night club.”

“Friends can have dinner together,” said Meghan.

“Not in media gossip columns,” said Will. “Those guys have a rich imagination and you draw a lot of attention.”

“That can be a problem.”

“I know, let me make dinner for the Kowalskis here.”

Mrs Kowalski and Maddie were still staying at Casa-Meghan as the fumigation had proved far more complicated than expected.

“Do you know how to cook for four people?”

“I don’t need to. You buy pre-prepared meat, which comes with packets of sauce and whatever else is needed. The instructions about the temperature of the oven and cooking times are on the packaging. You can even buy trays of vegetables and potato cubes for roasting. With the product I’m thinking of the meat has to be basted a couple of times while in the oven, which is getting complicated but I’ll manage.”

“Sounds good,” said Meghan. She thought later she would have at least considered a dinner invitation. The family dinner at home was a nice compromise, however, except that piqued Mrs Kowalski’s curiosity about her daughter’s attitude to Will.

“Will is making dinner for us all as a friend?” she said, eyeing her daughter.

“Uh-huh.”

“Should be interesting,” said Mrs Kowalski adding that “Will is a very nice man”.

Dinner was successful with Will entertaining the Kowalskis with his adventures in slasher movies and this time the writer did not choke when Meghan appeared in the low-cut, silver-white dress, but that was only because he was not drinking anything at the time.

“Reckon they’ll get together?” Madison asked of her mother after Will and Meg had gone.

“Hope so,” said Mrs Kowalski. “Remember that boyfriend she had who never took off his sunglasses?”

“He never even spoke to us,” said Maddie. “Just nodded. Will makes us laugh.”

In the limousine, with George and Noah in the front seat, Will pointed out that, as they weren't going by any freeways he might get away with talking about Darth Vader.

“Say anything about Star Wars and we'll find a freeway,” retorted Meghan, “a high one so George can throw you from it.”

“No problem, Ms Chalmers,” said George.

Will sighed.

“What I want to talk about is whether Violet is going to be in this slasher pic of yours,” said Meghan. “You said the director was going to contact her. How do you feel about that?”

“As it happens Vi is still in her off-Broadway role and can't make it back, although Evan says she is keen to do it. But that still leaves the problem of finding anyone at least competent for the money Hap is prepared to offer.”

“Hap sounds miserly,” said Meghan.

“He's putting up his own money so it's understandable but it still presents a problem.”

They arrived at the club with Clarise Chalmers doing the full Hollywood entrance while Will, walking a metre or so behind the star, was challenged by one of the security doormen and had to call to Henry to vouch for him.

“See I did almost get beaten up by security,” he said to Meghan. “Security guys who want to beat me up and threats of being thrown from freeways – it's proving to be a dangerous evening.”

The club was full of soft, blue light with white lounges scattered through the floor and a circular bar decorated with ribbons of white light. Will thought the effect, particularly that of the illuminated bar, was garish but as Meghan was being paid six figures to attend his opinion of the décor was not relevant. The clientele, well-dressed, professional types who had paid good money to be there, all turned to look as Clarise Chalmers walked in. Meghan waved. The dancing had not started so it was still possible to talk, the atmosphere being more like that of an exhibition or a wine tasting. Waiters circulated with drinks, one offering Will a glass of wine the moment he walked in. Henry refused his.

“Men and women are going to swarm around you,” said Will. “If there's a problem, maybe we can agree on a distress signal so George or I can find an excuse to pull you out.”

“Hmmm. What about I put my hand up to my face like this,” she said, demonstrating.

“Seems almost natural, but you will know the people I'm talking to are getting creepy and I want to move on.”

Then the club manager arrived. He was a seemingly smart, tough operator in an expensive suit complete with a gold chain around his neck – Will got the impression of a gangster who had graduated to management – who took Meghan away, ignoring Will and Henry. A short distance further towards the bar he introduced the star to a man Will recognised as a mall-owning billionaire.

“You came in with Clarise Chalmers,” said a female voice. Will turned to see a woman or perhaps a girl in her early twenties with flaming red hair, one of those narrow, symmetrical faces that make men pay close attention and a figure to match, all displayed in a red club dress that would have run a close rival to Meghan's at the charity event, had the wearer been invited.

“That’s right,” said Will, “I’m part of the entourage, I guess.” He noted that his interrogator had what he assumed to be a boyfriend towering over her left shoulder. This gentleman had a full head of long, dark hair and strong features that looked as if they should be on the cover of a cheap romance novel.

“Guess?” said the vision, amused. “You mean you’re not sure?”

“I work for Ms Chalmers. PR, social media, some business stuff, I even front for her in fashion brand meetings, which shows just what faking it can do in the film industry.”

Will rarely said so much about himself, especially to a stranger, but his new acquaintance had the ability to loosen men’s tongues. The vision laughed over Will’s ‘faking it’ remark.

“You’re not into fashion?”

“In that area I’m challenged,” he said. “I’m a nerd who wandered into this film star business and hasn’t been found out yet.”

She laughed again. “I’m Danni Devlin. You may have seen my Patreon channel Red Devil.”

“I’ve heard of it,” said Will, carefully. “It’s considered salacious.”

“You mean it’s porno,” said the girl, smiling.

“If you say so,” said Will. “I haven’t looked at it, which is my loss. But salacious sounds better.”

“It does,” agreed the girl.

“Anyway, I’m Will. That’s Henry watching Ms Chalmers and you are...” he stuck out his hand in the direction of the boyfriend.

“Brett,” said that gentleman shaking Will’s hand. Will got the impression that was the extent of the boyfriend’s conversion.

“Well, Will,” said Danni, “I know it’s a cliché but what I’d really like to do is to break into films.”

So that’s why she’s speaking to me, thought Will.

“I can reply with another cliché,” said Will. “And say I’m with a few guys putting together a low budget, independent film. No, it’s not porno, but it’s a slasher hopeful. The producer’s a Silicon Valley type who scored big in the valley and now wants to get into movies. The next question is do you think you can act?”

Danni lifted one eyebrow and smiled. “Men who’ve seen my channel don’t ask that question.”

“I’m sure they don’t,” said Will, “but I am.”

“Is Clarise involved in this project in any way?”

“Nope, in fact she fired me for daring to take time off to work on it.”

“That’s a shame, but you’ve been rehired?” said Danni.

“When she broke up with her boyfriend and needed a response to being dumped by media story she forgave me, reluctantly.”

“Oh right! When she said the breakup was really about her not investing in Robin Hawke’s mad schemes, you organised that response.”

“Yes, that was me. Hawke had been trying to get me involved in those schemes, and Ms Chalmers had been asking my advice about them. I said don’t touch them.”

Will thought that he had managed to impress Danni, which he also thought might be a difficult thing to do.

“To answer your other question, Will, I’ve been taking acting lessons and the guys who run the classes say I can act. Whether they’re saying that because it’s true, or because they don’t want to lose a paying customer I don’t know, but that’s what they say.”

Will took a card out of his wallet.

“I won’t ask for your number and there’s no point in contacting me as I don’t decide casting. Email me, and I’ll send the number for the director. He’ll set up times for auditions and such. I don’t know who else they’re speaking to at this stage.”

Danni looked at the card and then quizzically at Will.

“Is this on the up?” she said. “I could do without another casting couch incident.”

“Take Brett here if it worries you,” he said.

George tapped Will on the shoulder.

“Getting the signal,” the bodyguard said.

Will turned and, sure enough, Meghan had put her hand up on her cheek. The billionaire was talking to her intensely. Two men who might well have been the billionaire’s bodyguards were right behind him.

“Excuse me for a moment, can you hold this?” Will said giving his glass to Danni.

“Sure,” said Danni, surprised by this sudden turn of events.

Will and George strode towards Meg. One of the bodyguards saw the movement and moved around to cut them off.

“Run interference and block that guy,” said Will. George nodded.

“Mr Scranton and Ms Chalmers are not to be disturbed gentlemen,” said the newcomer. Will ignored him, took two more paces as the bodyguard struggled to get past George’s bulk and called out.

“Meg!”

The actress turned.

“Sorry to tear you away but we’re behind schedule.” He took Meghan’s hand. “You’ll have to excuse us Mr Scranton is it? Good to meet you.” Will reached over and shook the billionaire’s hand.

Despite being short, red-haired and with what might be described as a pimply face, the billionaire exuded a certain air as a man who got what he wanted, and he was not happy at having his prize taken away from him. Will was also aware of the club owner in the background, looking thunderous

“We were getting to know one another,” said Scranton frowning.

“That’s nice,” said Will. “But people to meet, schedules to keep, you know how it is.” He tugged slightly on Meg’s hand and she followed willingly, calling “bye” as she left.

“Glad you came so quickly,” she said to Will quietly, as they walked away. “He was propositioning me really hard to come and see his yacht. Thought he might even try to kidnap me or something.”

“Is it a good yacht?” asked Will.

“Suppose it must be, but I wasn’t about to find out,” said Meghan.

“This is Danni Devlin,” said Will taking his wine glass back and releasing Meghan’s hand. “That’s her friend Brett. Danni has her own Patreon channel.”

“It’s a great honor to meet you, Ms Chalmers,” trilled Danni. Brett smiled, nodded and said “Hi!”

“Nice to meet you,” said Meghan, although she glanced sideways at Will as if to ask why she was meeting this person.

“Heard your bodyguard saying you were giving the distress signal,” said Danni. “That guy wanted to hook up?”

“Big time. He wanted me to go to his yacht so he could take me to the Bahamas.”

“Isn’t the yacht on the wrong side of the country?” said Will. “The Bahamas are off Florida.”

“His private jet first to Florida and then on the yacht,” said Meghan. “Quite a ride for a first meeting.”

“He’s that rich?” said Danni.

“James Scranton, mall billionaire,” said Will, noting Danni’s sudden interest in the man.

“He was what, looking for a trophy wife?”

“More like a trophy mistress,” said Meghan.

“Huh!” said the porn star. She and Meghan exchanged a few approving words about the club décor then Will said, “now we should circulate as we’re supposed to. Remember to send that email Danni.”

“Of course,” said Danni.

“Email?” asked Meghan, as they moved on, she waved to a couple of people. Two said, ‘love your work’. The star said, ‘thank you’ and meant it. “How come she knows your email address and why should she be using it?”

“For the film project. They’re looking for cheap talent. We’re trying to put together something above the general run of independent slasher/zombie pics but without much budget.”

“Humph!” said Meghan. “Can she act? What sort of channel does she have?”

“She says she can act, but that’s up to director Evan and producer Hap. I’d certainly rather have her than be on the same set as Vi. As for her channel it’s porno, so she says.”

“You introduced me to a porn star?”

“Since when are you so fussy, Ms Chalmers? I was rescuing you from being a sex slave aboard a yacht, remember? We had to look busy is all. She only spoke to me because she saw me come in with you and was hoping for an introduction to the famous Clarise Chalmers.”

That explanation mollified Meghan, although Will thought that as he wasn’t there as a boyfriend he did not need to account for who he spoke to. Then Meghan caught up with fans taking selfies and complementing other ladies on their dresses. Will felt a hand on his shoulder and turned around to see the club owner still looking like thunder.

“Chalmers needs to come back,” said this man.

Will looked at the hand on his shoulder and at the owner, who let his hand fall.

“It’s Max right?” said Will. The man nodded. “Ms Chalmers doesn’t need to do anything but work the crowd as far as I know, and come back to where?”

“Mr Scranton says that he had almost closed the deal and then you charged in. He wants her back and what Mr Scranton wants he gets.”

“He thought that, really?” said Will. “Your Mr Scranton couldn’t be more wrong. The reason Henry and I went in was because we got the distress signal. Ms Chalmers was being really bothered by your guy. She told me that she thought that she might even be kidnapped and forced onto that yacht of his.” Max’s face changed from anger to concern as he was told this. “I dunno what the deal was between you and Stella Buckingham. You dealt with her right?” Max nodded. “But I’m pretty sure it doesn’t include being Shanghaied to the Bahamas as a sex toy. I dunno what side deal you’ve got going you with your billionaire friend but Ms Chalmers isn’t coming back.”

Will looked past Max to check whether billionaire Scranton was watching the confrontation to see him deep in conversation with another woman. Despite the dim club light Will was sure the woman was Danni, with Brett standing just behind her.

“With any luck, Mr Scranton will still get what he wants in a different package,” the writer said, nodding at the couple.

Sam turned, checked the scene, glanced sourly at Will and then left without another word.

The Clarise Chalmers show moved on around the club with the star pausing for selfies and the occasional snippet of conversation. Halfway through the circuit in what proved to be a big club they found Misty Dawn, the minor singer/model who had refused to give Will his shirt back, trailing a guy who proved to be a drummer for a rising band. When the dancing started, at Will’s suggestion, each lady danced first with the person they had brought and then the other’s escort to look as if they were mixing things up. Will included Brett in this dancing ring, when he wandered by, but could not see Danni. He asked Brett when the porn star had gone and the man just shrugged. Will also could not see Scranton and thought he knew what had happened, but it was no business of his.

Back in the car, after some dancing, with Misty Dawn and drummer Cass, Meghan handed a card to Henry.

“I want to make a stop at that place,” she said. Henry nodded and handed the card to Noah who looked at it without comment. “And I need to go to a bank terminal first.”

That last request drew a questioning look from Henry but he said nothing.

“What’s the stop?” asked Misty.

“Just a stop,” said Meghan smiling, slightly.

“Ohhh, okay,” said Misty.

Will thought he knew what the stop was for but did not say anything. He did not want to be told anything about it.

“I saw you talking to that manager guy, Will,” said Meghan. “What was that about.”

Will told her, which meant that he also had to fill in Misty and Cass on the background.

“Complete the deal,” laughed Misty. “What a romantic he is.”

“And I thought I was making myself clear, politely, that I wasn’t about to go to the Bahamas with him,” said Meghan.

“Billionaire or not he’s still a guy,” said Will. “Unless you hit him over the head and scream the message in his ear he doesn’t get it.”

“Not sure even that’d do it,” said Cass. “Some of the musicians I’ve known, banging their heads into a desk repeatedly and then screaming the message might work maybe 50 per cent of the time.”

“Girls can’t really bang guys’ heads into a desk,” said Misty. “We just have to shoot them and claim self-defence.”

“You haven’t shot me,” said Cass.

“Not yet, no,” said Misty, smiling.

They stopped at the bank machine with Henry standing guard and a little further on was the mysterious Hollywood address. This proved to be a mansion with a curved drive way so that cars could go in one gate and come out the other. Another car, a Porsche, was leaving by the exit gate as they drove up to the entrance. Noah typed four numbers that had been on the card into a security keypad and the gate opened.

“Come in with me, Will?” said Meghan. “Bring the money I got. Henry, you stay here. We won’t be long.”

The interior had expensive carpets, expensive sideboards with expensive vases sitting on them, as well as a huge man standing just inside the door. This gentleman had a lot of bling hung around a roll-neck pullover, a neatly timed beard, hot black eyes and surgical gloves on his hands. Will thought that the doorman was not the sort of person he would care to meet in a dark alley, but the man held the door open for Megan politely enough and waved her through, glancing at Will.

In the living room was another man who could have modelled for a statue of an evil Buddha except that he wore a purple track suit and pants as well as surgical gloves. Off to one side, sitting forlornly on a couch, was a thin man of middling height in jeans and a tee shirt, unkempt beard and hair and the bleary eyes of a user. The rest of the house seemed quiet but after a few moments, Will thought he heard voices murmuring from a darkened, open doorway on the far side of the room. A faint haze wafted through the opening. He suddenly had a great desire to be away from the place.

The evil Buddha smiled and said, “good to see you again Ms Chalmers”. His smile reminded Will of a shark. “I’m sorry we don’t have your full usual order. We had it when we called but there was a mix up and some got sold to another client.” The Buddha produced a small plastic bag with a handful of the sticks which Will had seen in Meghan’s bedroom when they had been rehearsing.

“Will there be more soon?” asked Meghan looking askance at the bag.

“On order,” said Evil Buddha. “We’ll call when they’ve arrived, and our deepest apologies for the mix up. You are a valued client.”

The drugs cost two hundred dollars which Will handed over without comment.

“Hello Ty,” said Meghan to the dishevelled man.

“Hey Meg, looking good,” said Ty quietly.

“Will, this is Connie’s brother Ty.”

“Oh okay,” Will went over and shook Ty’s hand. “I was arguing with your sister a few days ago about who was the bigger diva her or Meghan.”

Ty's handshake was limp. He smiled without any enthusiasm. "She won that fight I bet."

"She did. Um, can we offer you a lift anywhere Ty? Are you waiting for anyone?"

"We have a problem," said Evil Buddha. "Mr Leighton owes the house three hundred and fifty dollars and we have trouble contacting his sister."

"We have that," said Will looking at the money Meghan had given him.

"I'm not paying for Ty's shit," said Meghan. "I had enough of that at college."

"Then take it from what you pay me," said Will, exasperated. "We can't leave Connie's brother here. We can drop him at her house. It's not far."

"Humph!" said Meghan but didn't object when Will handed over the rest of her money. Will said, "plus trouble" to avoid the issue of change. Evil Buddha did not look like the sort of independent businessman who gave change. The writer thought he'd be able to get it back from Connie.

"All yours," said the dealer, then handed them both a notice about a party in a week's time. The address didn't mean anything to Will, but he later discovered it was just fifteen minutes drive further North.

"You guys have get-togethers?" asked Will.

"Valued clients only," said Evil Buddha. "Whatever you want 'll be there at a price."

Will slipped the invitation into his jacket pocket, thinking that he'd prefer to be torn apart by wild dogs than go to such an event. Meghan put hers into her purse. Ty followed them out as they left, and the scary doorman ushered them through without comment. A little more relaxed Will noted that there were security cameras in the hallway and at the front door.

Back in the car Misty Dawn said "hello" to Ty, having seen him around the music scene. "We can put him up for the night in our spare room," she told Will. "Drop him where ever tomorrow. You'll tell Connie?"

"I'll send a text with your phone number to her assistant if that's okay," said Will. "I think Connie herself is on tour."

They dropped their guests with Meghan complaining, after they had gone, about giving "lifts to half of LA" and got back to casa-Meghan in the small hours of the morning, with the star wanting coffee.

"You used to date Ty?" said Will, over coffee.

"He had talent before he got into the heavy stuff. Like I said I got sick of bailing him out of drug debts and dumped him."

"Didn't I read somewhere that Connie accused you of breaking her brother's heart?"

Meghan shrugged. "I dunno if his heart was broken but I dumped him because he was blowing his mind on shit as you saw just now."

"You didn't tell Connie that?"

"We weren't speaking at that stage and Ty begged me not to. He said he'd go into rehab. I don't think he ever did but anyway he's now as you saw him today, and I know Connie's tried interventions. It's a shame but there was nothing I could do."

"That place we went to today, incidentally, is evil," said Will.

Meghan's face fell. "It's just a business place serving a need," she said.

“I got a really bad vibe,” said Will. “It seemed to be like those old style Chinese Opium dens – a place where lives are ruined.”

“I didn’t see anyone else around apart from Ty.”

“That’s ‘cause he ran out of money and they cut off his supply. I’m pretty sure there were more druggies further inside the house. I could hear people. And what are you doing being seen anywhere near that place?”

“Why, what do you mean?” said Meghan. It was the first time Will had challenged her seriously in any way, and she did not like it.

“What I mean is that it’s an evil place. I know the sticks you get are pretty soft, but they’re still illegal, even in California, and there are cameras in the living room in the hallway and in the entrance way not to mention on the gates.”

“Cameras?” said Meghan. “Well, so what, they’re hardly likely to turn over the files to the police.”

“They may not have a choice. The LA cops are bound to find out about that place if not them then the DEA. Granted Evil Buddha...”

“The guy at the desk?” said Meghan.

“...my name for him, and that doorman and whoever else is in the house probably have an exit plan of erasing all files with a few key strokes then doing a flit over the back wall, with nothing traceable to them. The guys we saw were wearing gloves remember?”

“I just thought it was because of the drugs they handled,” said Meghan, nettled.

“Maybe that, but fingerprints as well. But what happens if the DEA or whoever knows about the escape plan or just has people on the back wall, or these guys slip up in some other way? You’ll bet they have back-ups of those photo files stashed somewhere, and they’ll trade them for a cut in their sentences. You’re too high profile, Meghan. They’ll happily nail you, as a way of showing that they’re doing a good job.”

Meghan frowned over this. “Will I don’t like being lectured like this. I’ll want you to go and pick up my order when it’s ready.”

“What? I’m not having anything to do with that place or those drugs.”

“You work for me,” said Meghan, now upset about being defied. “I’m telling you I want you to go and get these drugs for you.”

“No way I’m going to do it. Find someone else to be your drug courier.”

“Well I will, so that means you’re fired.”

“Fine,” said Will, standing up and leaving.

“Fine,” said Meghan to Will’s back.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The rest of Clarise Chalmers' tiny entourage took the news of Will's latest termination in their stride.

"Again!" said Mia when Emma told her. Emma had heard it from Will whom she had called over what photographs to use for the social media sites. "How many times is that now?"

Emma ticked off on her fingers. "Three, I think. Has Meghan said anything?"

"Nope," said Mia. "Like the other times we just ignore it until she says otherwise."

As it happened neither Will nor Meghan were in the house-office for much of the week. Will was helping with the pre-production for *Party Town* in a grimy, disused warehouse with a sub level which Hap had been able to rent in one of the warehouse districts South East of downtown LA.

"The warehouse will do for interior shots if we set up black screens for the CGI projections," Hap told the others. "We'll need a beach with a park for the exterior shots. I'm still working on that."

As LA traffic made commuting difficult, and there were basic facilities at the site, the production team decided to squat in the warehouse for the couple of weeks of pre-production and watch slasher/horror/grunge/SF pictures in their down time. Hap liked that part of being a producer meant he could hang out with Will and Evan, although they sometimes did not all see eye to eye over the choice of films.

"*Slave girls from Beyond Infinity*, really?" said Will, reading the title of a DVD from the producers' personal collection which Hap had brought to their camp-out. "1987, a classic year – I guess."

"Is this the one where they escape by 'reversing polarity' on their chains and then stealing a space ship which they pilot?" asked Evan.

"That's it," said Hap.

"Seen some of it a while back," said the director. "Do we want to see it again?"

"Hot girls, and we can learn something from it," said Hap.

"About what not to do, maybe," said Evan.

Eventually the other two gave way to Hap's enthusiasm for the film. Although they didn't learn anything much about film making, they agreed that the lead actresses were "hot" in an 80s-hairstyle kind of way.

Meanwhile Meghan was off on a beer commercial shoot in the desert, which took a whole three days and most certainly did not involve squatting in grimy warehouses or even nights in the campervans/Winnebagos used by film crews to live on location. Instead the star "slummed it" in a presidential suite of a three star hotel with production security keeping an eye on her. The presidential suite looked like the rest of the suites except that the bed had a different cover, but Meghan was sufficiently amused by the husband and wife owners of the hotel making such a fuss over their famous guest that she decided not to go diva on them.

Sometimes Meghan took Mia on such shoots but as this time there would not be much for her assistant to do but sit around in the hot desert she was left at the house, so she could go home to

Jake each night. Meghan called her if she wanted something, or often just to talk. During the first two calls the star did not mention Will and Mia avoided talking about the writer. On the third call, when Meghan realised that Mia was not going to broach the subject of Will, the star said, out of the blue, “and I hate Will Moorland”.

“Okay,” said Mia. “You hate him. Gotit.”

“And don’t just indulge the Diva by saying ‘okay’!”

“Umm, alright,” said Mia, although she wasn’t quite sure what she was being accused of. In fact, she had spoken to Will about the reasons for the firing and thought that the writer was justified in refusing to do the pickup, although wisely she did not say this. (When Mrs Kowalski eventually heard of the incident, via Mia telling Madison, her already high opinion of Will rose several notches. She strongly disapproved of her daughter’s use of sticks.)

“Is Will at the house?”

“He’s on site at that film of his, in some old warehouse Hap’s got South of downtown. He’s squatting with the guys in it for most of this week and handling your stuff by remote.”

“Ha!” said Meghan. “Tell him I hope he gets a horrible disease and dies.”

“I’ll tell him that,” said Mia, as that seemed like a safe thing to say. She later sent the writer a text.

Will’s response: “The warehouse is grimy and has rats. Meghan may get her wish. Tell her there’s no pool to swim in and I’m suffering horribly, that’ll cheer her up.”

Mia sent that on, minus the comment about cheering her up, and went back to her administration chores. It wasn’t her fight.

“He should suffer more,” retorted Meghan in a text. “Tell him I’m going to buy a shark and put it in the pool.”

“In chlorinated fresh water?” Will responded. “Poor thing. Maybe she could use piranhas. They’re at least fresh water fish. Then if I’m eaten, Meghan won’t hate me as much.” This was duly passed onto the star.

“I’m always going to hate him,” retorted Meghan.

Will decided he would stay a while longer at the warehouse.

Meghan then tried to get Mia to come with her to the party for which she had been given an invitation at the drug house. Mia, however, had already been told about the party by Will and, wary of it, invented a family engagement with Jake. “Why don’t you get Misty to go?” she said. “And I’ll book Henry. You don’t want to go to that sort of party without backup.”

Meanwhile Will’s peace of mind was shattered by the arrival of Danni Devlin in a tight top and jeans accompanied by a security man in a suit and sunglasses. He was as big as George and unsmiling.

“I’ve been sent by Mr Scranton to make sure Ms Devlin isn’t bothered,” he said.

“Okay,” said Evan who then later asked Will. “Who is Scranton?”

“Property billionaire,” said Will, “and I guess her boyfriend. I saw them together at the party where we met. She found out he was megarich and went straight in.” Will also noticed, but did not comment on, that Danni seemed more tanned than when he had seen her last. There would have been plenty of sunbathing in the Bahamas.

“Whatever,” said Evan. “She’s got the looks for this, we’ll see if she can act.”

As it happened Danni could act, or at least well enough for a low-budget slasher film, going through the motions in an audition, with Evan using his mobile as a stand in for a movie camera and the porn star brandishing a toy pistol as a make-do prop. Afterwards, Danni checked out the CGI backgrounds and monsters created by Hap and agreed to take the role.

“Not a bad script, Will,” she said, tapping the printed copy on her lap. She was sitting in a director’s chair while Hap and Evan were busy discussing details of the graphics on one of the screens. The security man glowered in the background. “You guys are serious.”

“Of course,” said Will. “Mind you, Evan and I had to argue a lot with Hap, who wanted every girl topless at all times.”

“Humph! You got him to cut back my topless shots to a couple of scenes?”

“Plus gratuitous nudity in the crowd scenes. Just how you handle your scenes is a matter between you and Evan.”

She shrugged. “Should be alright as is.”

“You must get a lot of doubtful offers.”

“I get a lot of propositions, is what I get,” she said. “How’s Clarise?”

“Shooting a beer commercial in the desert and mad at me for not doing exactly what I tell her to do.”

“Guys should do exactly what they are told,” retorted Danni, smiling. “How did you mess up in her eyes?”

“Prefer not to say.”

“At least you’re discrete,” she said. “I like that in a man.”

“Last I heard she wanted to buy some piranhas to put in the pool at her place for the next time I go swimming.”

“You use the pool at her place? I thought you were just staff.”

“I am just staff, but I swim every day. It was a condition of my employment.”

“Hers or yours?”

“Mine, although she and the ladies on staff do watch me swim.” That made her laugh. “One time her friends came and took my shirt while I was swimming and wouldn’t give it back to me.”

“Must be dreadful being seen as just a sex object,” said Danni, in mock sympathy.

“I’m exploited it’s true; it’s very sad.”

Hap and Evan turned their attention back to Danni who left soon thereafter waving briefly at Will before getting back into the stretch limousine with her grim security man, leaving the core production team of Party Town to hash through more details of just how they would shoot the picture.

After an exhausting week, the production team adjourned for part of the weekend and Will finally got back to an apartment on Saturday evening with his roomies off at a Goth party. Pan had tried to get Will to come to the party to meet her single girlfriends but the writer had declined on the grounds that he had to have a night to rest and regroup after a week of dealing with Hap’s enthusiasm. He had dinner and started a grand strategy computer game.

For her part, once she had finished with the beer commercial, Meghan moved on to a watch endorsement photo shoot. This involved a lot of work with costumes, lighting, backgrounds, makeup and much else besides, all requiring adjustment and discussion in order for the photographer to take hundreds of images, out of which perhaps two or three would be chosen as showing the “essence” of the product. Meghan would collect a fee for all this, but at the end of what she also found to be an exhausting week the star thought that she could do with a party. She found the invitation given to her at the drug house and called Henry.

The first Will knew of any of this was when Henry called him.

“Hey man, what’s up!”

“I’m at the house where Ms Chalmers wanted to go for a party, and she’s called me on my cell but she doesn’t make sense.”

“You can’t get in to grab her?”

“They won’t let me in without an invitation. They let her and Ms Dawn go, and the ladies said they’d call if there was any trouble.”

“Misty is with her? Where is this party?”

The address George gave rang an alarm bell with the writer. “It’s that drug house party. You remember the house we went to and came out with Ty Leighton?”

“Ohhhh man, I remember that place,” said George.

“They were handing out invitations then. I might even still have the one they gave me...” Will looked in his closet and felt in the pocket of the jacket which was still hanging where he had left it when he came home that night, the invitation still in the jacket pocket. “Got it. I can get in, but it says specifically ‘admit one’ on this invite. How come Misty got in?”

“They recognised her at the door. Celebrities count but bodyguards don’t.”

“I’ll have to come. I’ll be as fast as I can.”

“Worried,” said George.

Will changed, put on the jacket and dashed through the streets. It did not seem to matter what time of day or what day of the week, there was always plenty of traffic in Los Angeles. Will wondered, as he always did, where could all the people in all the cars be going?

George was standing in the street at the front gate of a white, two-story house in the neo-Georgian style meaning, among other things, that it had large, multi-pane windows on two floors set symmetrically about an entrance way. As Will drove past the bodyguard was resisting attempts by the party’s doorman – the same man with smouldering black eyes that had been on the door at the drug house – to get him to move on. The writer had to drive almost another block before finding a place to park and then ran back, to arrive just as the black-eyed man had been joined by another heavy set thug with a distinctly Eastern vibe.

“George, there you are,” said Will, slowing down to a brisk walk. “Let’s go in.”

“Invitation only, sir,” said the second thug.

“Good thing I have one,” said Will, producing his invitation for inspection. “This other gentleman might remember me from last weekend when I picked up Ty Leighton from your establishment. You were doorman then.”

“Remember Mr Leighton leaving,” said the black-eyed gentleman, eyeing the invitation. “You can come in but not him.” He pointed at George.

“Okay, but George stays right here. It’s a public walkway he can stand where he wants.” Will dodged past the two men and got to the door without further argument to find it unlocked. Another man inside glanced briefly at the two doormen still at the front gate and at Will’s invitation and then ignored him.

Beyond the door the music pulsed. Party goers in different states of undress drifted around the foyer and corridors. No one seemed to be in a hurry and no one paid any attention to the writer, except for a man behind a table in the foyer selling drugs. These included a selection of powders, pills in little plastic bags and a few cigarette-like objects on the side. All were expensive.

“Just come to get my boss,” he said.

He called George: “On second thoughts just move to the other side of the street, so our friends on the door can’t complain. I’ll put this phone in my pocket but I’ll put you on speaker and won’t hang up. Stay on the line.”

“Got it,” said George.

Will looked into a couple of rooms. What must be the house’s main living room had bodies draped everywhere. In the midst of this on the carpet a couple was having sex, the woman on top moving slowly and apparently enjoying herself. She looked up and smiled at the writer, who got the impression that the woman was performing rather than drugged up.

“You can be next if you like?” she said. The man on the carpet, who was also obviously enjoying himself, paid no attention to this interaction.

“Thanks but I have to find someone,” said Will. He checked the kitchen, to find one young gentleman with a punk hairdo saying that he was God and would destroy the earth but no Meg. Upstairs, another couple was having sex in the corridor, this time with the man on top, while the other party goers stepped over the couple. Then he found Meghan in one of the bedrooms, crowded with drugged-up people. She had been cornered by three young, clean-cut corporate types complete with suits and loosened ties who clearly fancied themselves as her next boyfriend. Standing close enough to breathe on her, they were stoned out of their minds.

“Then I made two million on the generalators deal,” said the man closest to Will. He was tall and blonde and standing with his back to the writer. He might have been trying to say ‘generators’.

“Oh man, I made four million trading bond hybrids for the Falbig Catalaxy,” said another. Will was not sure that the pronunciation of ‘Falbig Catalaxy’ was correct either, especially as the man was slurring his words, but it was time to break up the party.

“Meg!” he said.

“Oh, Will!” The star was glad to see her fired employee.

“Guys I’m on Mr Chalmers’ staff and I got the bat signal. Time for her to go.”

He grabbed the star’s hand who gladly allowed herself to be pulled out of the press of traders.

“Hay, man!” said the blond trader, grabbing at her. “We wuz just getting acquaint.. acquainted-like.”

Will knocked the man's hand away. "Say goodbye to the nice gentlemen, Meg."

"Goodbye nice gentleman," said Meghan. Outside the room she said, "I don't feel so good, Will. I've only had one drink and one of my sticks, but I'm feeling sick."

"We'll get you home quick." He took his phone out. "George you there? Got her. Get the car but keep the line open and the phone with you."

"Getting it now," said Henry.

"Those guys wouldn't let me leave," said Meghan, leaning against Will and gasping. The writer thought that she looked a little green. "My purse. I've left it somewhere. And where's Misty? We can't leave without Misty."

Two rooms along, with Will holding Meghan's hand tightly, he found Misty in a line of young ladies mostly in their underwear, two were topless, with the Evil Buddha from the drug house conducting an auction to a mixed crowd of the LA rich and nasty.

"Guys what am I bid for number three's bra," said Evil Buddha.

"One thousand slurred someone."

Will saw that Misty had a number three on a card hung around her neck and was plainly terrified. Another girl was obviously unhappy, while the other three were stoned and smiling.

"Bids are off for Misty's bra, guys. Time for Misty to go home."

"Now wait," said Evil Buddha. "Who the fuck are you?"

"Will!" said Misty. "I'm so glad to see you."

"I'm on Ms Chalmers' staff," barked Will. He had a loud voice when he chose to use it and could give it an angry edge. In such circumstances, a loud, angry voice and assertion of authority helped a lot more than any amount of martial arts training. Will had seen films where the protagonists had beaten up a whole crowd of thugs with whom they disagreed. Even if he could beat up Evil Buddha plus an enforcer type who, Will realised, was now closing in on his left, he doubted he would get by the three hefty doormen even with Henry's help. They had not looked like 'live and let live' kinda guys.

"Misty, get your clothes and let's roll. You, number five." That was the other terrified girl, a cute office type (Will later discovered she was a book keeper from Wyoming) "If you want to come with us you're welcome. Grab your clothes."

The girl nodded and dashed out of the line.

"I said to wait!" snarled Evil Buddha.

The enforcer type tried to grab Will's arm, muttering "Mr Chan said to wait." The writer shook him off and whipped out his phone, which was still on speaker. "George you there?"

"Here boss. Got the cops on speed dial."

"Get ready to tell them that there are women being held against their will at this address and being forced to strip. There may be sexual assaults. There's also drugs for sale."

The crowd was suddenly silent.

"They'll have probable cause enough to enter, Mr Chan," said Will, speaking directly to Evil Buddha.

Chan gestured and the enforcer type gave up on grabbing the writer's arm. By that time the two ladies had joined him and were putting on their dresses, not caring about the crowd watching them, although a lot of eyes were on Meghan.

"I take my friends and there's no need to call the cops," said Will. "No need for anyone to be taken down to the station or for lawyers to be called. You can forget about the incident."

Chan sneered.

"Where's my purse?" said the cute office type.

"That's a good point. Where are the purses for all the ladies?"

"I'll get them," said Chan, suddenly shifting from defiant sneering to sullen helpfulness, a shift which surprised Will. "Take over Jer."

The Buddha walked passed Will and the ladies without a word and they followed him to a sideboard in the main foyer with a piece of decorative glass on top. On the wall above the glass was an abstract painting - a series of jagged lines set diagonally on a black background. Will was a writer not an art critic but thought the painting was cheap. Evil Buddha unlocked the sideboard, pulled out a number of bags and purses and laid them beside the decorative glass. Will realised that his little group was a long pace behind the foyer's drugs vendor who was busy with customers.

"Mine's the white bag at the end," said Meghan.

Evil Buddha grabbed it but took a step to his right so that for a moment his bulk hid the purse, he paused for a touch longer than seemed necessary, apparently looking at the purse, then turned to hand it to Will. The man's movements had been sufficiently odd for Will to look in the open top of the expensive white leather bag to see a plastic bag of powder. He turned away so that his own body blocked the view of any observers or cameras, whipped out the pocket square - the same one that Meghan had given him in New York - from the jacket's side pocket, used it to grip the powder bag and flung it against the wall, just behind the drug vendor.

"Will, what...!" said Meghan woosily, still leaning against the writer.

"Shh!" said Will.

He turned back just as Chan had completed the same act with Misty's green zip-up bag, but before Will could warn Misty their host grabbed the cute office girl's black bag and all but threw it at her. After a single, venomous glance at Will, he stomped back upstairs.

"Misty," hissed Will, "turn around and check your bag."

"It's unzipped," she said, in surprise. She turned around, looked, then gasped, and showed Will. It contained a plastic pouch filled with powder. "That's not mine."

"Shhh! Use this to grasp it and then fling it in his direction," said Will, handing Misty the pocket square then gesturing towards the drug vendor. With any luck, when the pouch was found later, it would be considered to be part of the vendor's stock that had fallen off the table. The cute office type overheard this and also checked her bag, to go through the same motions as Misty.

"Ladies we are leaving," said Will. "Stick close and keep those bags shut."

They got out to the front gate where Henry was waiting with Meghan's BMW, then drove a short distance down the road before Will told Henry to stop next to a drain grate he saw in the gutter.

“Ladies, check your bags and purses again,” he said. “Make sure there’s nothing illegal. Henry check the trunk and under the seats. Any odd corners. Maybe the spare wheel space.”

“What am I looking for, Will,” said Henry.

“The host left the ladies some little packages of powder in their handbags for someone else to find. They’re not likely to have left anything in the car, but better check.”

A thorough search found nothing. Will found two of the drug sticks Meghan liked in her handbag, crushed them under his foot and kicked them into the drain.

“You got any priors, Henry?” Will said as they got back in.

“Possession, small amount, as a teenager. Community service. Means nothing, man.”

“I’m sure of that but were you charged as an adult or a minor?”

“Adult.”

“Then better let me drive. If we get stopped the driver is the one who gets the attention and I’m a clean skin.”

They drove on a little further and, just as they were turning into the feeder road, a police car came up behind them and sounded its siren. Will duly pulled over. “No one says anything but me. They’ve got no reason to pull us over, as far as I know. That means anything they find is inadmissible in court. Everyone hang tight.”

“Not so well, Will,” said Meghan from the back seat.

The policeman who came to the driver’s side door to ask for licence and registration could have come straight from central casting as a clean-cut, square-jawed cop-on-the-job. Will handed over the documents.

“Was there a problem officer?” he asked sweetly.

“Right, rear indicator not working, sir,” said the policeman, “or you were not indicating as you should.”

“I’m sure I was indicating, officer,” said Will, politely. “But if there is a problem with the car can I get out to check before we drive on?”

The cop nodded and Will got out, walked around and yelled at Henry to flip the indicator. It blinked.

“Seems to be working, officer,” he said.

“I was sure there was no light,” said the policeman.

Just then Meghan all but fell out of the back passenger door, onto her hands and knees, and vomited into the gutter.

“Oh my, my,” said the officer. Meghan had instinctively brought her handbag, clutched in one hand, which she dropped on the sidewalk lawn. The cop almost pounced on this, saying “Just let me get this for you.” Then held it up in such a way that he could “accidentally” see inside. He was still peering inside when Will took it and patted Meghan on the back.

“Let it out,” he murmured – about all that he could do.

Misty Dawn stumbled out after Meghan and also threw up on the lawn, although while standing up.

“Indications of drug use,” said the officer, grabbing Misty’s bag, unzipping it and looking inside. “These ladies are famous aren’t they?”

“It’s evidence that they’re sick, famous or not,” said Will. “We’d like to get the ladies home, so they can be sick in private.”

“You have a conviction for possession,” said the cop to Will. He dredged up a handful of Misty’s possessions from the bottom of her bag for closer inspection, then let them drop back, disappointed.

“No I don’t, officer,” said Will. “I’ve never been charged with anything.” Just then the second officer, who had been checking Will’s licence, handed it back to the writer and shook his head at his partner.

The first officer looked hopefully at the cute office type, who showed no signs of illness, then said “very well, sir, sorry for the inconvenience. We won’t do a ticket this time.”

“Thank you, officer,” said Will, who saw nothing to be gained by rubbing the officer’s nose in his defeat. “Long night for you I guess. Take care.”

They got back in the car.

“Are we going to take the ladies to a clinic or hospital?” asked Henry, as they drove off.

“How’s it going back there, ladies?” said Will.

“Still feel off but better,” said Misty. “I had some tasty savoury they were offering at the party. I think that was the problem. But I just got rid of it in a most unglamorous way as you saw.”

“What about you, other person?” Said Will. “I’m sorry I haven’t yet asked your name.”

“It’s Lissa,” said the cute office type. Really thanks for the rescue, Will, is it? The guy by the door just grabbed me and forced me into that line. I saw them offering those savouries around but only to some people. I didn’t get one.”

“I had two,” said Meghan. “I just want to go home, Will. I think I’ll be alright and too much media if I go to a hospital.”

“Okay, let’s all go to Meghan’s place and keep an eye on our two patients. If it gets worse we can go to a hospital..”

“I can’t believe I’m in the same car as Clarise Chalmers and Misty Dawn,” said Lissa. “This is really LA.”

When they got home Meghan was apparently asleep so Will picked her up and carried her inside. It was a strange sensation, Will thought, carrying the star.

Meghan opened her eyes, put one arm around Will’s neck, said “I hate you Will Moreland”, and then seemed to go back to sleep again.

“I think she’s getting better,” said Will.

The traffic incident was later discussed in a police station office by the officers concerned and a Federal agent.

“We managed to look where you told us to look,” said the first officer. “And came up with nothing. They must’ve dumped the drugs at the party.”

“The watcher said they made a stop just up the street,” said the agent. Unlike the officers, the agent had a very lived-in face with streaks of grey showing his hair. He liked the sit in the shadow, so the cops through of him as shadow-man.

“We looked there,” said the second officer. “Just traces of stuff and a few bits of paper. Nothing we could hang anything on, even if we could make a connection with the car. As it was the stop was barely legal.”

“It wasn’t legal at all,” said the first officer. “I had to make up a story about the indicator and the driver seemed to know it.”

“The guy with the drug conviction?” said the agent.

“No that was the guy riding shotgun. They’d also switched drivers. This was a William Moreland. No record. The ladies were sure sick but otherwise the whole thing was a bust. All we can show for the incident is to say that Clarise Chalmers is a total babe, even when she’s throwing up on the sidewalk.”

“So is Misty Dawn, but still no arrest,” said the second officer.

“What it comes down to is the guy who got them is a smart operator and saw us coming,” said the first officer.

“It’s Hollywood,” said the agent. “Plenty of celebrities.”

“Maybe next time we can make it legal,” said the first officer, “without having to plant the drugs.”

“Whatever,” said the agent.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When Meghan woke up in the early morning darkness, she saw a shape lying beside her and shook it.

“Will?” she said, tentatively.

“Wha? No, Misty,” said the shape, turning over. “The boys have gone home, and dropped that other girl off, but Will said I should sleep here in case you were still sick. You had whatever was in those savouries worse than me.”

Remembering more of what had happened that night, Meghan realised she had been put on the bed, still in her dress, and a blanket flung over her.

“How are you feeling anyway,” said Misty.

“Still not so good, but better, I guess. Did Will say when he’d be back?”

“He said he’d call. In the meantime, he’s left some water for you on the bedside table and a light breakfast downstairs for when you get up. He’s being very attentive, I think.”

“Maybe,” said Meghan.

“Would you have preferred that it was Will here rather than me?”

“Would have liked Will to be around,” said Meghan. “Last night is a blur. What happened?”

Misty went over the events of the night. Meghan got up long enough to clean off her face, brush her teeth and change, and waved away Misty’s apologies for using a toothbrush she had found in the en-suite which looked spare.

“I think Robin used that one when he was here,” said Meghan. “Take it with you. Those cops last night looked in my bag?”

“And mine. Even searched it hoping to find the drugs planted at the party, but we’d got rid of everything. I think Will threw away a couple of those sticks you had in your bag. He also said to tell you he’s taken the sticks in your bedside drawer just in case the cops found a way to get a search warrant. He said the traffic stop was an ambush.”

Meghan shrugged her shoulders over that news. She would far rather not have the police in her life than the sticks and there was something sinister about the way they had been stopped after leaving the party.

“Will told me off,” said Misty. “Said we should never have gone into the party without George. If George wasn’t allowed in, then skip the party and go to a night club.” He even wagged his finger at me.

“What did you say?”

“I said, ‘yes dad’. Anyway, considering what happened, he had a point. Let’s club next time.”

“Deal,” said Meghan.

“And let’s take Will. He’s fun. We watched one of your films for a time last night.”

“Which one?”

“A Very Continental Affair.”

“I’m mostly in my underwear.”

“Topless in one scene. Will said you managed to make the sex scenes with the husband and wife separately, and then with the husband’s boyfriend and the wife’s boyfriend with none of the parties realising that they were all having an affair with the same person believable. He also said the topless scene was interesting.”

“Interesting!” said Meghan. “Is that all he had to say?”

“He couldn’t say much else without seeming sleazy.”

“He’s a writer, it’s his job to think of something nice to say.”

“Yes, Meg,” said Misty.

That morning, when the ladies finally got up, Meghan found texts on her phone declaring that her mother and Madison, having been told of an illness due to eating something off at a party, but nothing about drugs or being stopped by police, declared that they would come that day and stay the night. Meghan and Misty also found two cans of fruit salad on the kitchen top and two fresh pears under plastic wrap in the fridge.

As the can was not one of those where the top could be peeled off, Will had left instructions about how to open it on a note.

“Electric can opener in corner – black device to your right.” (An arrow drawn by him helpfully pointed to the right.)

“Insert can in device then pull top lever down. It should all lock into place. Then turn it on, using the switch on the front. There are also videos online about how to work it. If all else fails, ask Misty.”

“Chop up the pears (you use a knife from a drawer on the other side of the kitchen). They are good on an unsettled stomach.”

Misty giggled. “I don’t think Will thinks much of your skills in a kitchen.”

Meghan, previously unaware her kitchen had an electric can opener, or even that there were electric can openers, smiled.

“Ha!” she said, but without any heat.

The ladies made a reasonable brunch of the fruit which stayed down. Then the two Kowalskis arrived to make a fuss over Meghan and Misty, which was gratifying. Misty took an Uber back to her own home and Meghan chose to lay out for a time by her pool as part of the recovery process. While she was there Will called.

“You!” she said. “You think I’m so hopeless I don’t know where the cutlery is in my own kitchen?”

“I was just covering all the bases,” said Will, cheerfully. “You’re a world-famous star who has many things on her mind. Cutlery is a detail you can leave up to your underlings – assuming, of course, that I still count as that considering that I’ve been fired ‘n all.”

“It never seems to work my firing you,” she said. “And my topless scene is just interesting? What sort of comment is that from a writer?”

“I’d be in trouble if I said anything else.”

“Ha!” said Meghan. “When are you coming over?”

“Oh right!” Will had not expected to be invited over. “I’ve got some of my own stuff to finish up here, why don’t I come over this evening and grab takeaways? There’s that Chinese restaurant near you. We can all watch a Star Wars film afterwards.”

“We can watch a non-star wars film, Mr Moreland,” retorted Meghan. “Mention Star Wars and I’ll set the dogs on you.”

“You don’t have any dogs,” Will pointed out, “just a cat.”

“I’ll get dogs – nasty ones,” said Meghan, “and someone to take your body away.”

Will sighed. “Okay, but maybe not the film of last night. You were the best part of it, but I had trouble following all the affairs and betrayals. It was typical Hollywood over-kill. Everyone was having affairs with everyone else and they were all betraying each other.”

“Even the director had trouble keeping it straight,” said Meghan. “One of the bedroom scenes they had to re-do because they realised it was supposed to be me in it, not the husband’s other girlfriend.”

“See, complicated, while Star Wars plots are mostly straight forward. Tonight. Chinese for four.”

Mrs Kowalski received the news of Will bringing Chinese takeaways for dinner with the comment that it would be “nice to see Will again, dear” and with relief that she did not have to

trouble herself about the meal. Both she and Madison, however, were surprised when Meghan appeared in a black, short, figure-hugging, sleeveless club outfit with a plunging neckline.

“Is this outfit for Will?” asked Madison.

“Just dressing for the occasion,” said Meghan, coyly.

“Riggghhht! You want to make Will choke again.”

“Maybe,” she said.

As it happened, Will left his car in the driveway and came in by the front door, so that Meghan could confront him in her entrance foyer. The writer’s mouth dropped open. He put the takeaway packages on the foyer table.

“Quite a dress,” he exclaimed. “At least this time I’m not drinking anything, so I won’t choke.”

“Misty said you told her off about what happened last night.”

“That’s right,” said Will. “I told her and I’ll tell you if George can’t follow then don’t go. You are too high profile. Naughty!” He wagged his finger at her and spoke as if to a very young child. “Baaaaad!”

“Okay, point noted,” she said, moving closer. “Finished?”

“Guess so – that dress is..”

Meghan abruptly closed the distance, wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. After a moment’s hesitation, having been caught by surprise, Will kissed back. When they paused, he asked: “this means I’m not fired, right?”

“Shut up,” she said and they kissed again.

Mrs Kowalski, wondering what had happened to dinner, looked in for a moment then hurriedly returned to the table, miming cuddling and kissing for Madison.

“Our dinner is getting cold,” said Madison, rolling her eyes, “while they mess with one another.”

“We can always heat it up in the microwave,” said Mrs Kowalski, amused. “Or do you want to go in there and separate them?”

After a few minutes, when Will also pointed out that the dinner was cooling, the couple emerged.

“Hey Claire, hey Maddie,” said Will, “how’s the antiques business?”

“Could always be better, Will,” said Mrs Kowalski. “Your film project sounds more interesting than antiques at the moment. Meghan says you’re an assistant director in this venture, as well as script writer. How is it going?”

“It’s low budget, Claire,” said Will. “But there’s enough money to make an effort at being serious. We’ve been doing pre-production all last week and this week.”

That led to Will telling the ladies about Danni’s screen test and how she was shadowed by a security man hired by property mogul Scranton.

“So she did end up with that guy,” exclaimed Meghan and that led to further explanations for the other Kowalskis, to make dinner pass pleasantly enough. Will made coffee to order and then Mrs Kowalski declared that she would watch an old-time musical on the television in her room and

would take Madison with her. Meghan and Will could then argue about what film to see in peace and quiet, or so she said.

Having been left to themselves. Will and Meghan then cuddled on the couch for some time.

“You know this is about when I’d suggest we go upstairs,” Will said, “and you’d say something like ‘I want to take things slow’.”

“Do I or we want to take things slow?” said Meghan, eyeing the writer quizzically.

“Well, I was just wondering about Madison,” said Will.

“Madison? She’s a big girl. She’ll survive.”

“You remember when Robin Hawke came here and you went off with him?” said Will.

“Maddie seemed uncomfortable at the time. That was why I started that card game. To distract her.”

“She was uncomfortable? I didn’t think she cared about that sort of thing.”

“Anyway, maybe you can hold your animal urges in check for one night…” Will could not believe he was putting off sex with one of Hollywood’s desirable women, but this turn of events had taken him by surprise. He knew he was doomed, but perhaps he could delay the inevitable.

“My animal urges, Mr Moorland! Ha! I’ll give you animal urges.” She kissed him soundly then they finally turned the television on to watch, of all things, the latest James Bond film while lying half on Will, the writer’s arm around her.

“There’s been talk of you being the next Bond girl,” said Will.

“Just talk, so far,” said Meghan. “If I’m offered I’ll think about it.”

Will’s occasional comment on the plot and action film sequences she found amusing and diverting.

“Been studying these with the guys from the production team,” he said. “Stitching action scenes together so that the film still makes sense is a real challenge.”

“What about sex scenes?”

“Those too.”

Meghan saw Will off with some more kissing at the door, just as she had done with boyfriends at school.

“You’ll be here for your usual swim tomorrow?”

“Actually no, I’ve still got pre-production for the film.”

“Really?” said Meghan doing her best to sound displeased.

“Why don’t I come by for dinner with takeaways, after the others have gone and you can tell me how much my performance as an employee displeases you.”

“Sounds good, Mr Moreland, but I have to watch my diet.”

“What about one of those salad bowl kits I saw in the supermarket? I could get one of those and toss it for you, and Chinese for myself.”

“Deal. We’ll try that,” she said. Meghan then went to confront Maddie, still watching films in her mother’s bedroom.

“Will’s gone home?” said Maddie, surprised. She had thought she might not see her sister again until morning.

“He’s coming tomorrow night,” said Meghan. “He said that you seemed uncomfortable that time Robin came here unexpectedly and we went up to my room.”

“I was sorta uncomfortable, I guess,” Maddie said, surprised at the question. “Was it that obvious? That’s embarrassing.”

Mrs Kowalski stopped the film to better hear the conversation but made no comment.

“Will said he started that card game you were all in when I came down to distract you,” said Meghan.

“He did? That was sweet of him.”

“Does that sort of thing worry you? I mean, we could have held off, and been more discreet.”

“It’s not so much that I was worried in general,” said Maddie, “it’s just that, and this is embarrassing, I had a crush on Robin.”

“Oh!” said Meghan. “Did anything happen with this crush?”

“No, no, we said hello a couple of times but he didn’t seem to notice me much, and he was your boyfriend so I didn’t do anything, but I couldn’t help the crush,” said Maddie.

“Half the college girls in America have a crush on Robin,” said Meghan. “Do you still have a crush?”

“After the way he treated you? No way. He’s forgotten.”

Meghan decided that her sister’s crush on a dumped and disgraced former boyfriend where nothing happened could be forgotten.

“Okay, I’m sorry I didn’t know at the time,” she said.

“I didn’t tell anybody and I tried hard not to show it. Now that he’s gone I’m glad. Life is simpler.”

“What about Will?”

“I really like Will,” said Maddison, “but I don’t have a crush on him. Wait, did you guys hold off because of me? There was no need.”

Meghan shrugged. “Will said I could check my animal urges for one night.”

The other Kowalskis laughed.

“As you seem fine, darling,” said Mrs Kowalski, “we will move back to the store tomorrow. You and Will can deal with these animal urges in private.”

Will, for his part, drove home thinking that he would have his heart broken by an actress yet again, but that he couldn’t do anything about it.

The next day proved to be a quiet one for Meghan of reading scripts, broken only by a long session with her personal trainer. Towards the end of the day she happened to mention, casually, to Mia that Will would be coming over for dinner.

“Dinner?” said Mia. “This is a new development, Will coming over for dinner.”

“He was here last night,” said Meghan, coyly.

“Huh! You’re not making this dinner, I guess?”

“No, Will is bringing it.”

“With your mum and Maddie having gone home,” said Mia, “there’ll be no one to keep an eye on you two.”

“We don’t need chaperones.”

When Will arrived, this time leaving his car in the garage, Meghan was waiting for him in the living room in a silver, backless club dress which also took Will's breath away. She took the food from his hands, put them on a side table and kissed his still open mouth. Will carried her upstairs.

Pleasantly surprised that her own needs were attended to Meghan also found that, when the coupling was over, she was allowed to cling. Her preference for holding lovers close had caused problems with other partners but Will did not mind and his body, Meghan decided, was worth clinging to. She also liked to talk afterwards and there were matters to discuss.

"There is one thing that has been bothering me," she said. "I'm due to start shooting that beach volleyball film the week after next and it's in Australia. After that, I more or less have to go straight to New York for an episode of that series where I'm an alien."

"I had been thinking about that," said Will, who had decided that since he was doomed he might as well enjoy the good part. "Why don't I come with you?"

Meghan raised her head. "Really?"

"Sure, it's a bit intense for this stage of whatever this is but it is more convenient for the work I do for you to actually be in the same place as the diva, and I can do my writing anywhere, so why don't I stay with you? You draw a suite right?"

Meghan considered this for a moment. Maybe it was "intense" as Will said, but she had been thinking about asking Will to come anyway and, after that night, if he was coming he might as well stay with her.

"Are you going to come with me on the flight over?" she said.

"On the private jet Mia says is lined up? Sure. A private jet sounds interesting enough, but if I come she gets to sit with Jake and I get to sit with the star."

"Jake is coming?" said Meghan.

"He got an assistant director gig last minute on this film. You'll have an ally in the directorial camp. From what I hear of your director you might need one."

The Italian born director, Paolo Amato had a reputation for brilliance combined with arrogance and an ego that stood out even in Hollywood. No one knew just exactly why he had ended up directing a by-the-numbers romance involving rival beach volleyball men's and women's teams, but a few guessed that he had clashed too often with senior executives in major studios to get a project better suited to his talents. Meghan, for her part, thought that if she could survive the chaos of the New York Affair shoot she could survive anything, and she was collecting a nice fee.

The next morning at the usual start of the day conference, as Will splashed up and down the pool – pre-production on Party Town Terror was on hold for a day or so – Mia received the news that Will would also be on the jet and staying in Meghan's hotel suite with a smile.

"I see," she said. "You two had a good dinner last night?"

"Pretty good," said Meghan, coyly, "when we got to it".

"Uh-huh! Anyway, this means that I don't have to entertain the diva in the plane and get to sit with my boyfriend."

"Yep, Will has to entertain the diva," said Meghan, cheerfully.

Poor Emma would be left behind to handle posts on multiple social media outlets, monitor news items and, perhaps, catch up on the streaming dramas she had been following.

The one major item for that day was a photoshoot, using Meghan's pool, for a line of swim wear to kick off the fledgling Bad Diva fashion label. This involved the usual tonne of equipment and numerous crew members including the photographer himself and two male models, one to do the shoot with Meghan and one spare. The photographer, Joel, the first to arrive and very interested to meet Will, referred to the two models as "nice boys". These nice boys arrived later holding hands.

"They're all good friends of mine and incredibly gay," said Meghan quietly to Will.

"I sorta got the gay part," said Will.

"No leaving, like with that other shoot. Coffee for the cast later?"

"Of course," said Will.

After Joel had fussed around with screens and lights, he got Meghan and the main model, Mason, to jump into the pool near the deep end and submerge themselves fully briefly then fussed around some more over the way the light reflected off their skin, getting make-up lady Miranda to rub some cream on muscle lines. Finally, he was satisfied to the point of asking Meghan, who was wearing one of the new swimwear line to take off both her top and bikini bottom. These were placed in artful disarray by the edge of the pool, along with a pair of wet men's bathers to one side.

"Shuffle down a little, darlings," said Joel, "I need to see a little more cleavage from Meg... just a little more, okay that should do it. Hug her Mason, pretend you're hetro."

"It's so different hugging a girl," said Mason, who had known Meghan since a photoshoot while she was still in high school. "Two big bumps. Is that hunk riding a laptop on your dining room table the latest?"

"Yep. His name is Will. He works for me as a consultant."

"Now darlings let's get passionate," said Joel. "Meghan, darling, I want your best cry of passion – you're on the camera side so you're on Mason's left cheek."

"Really?" said Mason, "And what does he consult on, Ms Kowalski?"

"Everyone asks that," said Meghan, settling her cheek on Mason's. "He's sweet, but he's also proved a very useful consultant."

"Mouth open, cry of passion, Meg," said Joel, taking the first shots. "Remember you've ripped each other's swimmers off to have fabulous sex in the pool. Hold Meg closer Mason. Remember, for this shot you're hetro. I hope the water's warm. That helps the passion. That's excellent darlings. Bit more ecstasy Meghan, sweetie. Keep it hot Mason."

Suddenly Mason stopped hugging Meghan and pushed her away.

"I'm sorry, Meghan, darling," he said. "I love you madly but I can't do the hetro thing anymore."

"What?" said Meghan.

"Mason, sweetie, this isn't the time," said Joel.

"I can't deny who I am, even for a photoshoot with an old friend." Mason nearly vaulted out of the pool. "Tom it's time."

“Oh goodie,” said Tom, the backup model, who flung aside the fashion magazine he had been reading and picked up his bag. “Let’s blow this boring, hetro shoot and have fun.”

“But you can’t run out in the middle of a shoot!” protested Joel. “Give me a couple more hours of hetro.”

“No, no I can’t do it any longer,” said Mason, “give me men’s fashion shoots only, sweetie.”

“I won’t give you anything if you run out on me now,” retorted Joel.

Mason grabbed his bag.

“Hey, we’re meant to be getting passionate here,” said Meghan, indignantly from the pool

“Sorry Meg,” said Mason, “Love you. I’ll call.”

“Nice to meet you Meghan,” called Tom. “We’ll send you a wedding invite.”

The happy couple dashed off together, hand in hand, followed by a stream of curses and threats from Joel which they ignored.

Meghan, still standing naked in the pool, was astonished.

“Can we get anyone else?” she finally asked Joel.

“I had Tom as backup because it’s difficult getting top models in at short notice. I never thought they’d run off with one another. Even when we get someone I’d still have to set it all up again. How long are you in LA?”

“Just another week or so and then I’ll be gone for weeks. ... Say, what about Will?”

“The hunk in your living room? He’d do on one level, but he’s not pro model is he?”

“Does he need to be?” said Meghan. “For the shot you want, it’s me mostly and just a part of the guy’s body. Will’s got the body for sure. He’s former national swimming team.”

“Oh, okay,” said Joel, brightening up. “It’s worth trying, and I get a peek myself.”

A little later Will was out by the pool in his own bathers still wet from his morning swim, being appraised by Joel.

“Nice, nice,” said the photographer. “Just darken him up a little, Miranda honey, and emphasise the muscle lines on the parts that we will see.”

Eventually, Will was directed to jump in the pool and submerge fully for a second or two. Miranda flicked the hair around to give it that mussed-up, spontaneous look. The writer then got to hold Meghan.

“You’re totally naked,” exclaimed Will. “I didn’t realise.”

“Is that a problem, Mr Moreland?”

He ran his fingers gently down the side of her body, making her gasp. She liked Will’s touch. They kissed.

“Maybe it’s more of an opportunity,” said Will kissing her neck and shoulder.

“This shoot’s got a different feel,” said Joel. “I like it. This could work.”

Will and Meghan kissed. Will cupped Meghan’s left breast in his hand and gently caressed the nipple with his thumb as Violet had taught him, until Joel said, “ah guys, it’s a photoshoot.”

They broke apart, Meghan giggling. “I can feel that you’re interested,” she whispered.

“You mean there?” said Will picking her up and letting her slide down with her legs around him. She gasped, her cheek against his which is where Joel wanted it.

“That’s it, that’s good darlings,” said Joel.

“Then I could try this,” said Will moving his hand between her legs.

Meghan gasped louder, then gave a little cry.

“Oh my!” said Miranda.

Joel kept clicking away as Meghan gasped again, digging her fingers into Will’s back and pressing her body against his until she convulsed.

“You are wicked, Will Moreland,” she said, kissing his cheek repeatedly, “absolutely wicked”.

“I do have one thing to say,” said Will. “Ouch!” and he gestured at Meghan’s nails digging into his back.

“Oh sorry!” She tried rubbing the area and ended up with traces of blood on her fingers.

“You didn’t say anything,” she chided.

“Didn’t want to spoil the moment for you. It was an interesting moment.”

“It was, but you didn’t get much out of it?”

“You can make it up to me later,” he said.

“I can do that,” she said.

They kissed again, initially ignoring Joel trying to get them to separate. Miranda giggled.

“Guys, guys!” said Joel, becoming exasperated. “time to come up for air, there’s a lot to get through yet.”

Will and Meghan broke apart, laughing.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The image which Joel eventually chose for the campaign of Meghan, eyes closed and gasping on Will’s cheek became famous. Will saw it on a gigantic poster in New York’s Times Square, and on the cover of a book on sex in advertising and was thankful that he could not be identified from it. Unlike Meghan, he had no taste for the limelight – a preference which occasionally baffled the star but also meant there was no tension over who should take centre stage at an event. For her part, Meghan was often asked about the image, including by her mother, to whom she gave a variation of a standard response suggested by Will.

“The shoulder and arm you can see in the picture belongs to Will. What the arm and hand you can’t see was doing to me I’m not going to share with my mother but I wasn’t acting.”

When this response was passed onto the other lady members of Mrs Kowalski’s golf club it caused some chortling, with a couple of the members then asking what she thought of Will.

“I thoroughly approve of Will,” said Mrs Kowalski, “and I sometimes tell my Meaghan that but not too often as I don’t want to put any pressure on her. I don’t want to spoil things.” (In fact, Meaghan thought her mother would never shut up about Will.)

As for Joel, a potential disaster had turned into a triumph and a major boost for the brand which led to plenty more work for him, as well as industry recognition. Whenever he was asked

about the shoot itself he would say that, among other results, the hetero fireworks resulted in makeup lady Miranda finally getting pregnant to her partner that night after a year of trying.

“The hardest part was separating those two afterwards,” he told friends. “I had more pics to take but would they listen to me? I even thought about turning a hose on them but they were already in a pool. It was quite the photo shoot.”

Will was not disappointed with the private jet (his jibe against Connie Leighton now ancient history), which was certainly more comfortable for the long journey involved – four hours to Hawaii and another eleven to the Eastern Australian coast – than a commercial flight. However, the pilot had more time to spend with his passengers which mostly involved talking to Meghan while ignoring everyone else. To the star’s amusement, her new boyfriend paid no attention to this byplay – Will having already decided that the best way to deal with Meghan’s swarms of admirers was to ignore them entirely unless the star gave the distress signal. Instead the writer read a thriller he had brought with him and, as he told Meghan later, wondered about writing a thriller himself.

The hotel close to the main drag of the area known as Surfers Paradise, south of the major city of Brisbane, was also an eye opener. But after a night’s cuddling, Meghan had to get up early to work on the shoot itself at the nearby full studio complex. She returned after the first day to say that director Paolo Amato was “mad” and a “monster”.

“Thought there might be problems,” said Will. “You’d think that a romance filled with hot bodies set during a volleyball competition would be fun. I mean you need a story but it’s not the stuff of industry awards. Why make life difficult over it?”

“Will, I agree,” said Meghan. “Now let’s forget it. I want to check out the hotel restaurant for dinner tonight.”

The next day Will was busy writing the final chapters of his third instalment of the Stellar Ranger series, which was starting to attract readers, when his phone rang.

“Will Moreland?” said a female Australian voice. “Can you come to the Volley shoot?”

“Me? Is Meghan, I mean Clarise Chalmers alright?”

“She’s fine, sir. It’s your expertise that’s required.”

“My expertise?” said Will. “In what?”

“Swimming sir, and can you bring your swimming gear, your bathers?”

After Will had ubered out to the studio complex, an assistant led Will to a tank with one end set up as a swimming pool, with the addition of a ten metre (about thirty foot) high, wooden diving platform, stabilised with wires.

Here he was confronted by director Amato, a short squad, red-faced man who reminded Will of an angry red toad, and one of the female stars of the film in a white bikini which showcased the face, figure and long dark hair of a goddess or, more practically, one worthy of the cover of the Sports Illustrated magazine annual swimsuit edition. A handful of film assistants clustered around.

“She won’t dive,” said Amato, his voice slightly accented. “She said she could dive but she cannot. I need you to teach her to dive.”

The girl, arms folded, looked deeply upset.

“You mean from up there?” said Will, pointing in astonishment at the platform, “but it’s ten metres, yes?”

One of the assistants, dressed only in bathers who proved to be the leader of the lifeguards hired for the film, nodded vigorously. “Yep, ten.”

“Mr Amato, it doesn’t even have a hand rail,” said Will. “That dive would be hard enough for an Olympian, and when Ms ... um..”

“Lauren,” said the goddess.

“Lauren here was asked if she could dive she thought that meant jumping from a suburban backyard diving board, right?”

Lauren nodded.

“Not from ten metres. You’d have trouble getting a civilian to even jump from that height, let alone dive. Why not get a stunt woman to do it? Why Lauren?”

“That’s what I’ve been telling him,” said the lead lifeguard.

“It’s about authenticity,” spat Amato. “I want the camera on her, on her figure, all the way down, in slow motion, then she has to lose her top in the pool.”

“Really?” Will fought off an urge to laugh. Lauren losing her top in the pool would be interesting, any guy would admit, but there were still problems. “Whatever happens at the end of the dive, Mr Amato, if you want a civilian to dive realistically from ten metres you have to tell them, I dunno, a year in advance so they can practice. At this short notice best you could manage is for a couple of the lifeguards here to throw her off head first...”

Several of the group chuckled.

“Hey!” said Lauren, although she was also amused.

“.. But I don’t think that’s going to get the effect you’re looking for. As it is, that’s not so much a platform you’ve got there but a health and safety issue, especially for an untrained diver. At the least, the insurance guys will be asking questions.” At the mention of ‘insurance’ Amato, who looked as if he was going to explode, visibly deflated. “Why ten metres anyway? Why not three metres and CGI it?”

“How much is three metres?” asked Lauren anxiously.

Will extended his arm above his head.

“Well, okay,” she said timorously, “I could try.”

“Can we do that?” Amato asked of a heavily tattooed long haired man in shorts, singlet and sandals who had been standing to one side. Will thought he looked like a middle-aged surfer who had wandered onto the set, but he was the film’s photographic director.

“I’ll talk with the effects guys,” said the photographic director. He had a South African accent. “If she dives from a couple of metres up realistically we should be able to work something.”

“What about that platform over there?” said Will, pointing to a broad wooden structure with a ladder leading up to it that seemed to have been pushed to one side. “That’s what, two and a half?”

“About that,” said the Aussie lifeguard.

“Get rid of the ten metres,” said Will, “and fix that here. Is it high enough?”

“May do,” said the photographic director, who was called Hamilton, “but I gotta ask.”

“I think it’s adjustable anyway,” said Will. He turned to Amato. “If you want me to get Lauren here to dive then I can spare a day or so to coach her. It’s not mainly what I was trained in but we’re not talking competition standard here. One of the lifeguards could do it.”

The director muttered and stamped his feet and then growled “you do it”. He spoke to an assistant. “Put him on payroll for two days.” Then snarled at Lauren. “You should know how to dive.”

The star started visibly.

“Mr Amato this isn’t helping,” said Will.

“We’ve got other scenes set up at the second tank,” said Hamilton.

Amato stalked off.

The photographic director stayed behind for a moment. “Good you stood up to him. He’s crazy but he can be argued with, sometimes.” He left.

“I’ve been telling him all that stuff,” said the Aussie lifeguard. “Ms Chalmers was saying you were US national team for a while.”

“I was,” said Will, “but not for very long. Swimming stopped being fun when I was on it.”

The lifeguard also departed. The assistant took Will’s details and left, finally leaving the writer alone with bikini goddess Lauren.

“You’re here with Clarise?” she said.

“Staying with her and I also work for her,” said Will. “This is an unexpected development.”

“I have a confession to make, I can’t dive at all.”

“You have a problem with diving or just never tried it?”

“Never really tried it. If I wanted to get into a pool I’ve just jumped in. Diving is something guys do.”

In fact, Lauren was a fun-loving, good natured mid-western girl who had not seen a beach until she sent in an audition tape to Sports Illustrated and got packed off to the Turks and Caicos Islands near Haiti and the Dominion Republic for her rookie photo shoot for the swimsuit issue. Then an agent discovered that, with a little training, Lauren could act well enough for movies and managed to get her the role of the movie’s bad girl who wants to steal the boyfriend of Meghan’s character, thereby upsetting her sufficiently to handicap the star’s national volleyball championship team. As all those involved in the film agreed it was not Shakespeare.

“Diving is like jumping just head first,” said Will. “Let’s start small and try from the side of the pool first.”

“Here?”

“Yep! If that’s too high, crouch down and roll forward. Put on goggles. We’ll be here a little while.”

By the time Meghan came by with Mia during a pause in the shooting on the second tank, to see what was happening with her boyfriend and the bikini goddess, Lauren had progressed to reasonably graceful dives off a pool-side plastic chair held steady by Will.

“Hi Clarise, Mia,” said Lauren, cheerfully, when she resurfaced. “Will’s really been helping me.”

Will told Meghan what happened. “You’re right about your director – he’s crazy.”

“Don’t get me started on him,” she said.

By that time a crew of Australian film hands had cleared away the ten metre diving board and replaced it with the much broader and far lower platform that Will had requested, although that last part of the work seemed to take longer than strictly necessary with the crew doing their best to check out Lauren as she dived, without seeming to check her out. When Meghan arrived, still wearing the black bikini she would have on for most of the film and a token filmy shirt to indicate she was off duty, however, they forgot what they were doing to the point of almost allowing the platform to fall into the pool right top off Lauren. Will had to intervene.

“Concentrate guys,” he said, grabbing the platform before it toppled. They pushed it upright and into place so that the lip jutted out over the water. “Tell you what, anchor this properly and hang around for a minute or two. We’ll need an audience to cheer Lauren on cue.”

That made them finish the job.

“Now Lauren,” said Will. “While we’ve got people watching let’s try the higher platform. The one you have to dive from.”

“Hmmm! Well, okay.”

Will led the way up the ladder and onto the platform. The pool’s surface did not seem so far away as it would have for a ten metre dive, but it was still far enough for someone not used to diving.

“Everyone has to cheer Lauren when she dives,” declared Will. “Lauren, it doesn’t have to be pretty the first time just head first and arms extended as you were doing. We’ll work on style later. For the moment it’s about diving.”

“I’m meant to dive?” she said eyeing the water.

Will was not aware, until the film was being assembled in its final form, that the second unit’s camera at the far end of the pool had zoomed in on himself and Lauren as he coached her, and a directional microphone had been aimed at them.

“That’s right you’re diving,” said Will. “Remember you’re the evil person of the film.”

“Right! Right! I’m evil,” said Lauren, uncertainly.

“You’re trying to steal a rival’s boyfriend; you tell girlfriends that they’re fat.”

“I do?” said Lauren, looking at Will in astonishment, “that’s... that’s really evil.”

“That’s ‘cause you’re an evil person who wants to win the volleyball championship for her team by nasty tricks while telling girlfriends that they’re fat.”

“You’re right I’m evil,” said Lauren more determinedly, getting ready to dive.

“And do you know what evil people do?” said Will, raising his arms in his best imitation of a television evangelist inspiring a congregation, “they dive”.

“You’re right, they dive.” Then with a decidedly un-evil squeal, Lauren launched herself forward and went into the water, more or less head-first with her arms out. The scratch audience cheered. Will laughed.

“What a business,” he said.

The scene was later put into the credits, with Will’s reluctant agreement, along with a subtitle saying who Will was and that Lauren was learning to dive for the film, along with a couple

of other outtakes to give the quite erroneous impression that the cast and crew had a lot of fun while making the movie, instead of the miserable reality of dealing with a monster of a director.

Two days of coaching became five days of work including messing around with bikini tops to make them come off with apparent spontaneity after a dive. Even for a strapless top the procedures proved far from simple, at least not for the effect that the mercurial Amato wanted, but eventually they succeeded.

“I’m sure you’ll understand when I say this,” said Will to Lauren, as they collapsed by the side of the pool after Amato finally declared himself to be satisfied, “but I’m so over getting your top off in a pool.”

Hamilton and the first assistant director, Hans, a tall, blonde, Aryan-type with whom he had bonded over a mutual dislike of Amato also collapsed nearby and nodded sadly.

“Will I do understand,” said Lauren. “I’ll say right here that I’m scarred by all of this. When I meet the guy of my dreams and he wants to take my top off, I’m going to have this bad reaction and reject him out of hand. My love life is ruined.”

This was passed onto Meghan who offered to help Will heal by letting him take her top off which he did. The by-play also resulted in Meghan being questioned about Will by Lauren and a stuntwoman while they were waiting for one of the volleyball scenes to be set up.

“What us single girls want to know, Ms Chalmers,” said the stuntwoman, “is where did you meet Will?”

“Yeah,” said Lauren. “Will’s sweet, helpful and fun to work with, not to mention tall and hot. He also seems supportive. He’s with you in the hotel. You don’t get many guys like that on the dating scene.”

“We met as plus ones for other people in a Hollywood bar,” said Meghan, amused, “and I rang him the next day, ‘cause he made comments about things that were causing me trouble at the time and I wanted to hire him as a consultant. But I was so down on telling him that I was not romantically interested in him he wouldn’t even comment on what I was wearing for months. I was with Robin Hawke at the time.”

“Who proved to be a total jerk,” said Lauren.

“Yep,” said Meghan. “Anyway Will was around for months before anything happened, and he’s still working for me. He also does his own stuff, but a lot of that’s writing which he can do anywhere.”

“Maybe I can hire a boyfriend?” said Lauren. “Are they expensive?”

“Not Will. Robin cost me a lot of money until I stopped investing in his crazy schemes.”

That week Meghan and Will went to one of Surfers Paradise’s top restaurants with Hans and his partner, a pretty English girl and aspiring actress Ella who was visiting Hans for a few days and was over-awed to meet Clarise Chalmers.

“You know, the other girls on the film want to have Will’s babies,” said Meghan, over dinner.

“Yeah, right, that’s what they say,” said Will. “I’ve been down that road before and it’s all female bravado. If I try doing anything about this talk, it’d be ‘*you animal!*’ ‘*What’s the problem,*’ I’d say. Then they’d say, ‘*Why don’t you talk to me first.*’ ”

“Yeah, talking,” said Ella.

“We’d been talking all evening. So I’d say, *‘what did you want me to do, bring a thesaurus’*, then I’d do something really crass like look at my watch. Which I can say, right here, does seem to be a mood killer for the girl.”

“Oh you didn’t look at your watch, Will,” said Meghan, giggling.

“There are time and achievement goals to be met,” said Will.

“A guy has a schedule to keep,” said Hans.

With such idle conversation, a discussion of the rich saga of getting Lauren to lose her top in the pool plus some bagging of Amato, the evening passed pleasantly enough. On the weekend Will and Meghan drove up to Brisbane and wandered around the state capital’s central business district with a local bodyguard in discreet attendance. Meghan was recognised but the locals mostly contended themselves with waving and asking for the occasional selfie. A news photographer also turned up and caught Will in the background, although he was labelled as entourage. One result of this was that Will’s mother, Mrs Isla Moreland, called to find out why her son, whom she had not heard from for some weeks, was in Australia.

“Why did Clarise Chalmers drag you all the way over there?” she said. “I thought you were just one of a big staff.”

“Sometimes she brings people so she can push them around,” said Will, who was not ready to tell his own family about recent developments, “and I ended up helping out with the film.”

This led to an explanation of the saga of Lauren’s top which amused Mrs Moreland, and the revelation that Will was a sort of fashion brand liaison for the star made her laugh outright. In all, she was sufficiently diverted not to probe any further about what Will was doing in Australia, although she later thought that she was not being told everything. A few days after that, Amato’s antics led to one of the assistant directors walking out and Will was reluctantly dragged back to the project.

“Do you know what an assistant director does, Will?” asked Hans, doing his best to be stern.

“He slavishly obeys the first assistant director and the photographic director?” guessed Will.

“His answer works for me,” said Hamilton.

As it happened on that project, Will’s job as a very junior assistant – he ranked under Jake – was mainly about rounding up the film’s male and female volleyball teams, herding them towards the make-up people and then onto the sand courts. This occasionally included Meghan who had to be coached in volleyball, this time by sport champions, although a stunt double was used for any shot that required skill. Will, who had played the sport, was of some assistance in dramatising the shots, and often interceded with Amato when he started bullying cast members. His efforts, appreciated by the cast members, were helped by the fact that he didn’t care if he was sacked.

In the midst of this, Meghan was scheduled to shoot a steamy sex scene with her screen boyfriend, hunky Czech swimming star Jakub Beran, as they reconciled following the attempted seduction by Lauren’s character. All the cast girls were drooling over Jakub, who was engaged to a beautiful Czech model, but the guys who knew him detested the star as an arrogant piece of work. Will had wondered how he could cope with seeing Meghan at least semi-naked in bed with Jakub. However, Meghan solved the dilemma by banning Will from the set for those scenes.

“I have to concentrate on acting passionate and I can’t do that with you around,” she said. “Not after you ambushed me in the pool that time. You’d be too distracting.”

Will suspected that he was being given a compliment but that still meant he was free for a day or so and was happy to take up an invitation from Lauren, and minor co-stars, Christian and Molly who were not needed on the set that day, to mess about in Surfers Paradise proper which included a visit to a video arcade, and its competitive driving machines, lunch and checking out a beach side street market.

Molly happened to tell Mia about this idle, fun day who told Meghan on her way back from the shoot. The star then asked Will about his day on the town.

“Sure, while you’ve been getting passionate with your hunky screen boyfriend, I’ve been hanging out with some friends,” said Will. “You banned me from the set, remember?”

“Those scenes are a pain to do,” said Meghan. “I’ve been slaving away on set, not even getting topless this time, while you’ve been ignoring my work in favour of having lunch with my hot co-stars.”

“As a group, sure, along with Christian who has an interest in Lauren. The girls helped me in one way, however, by choosing a pendant for you from a market.” Will produced the pendant for Meghan to inspect. “It’s a keepsake. A couple of years from now when you’re going through your jewellery and find this, you’ll ask Mia about it and she’ll say, ‘don’t you remember, that writer you dated for a while gave it to you before you fell in love with a hunky co-star’. And you’ll say, ‘oh yes, now what was his name?’”

“That’s terrible dialogue Will,” said Meghan. “I would never say such things. But it is sweet, put it on.”

“You might thank Molly and Lauren who consulted extensively on the choice,” said Will, as he hung it around her neck, “and remember it has another use. When you’re disgusted with me for whatever reason, you can rip it off and fling it at me. That’s more dramatic than simply firing me. It’s a multi-use object.”

Meghan, who had been given diamonds by admirers, often wore the pendant when she was not being a super star, telling friends and her mother who commented on the “sweet pendant” that Will had bought it for her as a keepsake – an explanation which Mrs Kowalski noted with interest.

In the meantime, Meghan having been mollified by the pendant she and Will settled down for their routine of taking dinner in. This meant that Meghan would eat a bowl of a salad kit sold through the supermarkets which Will mixed for her, plus pieces from the takeaway meal which Will ordered through the hotel in preference to the room service menu.

To eat this they pulled a sofa cushion onto the floor in front of the television and sat on that, Will with his back to the couch and Meghan sitting between Will’s legs and leaning back on him, while they watched a streaming service movie.

Will tempted Meghan with chicken nuggets.

“You are evil, Will Moreland! Evil!” she said, as she took one. “I want to try that other sauce please...”

The doorbell rang.

“Are we expecting anyone?”

Meghan shook her head. Will got up and opened the door to find Meghan's co-star Jakob outside, holding flowers. His face fell when he saw Will.

"I thought this is Clarise's room – Will is it," said the star. His English was excellent, although he still spoke with a slight accent.

"It is her suite as well as mine," said Will, then called "Meghan honey! Someone for you." Meghan came to the door.

"Jakob, what are you doing here?" she said. "There were no plans to meet."

"I just thought," said Jakob, giving her the flowers, "that we sort of connected today."

"Did you give him your room number?" asked Will of Meghan.

"No, I never give the room number unless necessary."

"That's what I thought," said Will, then turned back to Jakob. "So how did you get the room number?"

Despite his colossal ego, the star was beginning to realise he'd completely misread Meghan's attitude to him.

"One of my staff got it. He might have paid someone ..."

"I see," said Will, putting his arm around Meghan to remove any doubt about the relationship between them.

"I did not know you two were together," Jakob said.

"Maybe it's not generally known," said Will. In fact, the connection was well known but Jakob had managed to completely miss all the gossip and failed to take the basic precaution of checking with someone, anyone, beforehand about his co-star's availability.

"Can we ... offer you coffee?" said Meghan, flustered.

"We were just in the middle of dinner, and Mr Beran does not have an appointment," said Will firmly. "Go back to the film, I'll be there in a moment."

After Meghan had left Will said, "there's no need for anyone to refer to this meeting ever again or say anything about it." Jakob nodded. "And we can all meet later as good friends." The star nodded again. "In the meantime perhaps you could spend this evening catching up with friends. Maybe you could call your fiancé? I'm sure she'd love to hear from you."

With that, Will closed the door gently and went back to dinner. He later told Meghan that she, especially, should not offer unexpected visitors coffee like that, whether she knew them or not.

"Guys are basically evil and will take advantage," he said. "If they turn up unexpectedly don't offer them coffee and don't invite them in."

Meghan, however, barely listened.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

When the time came to fly back from Australia to the US and immediately on to a location in the Canadian forests for Meghan's role as an Alien trying to rescue her brother from imprisonment on Earth, the star and her entourage did so on a full-sized commercial jet. The

producers had done a deal with a concert tour promoter to hire an aircraft known as an Airbus A-380-800 to bring back the US members of Volley's cast and crew along with the personnel of a major band tour, plus the US members of a live musical remake of a popular film – a form of entertainment Will never understood.

This meant Meghan and Will sat together in two first class seats, in which it was possible to sleep while Mia and Jake made do with a still comfortable plus economy seat further back in the plane. An advantage of this arrangement was that the journey back promised to be considerably livelier than the trip in the private jet. There were disadvantages, however, one of which Will discovered when he came back to his seat after a visit to the bathroom to find the world-famous rock musician Bo Benjamin in his seat, fresh from his Australian tour, talking animatedly with Meghan.

“Another one,” he thought.

Will had never cared for the man's music, but a lot of people did. Bo Benjamin had more gold grammies and hit songs to his credit than most people had hot dinners in a month. Although the singer's hits were now less frequent and his many years on top were beginning to tell in the erosion of stunning looks that mesmerised teenage girls everywhere, and a slight greying of his flowing dark hair. Despite his years, Benjamin maintained a figure that allowed him to get away with wearing black leather pants and a black shirt with a short, black jacket. Okay, he was a rocker, Will got it. But the rocker was in his seat.

“Pardon me, Mr Benjamin..” he said.

“No autographs,” said the singer, and went back to talking to Meghan.

“But it's Will's seat,” she said.

“Huh!” said Benjamin, but he did not look around.

The singer's bodyguard – a man so large that his head seemed to brush the cabin roof - who had been standing back, got involved. “Step back, sir. No autographs.”

“Your boss is in my seat,” said Will. This made the bodyguard pause. He leant forward and spoke over the singer. “Meg, why don't you introduce me to your friend?”

“Oh yes, Bo this is my friend Will.”

Benjamin finally looked around. “I'm talking to Clarise here,” he said, but before he could stop himself he took the hand Will offered to him. The writer gripped that hand, firmly grabbed Benjamin's shoulder with his other hand, ignored the musician's squawk of “no touching man”, and bodily pulled the rocker out of his seat, turning him so that the singer's back was to his bodyguard who was about to intervene.

“If you want to keep talking to your friend, Meghan,” said Will. “Why not sit in this seat. I'll take yours.”

Meghan, taken aback and somewhat amused by Will's actions, nodded and smiled.

“Incidentally, what happened to my computer?”

This was not a laptop but a more powerful system with a separate processor box which was still light and compact enough to be carried in Will's shoulder bag. He had left it set up on his serving tray.

“In here, sir,” said the bodyguard and he opened an overhead locker, while Bo Benjamin looked on in baffled disapproval.

Will glared at the bodyguard just as one of the attendants came up.

“Is everything alright here?” she asked.

“Everything’s fine,” said Will. “Just some confusion. Mr Benjamin was getting out of my seat and giving me back my computer, which was taken away for some reason.”

The attendant left and Will set himself up again in Meghan’s seat, doing his best to ignore the conversation between his girlfriend and a rock star. He had some work to finish off, both his and Meghan’s, before the in-flight dinner. After a few minutes, Meghan turned to him.

“They’re having a gathering down by one of the coffee areas,” she said. “Some of the headliners I’d like to meet. Do you want to come?”

“They don’t want to talk to me at all,” Will said. “And that Benjamin guy might be sore at me. You go and I’ll finish off some work here. Tell you what...” He called to a passing hostess. “Excuse me, when is dinner to be served?”

“About an hour, sir.”

“Okay come back in an hour. I will insist on dinner together.”

“Sure,” she said cheerfully and left.

All Will knew of the party was the hum of conversation and occasional laughter which he found easy to ignore. About half an hour later, after he had just about finished all that had to be done, the same attendant who had asked if everything was alright before, a pretty girl with short, dark hair, came to his seat.

“Excuse me, sir,” she whispered. “Ms Chalmers has asked that you come and get her. I think she’s feeling uncomfortable with the company she has.”

“Oh right,” said Will, dumping the computer on his seat and getting out. He found a merry party behind the port side window row of seats but with Meg firmly wedged between Benjamin and another of the singer’s band members. Will thought he was the drummer. The bodyguard tried to head him off but Will side stepped, called “Meg” and held out his hand.

“My ride,” said Meghan, grabbing Will’s hand.

The writer pulled and, with some effort Meghan came free. The writer realised that both men had their arms around Meghan.

“Gentlemen, groping is for old men,” said Will and turned, ignoring a decidedly unfriendly response from the drummer.

“Lauren!” he said, spotting the film co-star “and, thank heaven, you have your top on”.

Lauren rolled her eyes, “I’m never going to live that down am I?”

“Don’t worry, I can keep the references up for years yet,” said Will. “Meghan, say goodbye to the nice gentlemen.”

“Goodbye nice gentlemen.”

As they walked off, Will heard someone say, “you didn’t tell me her boyfriend was on the plane”.

“They’ve been sitting together the whole trip,” said a woman’s voice. “And it was obvious she asked that attendant to tell him to come and get her.”

“Why did you need me to drag you out from the two gropers?” asked Will as they walked back, holding hands. “You could have told them to stop it and levered yourself out.”

“Bo is still a major celebrity, bigger than me, and I didn’t want to cause any direct offence.”

“Better to have your horrible boyfriend do the jealous thing and drag you away, instead of making it clear you can’t stand his arse.”

She nodded.

“It is better to be clear about this and tell him he’s a filthy groper, rather than have him maintain illusions,” said Will. “He’s a guy, he’s hopeful.”

She shrugged and half smiled. “We did have a connection once.”

“With Benjamin?”

Meghan nodded. “A few years back before I was famous, and it didn’t last very long. I didn’t plan it but the connection also helped boost my image back then.”

“I’d have preferred not to have been told that I think,” said Will. “But no matter. Would I have liked any of your past boyfriends?”

“Maybe the one in college who got me to watch the Star Wars films.”

“Ah, yes! I must meet him sometime so we can compare notes.”

“What would you compare notes about?” asked Meghan, raising one eyebrow.

“The Star Wars film franchise of course,” said Will, in mock surprise. “Heaps of material is still being produced. What else would we talk about?”

Meghan rolled her eyes but had to laugh and was even impressed. Will had extricated her without causing a scene and, instead of becoming jealous over ex-boyfriends, had provided her with an amusing story. She could tell friends and her mother about Will comparing notes on Star Wars with her college boyfriend instead of her, complete with rolling of eyes. Will was considerably easier to deal with than many other men she had known, she decided. Although the writer did not know it, high above the Pacific, he had passed a test.

A few hours later Will was dozing in his seat with Meghan asleep, curled up so that her head was on a pillow on his shoulder, clutching his arm – a comforting way to sleep on a plane, she had found – covered by a single airline blanket. Will woke to find Benjamin’s giant bodyguard leaning over him, about to shake Meghan awake.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he whispered indignantly, pushing the man’s hand away. The rest of the plane was also sleeping.

The bodyguard drew back.

“The boss wanted to invite Ms Chalmers to a party.”

“What now?”

“No, his hotel in New York, when we land.”

“We’re going straight onto a shoot in Canada. I will inform Ms Chalmers when she wakes up. Here..” with difficulty, Will took out his wallet while trying not to disturb Meghan and extracted a business card “.. that’s the only contact number I can give out. Send a text, I’ll make sure she gets it. Now go away.”

The bodyguard duly vanished.

When Meghan awoke and was told of the night's adventures she regretted having to miss out on the party in a way that made Will apprehensive, but then he thought that with any luck he would not see Benjamin again.

For the shoot in Canada, rather than take everyone back to hotels each night, the producers opted for a small town of caravans and motorhomes with catered meals. Every day most of the population of this small town would disappear into the surrounding forest leaving Will and assorted hangers-on, mostly the female partners of the cast and crew to their own devices.

Will had to politely decline some of the activities these other hangers-on got up to in order to get his own work done, but went on a few walks of exploration and got involved in games of Monopoly. Although he had breakfast with Meghan, when everyone arrived back from the day's shooting she was often so surrounded by men that Will did not try to join her for dinner. Instead, he ignored men flirting with Meghan, as he now always did to the star's amusement in favour of activities with new friends among the cast, crew and partners of the trailer-park city.

One day, when the star was chatting with the various men paying court to her she looked over to see Will in some sort of game with those other. One man would approach three girls and say something, and the girls would then each hold up a card with a number on it.

"What were you doing with the others at dinner?" she asked Will when they got back to their own luxury caravan.

"I organised a game of pick-up. The guys had to approach a panel of three girls and hand them a line as if he was trying to pick them up at a bar. They'd then give him a score – one to ten for each girl. A way to pass the time."

"I see," said Meghan. "Wait, I saw you approach them too – what was your pick up line, Will Moreland?"

"I said, 'excuse me, ladies, can you settle a discussion I'm having with some friends. In the Harry Potter series should Hermione have ended up with Ron, or should she have married Harry?'"

"Hmmm – have you ever actually used that line?"

"Picking up girls in bars is not my style, but I figure that even if the girls aren't interested or waiting for boyfriends or whatever, they might at least reply. A lot of girls say Hermione should have connected with Harry. Anyway, it got me a twenty two out of thirty."

"Did anyone get better?"

"That co-star of yours Michael Mellon, big, pretty and famous. He went in there and said 'hey' and they all gave him ten out of ten. There I am working my butt off to think of something interesting to say, and he rocks up and says 'hey' and he gets a better score."

"Yeah," said Meghan, laughing, "who cares what they say provided they look good – even if Hermione should have married Harry."

While he was in Canada, Will was called by what might generously be called his own agent – an offsider of Stella Bullingham. Meghan's agent was now doing well enough to afford an office suite and hire apprentices, one of whom negotiated the pay for Will's stint as an assistant director with the producers of Volley as something 'easy' for her to do. Now this apprentice agent, Sage, asked Will if had any of the video files from the film.

"I haven't got any of the files myself. Why? What do you need them for?"

“There’s been a huge problem, the director Mr Amato deleted them all just before he was murdered...”

“What? Murdered? Personally, I’m not surprised but when was this? Do the police know who did it?”

“Body discovered this morning. The word on the gossip sites is that he was shot by his girlfriend’s husband,” said Sage.

Will laughed. “Okay,” he said after a moment. “It’s not right to laugh over someone’s death and I’m sorry for his family and all that, but I detested the man. And now the producers can’t find the video files of this film they’ve got so many millions invested in?”

“Amato deleted all the files and all the backups saying that the project was an artistic crime,” said Sage.

“For once I agree with the man,” said Will. “The film is trash but it’s the sort of trash that makes people pay for theatre tickets, so I also see the producers’ point of view. Why don’t they try the site office in Australia? I seem to recall they had a policy of backing up everything.”

That comment resulted in Will spending some more time on the phone – at least the remote site had cell phone coverage - tracking down the site office manager in Australia, with whom he had some dealings, and then telling a relieved executive at the producer’s office that a copy of the video files for Volley still existed. As Hans was next in chain of directorial command, Will suggested that they give the job of editing and post-production to him, and thought no more about it. He did not see himself as an assistant director, but as a writer, preferably of trashy military SF, although he was increasingly being diverted from that path.

They finally left Canada and arrived back at Meghan-HQ after many weeks away. The housekeeper’s cat looked up from its usual position, laid out on a pool-side table, gave a plaintive “miaow” and went back to sleep.

“A rousing reception,” said Will.

The return to Meghan-HQ also raised the delicate question of whether Will should continue to rent his shared cockroach-central apartment or just stay with Meghan. Was that going too far, too soon?”

“It’s no business of mine if you have a room somewhere else, Mr Moreland,” said Meghan when Will mentioned this.

“Will I be allowed to put clothes in your wardrobe?” said Will. “There doesn’t seem to be a lot of space.”

In fact Meghan’s walk-in closet was bursting with clothes shoes and accessories.

“I can’t help where you put your clothes,” said Meghan, apparently determined to be difficult about this matter.

“What about my toothbrush? Is it allowed in the holder in your en-suite?”

“Now you’re bothering me about toothbrushes. An international star does not consider other people’s toothbrushes.”

“She does if it’s a man’s toothbrush in her en-suite.”

“Your toothbrushes are your concern, Mr Moreland.”

“Okay, let’s try it this way, suppose that it was there. Would you ask me to take it away or would you throw it into the trash?”

“It depends on the toothbrush,” said Meghan. “If it’s still in good condition why would I throw it away? Anyway, I just said it’s your concern where your toothbrush happens to be.”

“Then I can stop paying rent elsewhere and move in?”

Mia, who was close by, thought that Will needed some help. As she was sitting where Will could see her but the star could not, Mia nodded and gave the thumbs up. When Meghan noticed Will glancing over her shoulder and looked around, Mia abruptly busied herself with her laptop.

“Then moving here is seen as a cost saving on your part?” said Meghan settling back in her chair and crossing her arms.

“I can always pay rent here. I don’t want you to think of me as a freeloader.”

“Renting here is expensive.”

“That’s true,” said Will.

“You were lecturing me a while back about the rate of return on assets. This is an expensive piece of real estate. Rents also have to be set accordingly.”

“That’s also true, but if my expenses increase then I’d have to ask for a raise to cover the cost.”

“Hmmm!”

“In fact, why don’t you increase my pay enough to cover the rent and then deduct that amount before it gets to my account. I live here and get paid the same?”

Mia stifled a laugh; Meghan tried not to smile. Will said goodbye to his roomies, much to Pandora’s regret that she had been unable to snag Will for one of her single girlfriends and moved his belongings to Meghan’s house. By buying a large shoe rack to organise the star’s shoes he found a little space in her closet to put a small chest of draws. Hanging space was more difficult but Meghan eventually condescended to shift some clothes around to free up space, with the overflow going to a wardrobe in one of the spare bedrooms along with Will’s books. Prowling through this collection when Will was not there, Meghan found a naval uniform which she thought for a moment must be a film costume. Then she saw a scuba diving air tank and gear and recollected Will was in the navy reserve, attended weekly parades when he could and was talking about going on course for deep diving, whatever that was.

Life went on. Hans called to say that a few segments of *Volley* had not survived Amato’s purge and that, in any case, the film was not complete.

“Please tell me that Lauren’s pool shot survived,” said Will.

“First thing I checked and yes, it’s good,” said Hans. “Now we just need a film to go with that scene.”

After some discussion, they put together a pitch to the film’s producers to finish the film relatively cheaply using a back lot in LA and, as Will put it, “CGIing the shit out of it” to fit with the beach and interior scenes shot on a different continent. That meant Will was back to being an assistant director, but this time returning to Meghan’s house each day. From there he moved on to the main shoot for *Party Town Terror*, which had now grown to something like the size required for a film, with makeup and costume people, people paid to worry about continuity in the shots and

sound quality and others who moved props and background screens. There was even a director of photography who, like Hamilton on *Volley*, looked like an aging surfer who had wandered onto the set.

Then there were the principals, including Danni, with sunglasses-wearing bodyguard in tow, who wanted to know if Clarise was still angry with Will for not doing what she wanted.

“There have been developments since then,” said Will.

“I heard that you’re now not just staff who happens to use the pool,” she said.

“Well, no, Clarise seems to have suffered a lapse of judgment.”

“I’m sure she doesn’t see it as a lapse,” said Danni, “but I like that you’re not boasting – is she in town?”

“For now, but she’ll be doing scenes for another spy thriller in Miami soon. I’ll join her after this. How is your friend Mr Scranton doing? I see he’s still providing bodyguards.”

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t ask. He wants control of everything and it’s annoying.”

Will and Meghan attended the premiere performance of *New York Mystery* in New York, Los Angeles and London although Will did not feature in any of the publicity shots or red carpet walks, despite efforts by Meghan to get him into the limelight. The production process for the film might have been painful, if not fraught, but the film was successful enough for the premiers to get some publicity.

To Will’s surprise, Meghan agreed to attend a barbecue at Buck and Wilma’s place, which included Hap as well as Will’s former roommates Leo and Pan. Even more surprising, as far as Will was concerned, was that she got on well with this Comic Con type crowd who were over-awed at having a famous star in their midst. She bonded with Wilma, in particular, by sharing stories about Will. Later Wilma took Will to the garage office of Buckland Publishing to show him sketches she had done of children flying around in spaceships that were actually cardboard cartons.

“I figure they are playing at being spacemen and spacewomen with the cartons as their spaceships. I was thinking of turning these into a kid’s picture book but I need a story – words to go with the drawings.”

“Hmmm!” said Will. “You’re looking for a few hundred words tops that can be read as a bedtime story, right?”

“Yeah, bedtime,” said Wilma.

“Okay, I’ll think. How hard can it be?”

“What about you and Clarise Chalmers?” she said. “You’re living at her place now? How is that going?”

“Seems to be okay.”

“You going to buy another ring?”

“After what happened with Vi I’m a cautious man. I’d want to be sure of my ground before I do anything like that.”

“That’s good Will,” said Wilma. “Check first, then buy rings.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Organising the Mia-Jake wedding at such short notice was considerably simplified by Meghan volunteering to host both the ceremony and the reception in her house and pay for the catering as her wedding present to the couple. Will was handed the gig of Master of Ceremonies, along with the job of making sure guests did not fall into the pool. There were speeches, food served at tables set outside, dancing in the dining room cleared out for the occasion to music from a hired DJ, and much else that went with a wedding.

This ceremony was also the first time either Meghan or Will had met Emma's boyfriend, the much-storied Josh, a good-looking bar tender at one of Hollywood's swankier hotels, and neither approved of him. Meghan found him to be sleazy, making remarks about her film scenes that she thought best not to repeat to either Emma or Will. She excused herself and walked away. Will found him to be surly and aggressive. He excused himself and walked away. They both agreed later that Emma could do better for herself but when it came time for the happy couple to leave and Mia tossed her bouquet, Emma caught it and then looked meaningfully at Josh, who looked away.

That Sunday, however, Will had to leave for his Navy deep diver training course at a navy centre in Florida without the question of an addition to Meghan's entourage having been settled. They had gotten as far as a short list of candidates whose CVs were piled on Meghan's desk, but the star had to go to a shoot in Canada within days, staying at a swanky hotel in Vancouver, leaving little time for employment interviews.

"The trouble is that these ladies and guys see getting on to your entourage as a major career move which includes travel and meeting big-time Hollywood celebrities," said Will, "so they're all impossibly well qualified for just sitting around here doing admin. Double degrees, even doctorates in the art of cinema."

"Really?" said Meghan, "I won't know what to talk to them about."

"Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to go with an agency," said Will. "But it's done now so pick one to hire on a per day rate like me and see if it works. If you hire a guy are you going to give him the same speech you gave me about how you have no romantic interest in him?"

"Maybe," said Meghan, straight-faced. "Depends on what's on offer. There may be someone cute. We could talk about art in film."

Will sighed. "That's great, I get warned off hard; this other guy gets hired straight away because he's hot and never mind whether he's any good."

"Speaking of people being hot, are there going to be cute Navy girls on this course?" asked Meghan.

"Not many on the diver's course but those that are 'll have trim figures," said Will. "I'll have to check them out."

"Ha!" said Meghan

"What about security while you're away? Are you taking George?"

"Maybe. The film site has security as does the hotel and the production company will get some ex-Canadian armed forces type for walking around if I want one," said Meghan, "but I can walk around the streets in daylight by myself. It has been known to happen."

“True but Toronto is too close to the US border. Be careful.”

“I always am, Mr Moreland,” said Meghan. “You’re going to join me the moment this course ends?”

“You bet! I’ll be worried about you falling for your handsome co-star.”

Meghan made a face. “He’s married and his wife will be with him.”

“He’s still a guy. That means he’s potentially evil and capable of anything. I’ll call every night.”

“You’d better, Will Moreland.”

Then Will was gone after a passionate parting scene Meghan thought would be worthy of any of her films and the house suddenly seemed empty and lonely. She told herself that the separation was just for a couple of weeks and that seeing Will again would be all the better for the temporary parting, but she had not realised, until he left, just how much Will was now a part of her life. Did he feel the same way about her? Meghan tried to put such thoughts out of her mind, including the big one about whether they would have a life together. She thought it would work but did Will think that and would he say anything?

“For heaven’s sake he hasn’t been gone one night and already you’re going crazy,” Meghan thought. She wasn’t about to call Mia on her honeymoon. In any case, her assistant was going on a walking tour of the Rockies - not hiking as Meghan understood it but walking between hotels – but that still meant that cell phone reception would be uncertain in some places.

Will called and they talked for half an hour before he had to go to some pre-course get-to-know-everyone dinner. Meghan ordered takeaways and then called Misty, who had been at the wedding, to complain about Will being absent.

Misty listened for a time then said: “now are you going to officially acknowledge that you’re in love with Will?”

Meghan sighed. She had not put it quite that way to herself but the stark fact was there. “Yes, I’m in love with Will.”

“You’re acknowledged as one of the most desirable women in Hollywood and you’ve fallen for a nerd,” Misty said.

“It’s sad isn’t it,” said Meghan, echoing Will.

“He’s a hot, sweet, easy to get on with nerd who looks good in a pool,” said Misty. “The sex side is good?”

“No complaints there.”

“What about getting jealous over all the men paying attention to you? Robin used to get jealous.”

“Will pays zero attention to other guys talking to me unless I say something, or the man is sitting in his seat,” said Meghan. “I’m filming sex scenes and I find that he’s been out to lunch with my co-stars or has organised a game of ‘pick-up’ with others.”

“That’s way more comfortable than Robin getting jealous,” said Misty, “not to mention more practical. He told me that if he started fights with every man that spoke to you he’d be fighting half of LA.”

“There is that,” said Meghan. “His way works.”

“There you go, although the fact remains that he is a nerd – a writer with strange theories about Star Wars. I got lectured about Jedi Knights at the wedding.”

“Oh Nooooo!”

“You don’t want to know about the real story of the Jedi Knights.”

“I wasn’t going to ask,” said the star.

“But that stuff isn’t a deal breaker,” said Misty. “If he starts talking about Star Wars you say, ‘yes dear’ and ignore him. Otherwise you two complement each other. You like the limelight; he doesn’t care for it. You make heaps of money but can get into trouble. Will helps you keep that money and fixes your troubles with a minimum of fuss.”

“Seems so,” admitted Meghan.

“Practice saying ‘yes dear’,” said Misty.

“Yes, dear.”

“Too much emotion,” said Misty. “You have to say it without being dismissive or encouraging. Try it again.”

“Yes, dear.”

“That’ll do for the moment,” said Misty, enjoying her role as relationship counsellor. “Now you’re going to have to take that extra step. You’ve had one wedding at that house; what about another?”

“Well..” said Meghan. She also had not thought in such terms, but now it seemed the obvious thing to do.

“This brings up the question of just how Will feels about you,” said Misty. “Have you two said anything to one another He bought you that keepsake, which is very sweet. But what’s been said?”

“Nothing really. He’s not a guy who talks much about that stuff.”

“Few straight guys do. But now that you’ve admitted to your own feelings, you can hint at them and see how he reacts. No need to push. You are already living together. If he doesn’t want the ceremony maybe leave it for a while. ”

“Hmmm!”

“Or maybe just ask him to marry you?”

“I’d prefer the traditional way if I can.”

Meghan and Misty kicked around the subject of Will for a while longer before Misty said she had an early call and Meghan went off to bed wondering what Will was doing.

The next morning, Emma came in late, clothes dishevelled, hair a mess, mascara running, collapsed into one of Meghan’s dining chairs and sobbed into the table.

“Darling whatever is the matter?” asked Meghan.

“Broke up with Josh,” she wailed.

“Oh, I’m so sorry..”

“Another girl..”

“Oh dear..”

The story that Meghan managed to piece together between wails was that Emma, sufficiently encouraged by catching the bouquet at Mia's wedding to have a relationship discussion with Josh, had the discussion blow up in her face. Josh revealed the existence of another woman in his life and demanded that Emma move out of their joint apartment to make way for her.

"The bastard," said Meghan. Emma nodded and then went back to wailing.

Meghan thought that maybe a full-on discussion with Will about their relationship was not such a good idea.

"Darling I'm so sorry about Josh but crying onto my dining table isn't going to help," she said. "Take one of the rooms upstairs for a few days, the far one. Go and lie down there for now. I'll get George to take you to your hotel to get your clothes. Also to your apartment. You still have things there?"

Emma nodded, then wailed again.

"Emma, darling, I'm sorry for your troubles but this is distracting, please go to the room. I'll send George there."

"I was to go with you," said Emma, between sobs.

"Maybe another time. I can't speak to people with you sobbing in a corner can I?"

Emma nodded then walked off, crying gently.

Back in her office, Meghan looked at the pile of CVs. Will had scribbled a note on a post-it note on top, which read: "when start? If Canada, current passport."

She flicked through the documents, eventually picking a Bella Griffin, who had a degree in fine arts from Oxford University in England and experience which included curating collections of historical objects for family trusts, and spells of private tutoring. None of that screamed "assistant" but then her job would mostly be reminding her boss of appointments, helping her get to them, screening calls and chatting. A call later and Bella presented herself at the house. She was a slight, sinewy woman in a dark blue coat and skirt with a white blouse perhaps a few years older than her would-be boss. She wore glasses, had dark hair cut short, and a permanent dimple in her chin that marred a pleasant face. She spoke with an English accent. Bella was between husbands, so she told Meghan, and as the last not yet divorced husband had been her boss she was also between jobs.

"Sounds like quite a story," said Meghan.

"A sad story," she said.

Will had said something like that when Meghan had hired him and that made the star hire Bella on the spot at a per day rate. If she worked out a more permanent arrangement was possible and she told Bella, as she had told Will, to call her Meghan.

"Thank you for the opportunity, Ms Cha – I mean, Meghan," said Bella. "Where do you want me to start?"

"Go and speak to the person you're filling in for, that's Emma. She's upstairs sobbing over breaking up with her boyfriend..."

"Goodness... a bad breakup?"

"The worst, for her. I met the boyfriend for the first time on Saturday and he's a good looking sleaze. She's better off without him. But for now, all she can do for now is sob. See what

you can get out of her about what I'm meant to be doing this week, although most of it is going to Canada to film more of this Alien Search series. Next week as well I think."

"I've seen some of it," said Bella. "The detective hunting for your character is a real honey."

"He is, but I don't get to do many scenes with him. I'm mainly doing exterior shots and a shower sex scene with my human protector in this episode."

"He's hot too," said Bella.

"But married. I'm doing another film in a couple of weeks but that's a space, science fiction thing which means mostly studio work in LA. I also have modelling and paid appearances to do. My agent's office will have the details. Here is her number." Meghan wrote it out. "Here is a number for George, a security guy I often use. Have him come and take Emma to her hotel and then back to her boyfriend's place to collect what she needs to live here for a time. She can hang out in the room she's in at least until she stops crying."

"Gotit," said Bella. "What room is Emma in?"

"To the right at the top of the stairs and follow the wailing," said Meghan.

Bella found Emma sobbing into a pillow but the heart-broken assistant was able to hand over a printout of Meghan's appointments for the next couple of weeks plus details of flights and hotels, given to her by Mia before the wedding.

"Does Ms Chalmers – Meghan have a boyfriend that I should know about?"

"Will," wailed Emma. "Swims, makes coffee."

"I see. A staff himbo?"

"Very nice," sobbed Emma.

"That's one seriously messed up lady," said Bella on returning to Meghan. "Can we get a couple of her friends in for girl time, especially when we're away? May not be good to leave her alone."

"That's not a bad idea," said Meghan. "When you've recovered from that visit and sorted out my schedule see if you can get any sense out of her about friends she can have to visit. I'll speak to Mrs Mendez – that's the housekeeper."

"And this friend of yours, Will. He's not around at the moment?"

"He lives here," said Meghan. "But is on a deep sea diving course in Florida at the moment. I expect him at the hotel towards the end of next week, maybe Friday. The hotel booking is in my legal name – Meghan Kowalski, as that doesn't attract attention – but a key card should be left in his name at reception."

"I'll see to it," said Bella making a note on the printout.

"For now I'll need a rehearsal partner," said the star, handing her new assistant a script.

Meghan and Bella went to the hotel in Canada, leaving Emma still sobbing at Casa Meghan. A dispute about who owned various items of furniture removed to a storage facility resulted in an unfriendly visit to the house from Josh which had to be dealt with by George. This meant the security man was left behind to ensure that Josh behaved himself. Meghan would rely on security at the hotel and on the production site if security was needed.

When Bella saw the hotel suite and met the cast members and director of the series *Alien Search* the novice assistant began to appreciate that she had lucked into a plumb job and began to scheme about how she could retain it, or at least snag a spot on Meghan's entourage. Maybe she could do something to manage the star's career? She did not know how to help with the film and modelling side of her boss's life, but what about relationships? A barista who could swim – as she thought of Will – did not seem suitable for someone of Clarise Chalmers' status. Rock stars and movie stars of the top rank should be competing for Meghan's affections. Why not trade up to one of those media stars and a big-time celebrity wedding with the star's hard-working assistant as a bridesmaid?

Bella hinted at this in the occasional discussions she had with Meghan, but this was hampered by the star's reluctance to say very much about personal matters to someone who was still very much a stranger and one who, despite the initial favourable impression, Meghan had decided that she did not particularly like. The two women differed on many matters.

Bella wanted Meghan to check out the Montreal night life and eligible men, with her loyal assistant in tow, when the star wanted to stay in and talk to Will on the phone. More annoyingly Bella was way too serious in monitoring Meghan's diet and exercise regimen. Will let her have the occasional nugget and challenged her to competitive tread mill races in the gym which he would win, but then Meghan would push him around. It was fun. Mia kidded the star into doing the work and would chat. Bella took everything seriously. It was irritating.

Meghan was not about to tell this annoying stranger how she felt about Will, especially as she was not sure how Will felt about her. However, she found Stella's game of "pick a husband" an amusing diversion while on set and helped lighten her assistant's grim outlook on life. This game consisted of Bella mentioning a particular star featured in a magazine she had picked up (Meghan also found her assistant's interest in the film gossip publications mildly annoying) and say said something like "he's really hot", Meghan would say "he's a nice guy" then add "his girlfriend is sweet", or "yeah, he's hot".

One of these publications mentioned mall billionaire James Scranton.

"What about him?" asked Bella. "He's rich enough for anyone."

"Met him; total sleaze," said Meghan.

This went on for a few days with Bella thinking that she was making progress in her quest when, in reality, her boss was not thinking of anyone but Will and beginning to tire of the husband game. Then on the Friday that Will was to be released from his course, there was a knock on the hotel suite door.

"Bella, have whoever it is wait," called Meghan. "I have to change."

Meghan was, in fact, still in her dressing gown – a charming, short, white silk gown that showed off her legs to excellent effect – and was reading an article in one of Bella's magazines about the loves of Misty Dawn. She was not due on set until the filming of a salacious shower scene scheduled for the afternoon. She heard Bella speak to someone at the door and thought that she should get up and go to the bedroom to put on clothes. She had taken a few steps when Bo Benjamin came into the room, followed by two gigantic bodyguards.

"My, this is fine," said Benjamin, eyes widening at the sight of Meghan.

As on the plane, he looked every inch the rock star with leather pants and vest, open black shirt, gold chain, still potent good looks and that masculine presence that made girls swoon worldwide. His two man security detail, on the other hand, looked as if they'd been cut from the same block of granite with the sculptor skipping on the necks, as well as dressed in the same dark suits and white shirts. Most of those who encountered the rock star had trouble telling the two bodyguards apart.

"Bo, good to see you," said the star automatically, "but I'm not dressed. Bella, I said to ask our guests to wait."

"But it's Bo Benjamin," trilled Bella. "It's such an honor."

"For me or for him?" asked Meghan, coolly. "Bo could still wait until I'm dressed."

"We're all friends here Clar," said Bo, grinning. Meghan was reminded of a shark, or perhaps a wolf. "I've got concerts in town and thought I'd drop in."

"I'm not friends with your security guys," said Meghan. "They can wait."

Bo dismissed his security detail with a wave and, not knowing where to go, the two men went into the suite's dining room, shutting the door.

"I was thinking of you the other day when I got these," said Bo, taking a paper packet out of his vest, which he unwrapped and put on the occasional table in front of the sofa to reveal sticks. Meghan had not touched this mild drug since being rescued by Will from the Los Angeles party and had not really missed it. But now that a few of the sticks had been placed in front of her by a man who had introduced her to the habit long ago, she was tempted. Shower scenes were hard work and Will, who would not approve at all, was still some hours away. Maybe she could be more relaxed before that afternoon's filming?

Bo vanished for a moment while Meghan took a stick, then reappeared with an opened bottle of white wine.

"You used to like this label," he said showing it to her.

"I don't remember," said Meghan squinting at the label and thinking that perhaps she needed glasses. "A few sips to relax can't hurt. Bo, I can spare you an hour for old time's sake then I've got to get dressed. My boyfriend is due in later and we're going out."

Bo paid no heed at all to Meghan's comment about Will's pending arrival. Instead he got two glasses filled them up at the suite's bar and lit a stick for Meghan.

"Meghan why don't I grab some coffee in one of the hotel shops," said Bella thinking that the two stars may want to be alone to connect. "I could come back in about an hour."

"Sure," said Meghan, forgetting Will's warnings about being left alone with men, particularly men who might think themselves entitled. Bella vanished.

Meghan took a sip of the wine – it was pleasant – and puffed on the stick. She thought that Bo was grinning at her in a way that reminded her of a wolf.

Not that far away, in fact in Montreal's main business district, Will was looking in the windows of jewellery stores wondering if he was making a fool of himself again. The diving course had finished early, as one of the instructors had fallen ill and another had been required elsewhere, without giving Will the qualification required for deep diving. He would have to return perhaps

later in the year. But that meant he was free to re-join Meghan early, meaning to surprise her, and perhaps do some shopping. He had never been to Montreal before but quickly discovered that it had an underground city filled with shops and a golden square mile and other places besides. Where was the best place to go? Should he really buy a ring off the shelf for a star like Clarise Chalmers? Should he buy a ring at all? Well, there was no need to confront the star straight away. Maybe he could hint around, or perhaps let her find the ring without realising that she was supposed to find it? He looked in another store and there, on display, was a ring that he thought she might like. His finances were in a lot better shape than they had been when he bought that ring for Violet. He went into the shop thinking that there was no harm in checking the ring size.

For Meghan space and time had been redefined. Ceilings and floor did not matter, she realised, and they vanished seemingly with a wave of her hand. Space was infinite and the stars that wheeled overhead were all hers. Everything had a soft glow, as if a particularly skilled lighting director had been at work on the set. Yes, that was it. Everything was really a movie set and they were all actors playing a part and what happened on a movie set didn't matter in real life. Now that was a profound thought. She could do what she wanted, or what the script demanded, and walk away at the end of shooting. It was all pretend anyway.

A small part of her mind warned her that the drug in the stick was far more potent than those she had been using and it had combined with something in the wine in a strange way, but the rest of her drug-addled consciousness dismissed such thoughts as unprofessional. Everything was a movie. What happened on set did not matter, particularly when the feeling of letting go was so pleasurable. She was aware of being lifted up by Bo, and thinking that was odd, of her dressing gown falling away – what did that matter? It was all part of the scene – and of being pressed against a desk; of Bo moving on her. She clung to him, to steady herself, as she had done in many scenes, but also wrapped her legs around him as she thought that was a nice touch the director would appreciate.

Neither she nor Bo heard the hotel door open and she did not see, her face being buried in Bo's neck, Will standing in the hallway dumbfounded before charging at the grappling couple. She heard Bo shout for his security team as he grabbed an old-fashioned letter opener that happened to be on the desk and thrust it at the on-rushing writer. Meghan looked down, saw the implement in Bo's hand, thought that it was part of the scene they were playing and also grabbed it, just as Will's full weight hit the couple, throwing them both off the desk to land painfully on the floor. Will had a moment to realise that something was sticking in his abdomen before the bodyguards intervened, tackling him and, in the process, smashing Will's head into the wall.

Everyone but Will, who had been knocked unconscious, picked themselves off the floor. Meghan was naked and apparently in some sort of drugged state but working for Bo Benjamin the bodyguards had become used to such sights.

"How did this guy get in here?" said one of the security men.

If Bo had looked at Will the singer might have recognised him as the guy who dragged him out of the airplane seat next to Meghan, but he did not. As far as he was concerned the body on the floor was just another stalker and a violent one. Neither of the bodyguards had been with Bo on the plane so they also did not recognise Will. They only knew that it was Ms Chalmers' suite.

“Get him out of here,” snapped Bo. “And talk to the hotel about security. Tell them I’m not happy.”

“Yes, boss,” said the senior man.

“He’s been stabbed,” said the other man, turning Will over. A huge blood stain was spreading over the front of his shirt and onto the tan writer jacket with padded elbows he had taken to wearing. “Doesn’t look so bad but better get him to a hospital.”

Meghan, reacting to a passing cloud she could see through the glass balcony door, giggled.

“I was defending myself,” snapped Benjamin. “Get rid of that letter opener I think it is and tell the police that we don’t know how that happened. Call the hotel people. Get him out of here and to a hospital.”

“You’ve got it, boss,” said the guards.

Benjamin carried Meghan off the suite’s main bedroom, the bodyguards carried Will out the door, passed the suitcase and shoulder bag Will had left in the suite entrance way without really noticing the items, and down to the lobby where the hotel staff hurriedly called an ambulance and the police.

A little later Bella returned to the suite to remind her boss it was time to get ready for the shoot to be confronted by two excited bodyguards the moment she opened the door.

“Oh it’s you,” said the senior guy. They told her what had happened. She was interested in the story about the intruder. She did not connect that intruder to Will, whom she had never met and was not due in for some time, or so she thought. Instead, she was astonished and gratified to hear that her boss had apparently connected very strongly with Bo Benjamin. Mr Benjamin had an entertainment industry stature that made him a worthy partner for Clarise Chalmers. The celebrity wedding of the century was one step closer with Himbo Will an irritant to be dealt with later. In the meantime, there was the problem of getting Meghan to the scheduled shooting for that day.

When the director’s assistant called to find out where the star had got to, Bella asked to see her boss. She found Meghan lying in bed beside Benjamin both apparently naked underneath the covers and talked to her while Benjamin spoke on his own mobile to what Bella supposed was an agent. The star acknowledged her assistant with a sleepy smile.

“Meghan, the people doing Alien Search called and they want you on set, are you going to get up?”

The star giggled. “Don’t want to. Want to stay here.”

It occurred to Bella then that the star was deeply stoned and maybe drunk as well, as there was an empty bottle of wine on her bedside table.

“There is also the question about what I tell Will.”

“Like Will,” she said, smiling. “Tell him what’s good.”

Bella tried a couple more questions but it had occurred to her that getting Meghan into a state fit for work that day would not be possible in any case and called the Alien Search people to tell them that. This eventually resulted in her speaking to the director, a gay Englishman called Liam, who had worked with Meghan before and knew her to be hard working and reliable.

“She’s basically excusing herself to have sex with Bo Benjamin?” said Liam, astonished.

Bella had not told him about Meghan also being stoned and drunk.

“Seems like they’ve really connected,” she said. “She’s sort of incommunicado right now. The moment she’s sensible I’ll get on the phone to you.”

Liam sighed. “Yeah, well, we can reschedule sort-of but streaming services are not like the movies. The schedules are way tighter. I don’t want to have to write her out of the series but that can happen unless she’s got a better excuse than rolling in the sack with her new boyfriend. What happened to Will, incidentally?” Liam had spoken to the writer a few times and liked him. “How did he take all this?”

“I’m still working on that. I haven’t seen him to tell him.”

“Poor lamb,” said Liam.

Bella was not looking forward to telling Will but he did not turn up that evening, although she waited in for him, trying not to listen to the sounds of Bo and Meghan, and unaware that Bo was all but ensuring that Meghan was kept high despite the star, in a muddled way, attempting to refuse the sticks.

The next day she walked twice through the suite’s foyer, nodding to one of Bo’s security guys who was always there, before she thought to ask about the bags that had not been moved.

“Not us,” said the guard. “I thought they were Ms Chalmers’ bags or yours.”

“No, not us,” said Bella. She flipped open the shoulder bag, saw that it had a computer and mobile phone. She also saw a ring case which she picked up and flipped open to briefly admire the ring inside. Then she picked up the phone, pressed the button at the bottom and the screen shot of Will and Meghan appeared. She knew Meghan, of course, and had to think for a moment about who the man was as she had only ever seen pictures of Will.

“Oh my god, Will was here,” she said, hand over her mouth.

“Who’s Will?” asked the guard.

“Her boyfriend, or the guy who was her boyfriend. When did these bags get dropped here?”

“I dunno,” said the guard.

“But was there anyone else here?”

“Just that intruder guy.”

“Did he look like that?” Bella showed the guard the phone’s cover picture.

“Yeah, that could be him.”

“You idiots, that was her boyfriend. He had a keycard left for him at the hotel reception. That’s why he was in the room.”

“He was attacking Mr Benjamin.”

“She was her boyfriend. He was probably just pulling them apart. You should have just held him rather than knocking him out.”

“Who knew,” said the bodyguard.

It took Bella a couple of hours and several calls to work out where Will had got to. He had been given a minor operation for the stab wound, then held overnight at the hospital to ensure there were no complications from being knocked unconscious before being transferred to a police station for questioning. She went in to tell Meghan what had happened and the star grinned at her. Bo, lying beside her on the bed and comparatively unaffected by the sticks they had both been smoking, was highly amused.

“Hear that Clar?” he said. “Your boyfriend didn’t realise you’d moved on and got stabbed and arrested.”

“Ish wonderful,” said Meghan.

It was left to Bella to go to the police station with Will’s bags and, after a brief explanation, was led straight through to an interview room where Will was being questioned by two Canadian detectives.

“Let’s go through this again,” Bella heard one detective say to Will. “You went to reception and picked up a key card for Ms Chalmers’ room.”

“Left for me by arrangement,” said Will. “Call the hotel.”

“Excuse me guys,” said the uniformed policeman escorting Bella. “You want to listen to this lady. She’s Clarise Chalmers’ assistant.”

“You must be Will,” said Bella. “I’m Bella.”

“Oh right, Meghan, I mean Clarise has spoken of you. Please tell these guys who I am?”

“Detectives this is Will, a member of Ms Chalmers’ staff,” said Bella. “There was a dreadful mix up at the hotel. Mr Benjamin’s bodyguards did not know who he was and thought he was attacking Mr Benjamin. If you call the hotel you’ll find that a Will Moreland was a guest at the hotel and was given a key card for the suite reserved for Megan Kowalski – Ms Chalmers legal name – at the front desk.”

“I see,” said the lead detective, surprised at Will’s sudden exoneration. “We’ll check but in the meantime, Mr Moreland, here is your passport and wallet back and an apology it seems. Sorry, man, we weren’t told any of this.”

“Forget it,” said Will. “I just want out. I see you’ve got my bags, Bella.”

“Then how come you got stabbed?” asked the second detective.

“In the confusion I ran into a knife – a letter opener on the desk in the living room - held by Benjamin and Chalmers.”

“Wild stuff,” said the senior detective. “Do you want to make a formal complaint?”

“No I don’t want to press charges, thank you,” said Will, stiffly.

“Let’s give you a hand with those bags,” said the junior detective getting up.

“Guys, guys, it’s okay,” said Will, irritated. “I understand you were just doing your job with the information you’d been given but let’s go our own ways. I’ve had a hard time of late.”

Will and Bella walked off down the corridor while the detectives hastily went in the other direction.

“Sorry it took so long to work out what had happened,” said Bella. Will was a himbo and history, as far as she was concerned, but she had some sympathy for discarded lovers and he was owed an apology. “I hope it wasn’t too bad.”

“I woke up handcuffed to a hospital bed.”

They reached the lift and Will held the doors open for a moment so that an elderly lady could get in – a routine act of courtesy that impressed Bella.

“You were operated on at the hospital?” she asked.

“The happy couple missed the intestines so all I really needed was stitching. They were more concerned that I arrived unconscious but as I didn’t seem to have concussion when I came too they just kept me overnight.”

They walked through the police station foyer.

“Is Meghan really with that Benjamin guy now?” he asked.

“Seems so,” said Bella. “I’m sorry Will. I asked her what I should tell you and she said to tell you whatever.”

“Huh! Really! Hard to believe I’d be dropped just like that after we’d been going so well, but they’re engaged already?”

“Engaged?” said Bella. “Who’s engaged?”

“Meghan and Benjamin. One of the nurses at the hospital told me this morning. News item on the Sidewalk Stars site. I really can’t believe she would do that.”

‘Um, well, a lot’s happened while you’ve been away.’

“Yeah, well, I guess it was all too good to be true. Should have known better after Violet. Doomed again, that’s me. Tell Meghan I’m sorry I couldn’t make her happy.”

He turned away from Bella, before the assistant could ask who Violet was, not wishing to show that his eyes were now wet. He walked off, thinking that he might as well just go to the airport.

In the taxi back to the hotel, Bella looked at the Sidewalk Stars site on her phone.

You heard it here first, the siren of the shower Clarise Chalmers and rock legend Bo Benjamin have declared that they are engaged. The pair rekindled an old love when Bo dropped in on Clarise in Toronto where she is filming the popular series Alien Search. Bo has declared he is “over the moon” about the engagement but few other details are available yet. Don’t worry folks we’ll keep you posted.

When Bella got back to the hotel Bo Benjamin had gone out and Meghan was sleeping, the remains of a stick in a saucer by her bed, and she went back to her room sorely puzzled. Something was amiss. In the middle of the night it occurred to her that Benjamin had called Meghan Clar, short for Clarise, rather than Meghan. Anyone who knew her called her Meghan or even Meg, but not her supposed fiancé. Then she recalled Will’s automatic kindness in holding the lift doors open for an old lady; Benjamin dismissing Will’s plight with contemptuous indifference and Meghan’s vacant answers to her questions. Uh oh!

Yet it was a good match and, potentially, a blockbuster wedding. That wedding would require considerable organisation by Ms Chalmers’ hard-working staff and that meant Bella would be kept on when Mia returned from her honeymoon, which would be soon, and when Emma recovered from her heartbreak. There was also the undoubted problem that if Meghan and Will ever connected again and started comparing notes, the star might take exception to Bella dumping Will on her behalf. The more Bella thought about it, the more she realised how much trouble she could get into. Then again, perhaps there was some genuine feeling between Meghan and Bo that needed time to develop.

During the night, when all was quiet, Bella got up and found Meghan's phone where she had left it in the suite's living room. She took it back to her room where she opened it – she had long known Meghan's passcode, simply by observing the star when she used her phone – and wrote a text to Will.

Sorry you had to hear about the engagement on the Sidewalk Stars site, Will, and I'm sorry Bella had to be the one to tell you it was all over. Stuff happens. Thanks for the good times. Meg.

Bella sent that, deleted a text Will had already sent asking the star what was happening along with a voice message, then blocked Will's phone number. After some fiddling around she then deleted the text she had sent and edited Will's number so that it gave a "number not in service" response. She returned the phone and went back to bed. That time she managed to sleep. Bella admitted to herself that her interference was nasty and certainly beneath her, but she thought that in the end all parties would eventually be better off. Even if Meghan did not end up with Bo she would have her pick of eminently eligible men. Will was hot and seemed very nice. He would find a nice girl in his own league and be much happier. It was the right thing to do.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

When Meghan woke up clear headed on Monday morning in a darkened hotel room the last thing she remembered with any clarity was that of Bo coming to visit and offering her a stick, which she had taken.

After that came a haze of memories of smoking the sticks and sometimes trying to refuse them, only for Bo one way or another getting her to take another. Alcohol was involved. Still disorientated, the star turned over in bed to find, to her horror, that she was lying next to Bo. Then she realised that, under the bed clothes, she was naked. Suddenly fully awake, albeit feeling sick and with a headache, she got up at once, exclaiming "Oh shit! Oh shit!" She put on the dressing gown she found on the floor – the same one she had been wearing when Bo had arrived – and ran out into the suite's living room calling for Bella. Her assistant appeared fully dressed, a piece of toast in hand.

"Oh hi!" she said. "Glad you're up. The director, Liam, was pissed at you missing the shoot on Friday but we can still make today."

"Missing Friday!" said Meghan horrified. "It's Saturday morning? Where's Will?"

"It's Monday morning," said Bella.

"WHAT! Where's Will? Does he know about this?"

"He was here on Friday and found you with Bo so yes, he knows." She took another bite of toast.

"Oh my god! Oh my god!" said Meghan face in her hands. "What happened? Where is he now?"

“Well, from what I can make out he saw you two together naked,” said Bella matter of factly, “you underneath him on the desk over there.”

“Oh my god!” exclaimed Meghan.

“He rushed you guys. Bo picked up one of those old fashioned letter openers on the desk – you were holding it too - and Will ran into it. Then the bodyguards rushed in and tackled him, knocking him out. He was taken to hospital then a police station and later released. I don’t know where he is now.”

Bella decided to leave out the fact that he had spoken to Will and that she had dumped him on Meghan’s behalf.

“I helped stab him? Where’s my phone?”

Bella picked up the device and handed it to Meghan. She used her contact list to call Will and got the “this number is no longer in service” response.

“Shit!” said Meghan flinging the phone onto the cushions. “I want to talk to Will. Call him.”

“Of course, but don’t you want to talk about your engagement?” said Bella. “We need to discuss that.”

“Engagement? To Will?”

“No, Bo, it was announced on Saturday.”

“WHAT? I’ve been drugged out of my mind all weekend. Those sticks had a really bad effect on me. There was something in that wine too. How come I’m suddenly engaged to someone I don’t even like much.”

“For the whole weekend?” said Bella. After her deceptions – all in a good cause, or so she thought – the assistant now had to act as if had not suspected anything.

“Yes for the whole weekend! Every time I started to come out I think I got more sticks shoved in my face. You didn’t realise something was wrong?”

“Bo said it was all fine and you seemed happy. I spoke to you a couple of times.”

“I don’t remember.”

The bodyguard in the foyer chose that moment to look into the living room to see what the noise was all about.

“You,” said Meghan pointing at him. “What are you doing in my hotel room?”

“Here with Mr Benjamin,” said the guard, taken aback.

“He shouldn’t be here either. Grab your boss and get out of my hotel room.”

“I’ll get the boss up and ask him,” he said.

“You do not need to ask him. It’s my room. Get out and take him with you or I’ll call management.”

The bodyguard went into the bedroom and Meghan turned her attention back to Bella.

“Where does this engagement story come from?”

Bella used her own phone to show Meghan the Sidewalk Stars item.

“I never agreed to any engagement,” said Meghan indignantly. “I don’t remember being asked and I sure as hell didn’t say yes. Will must have seen this. Oh my god, and he saw us together. No wonder he’s disappeared. Has my mother seen it or Madison? Have my friends seen it? Why wasn’t this contradicted straight away?”

“I couldn’t get any sense out of you,” said Bella, which was true enough. “Even if I’d known who handles your PR I wouldn’t have known what to tell them.”

Bo came out of the bedroom wearing only shorts and holding a stick and a lighter. His bodyguard, aware now that something was seriously wrong with his boss’s view of events, hovered in the background.

“Hey, babe,” said Bo, grinning wolf-like. “What’s with all the noise? Just have one of these and everything ‘ll seem right.”

“I’m not your babe,” retorted Meghan. “You took advantage of me. I told your guy to get you and leave and now I’m telling you. Get out!”

“Babe, just have a stick and the worries go away,” said Bo still grinning and holding it out.

“Get that away from me!” shrieked Meghan, slapping at the stick, knocking it out of Bo’s hand so that it fell to the floor.

“There’s no need for that,” said Bo, exasperated. He bent down to pick up the stick and lit it. “Just have this.”

“I told you I don’t want it,” said Meghan, shrinking away from him, “and I want you to get out of my room.”

“But babe we’re engaged,” said Bo, advancing on her.

“We’re nothing of the kind,” said Meghan stepping away again. “I only just found out about that story, and I’m going to start denying it. How dare you put that item up! Bella, call the hotel management and call those Sidewalk Stars people.”

“Why are you being so hostile!” snarled Bo. “You’ll never get a better offer than me.”

“What? What is this the seventeenth fucking century?” said Meghan. “I don’t need to marry anyone. I’m a major star in my own right. I don’t need you, and I don’t even like you and I’m sure as hell not marrying anyone who keeps me strung out on drugs.”

Bo snatched at her, grabbing her arm. “Yes, you need me. Stop this! I’m trying to help you.”

“Let go of me!” shrieked Meghan, struggling.

“You can’t do this, Mr Benjamin,” said Bella, who had finally picked up the suite’s phone to call the front desk.

“Boss this ain’t a good idea,” called the guard.

Meghan grabbed the stick from Benjamin’s hand and jammed the still glowing end into the singer’s bare arm.

The singer yelled and released her. “You little bitch!”

Meghan ran into the suite foyer, where she encountered the second guard.

“Stop her,” called Benjamin.

“Don’t you dare touch me,” said Meghan.

The guard hesitated. He had no reason at all to grab her and he knew it. She ran around him flung the door open yelled “Bella call the hotel people,” over her shoulder and ran into the corridor.

“Go after her,” he heard Bo yell from the suite. “She’s being fucking hysterical.”

Meghan ran down the corridor and turned the corner into the lift foyer before the guard got out the door. She was in the best suite in the hotel but there were other rooms on the floor. She saw a hotel maid, a middle aged lady with a service cart outside the open door of one room.

“Sorry, I need this room,” she said.

The maid looked up startled and her eyes widened.

“Don’t tell the man following where I’ve gone, and call management.” She had the sense to say this quietly.

The maid nodded, as Meghan closed the door as silently as she could. The thought occurred to the star that perhaps the maid had been in such situations before. As it was, by the time the guard from the foyer looked down the corridor the maid had opened the door on another, empty room. When the guard asked if she had seen anyone she shook her head and let him look in the room she had just opened. After he had left she opened the door to Meghan’s room.

“He has gone ma’am,” she said. Then she got the front desk on her own phone and handed it to Meghan.

As for Will after leaving Bella on Saturday and not knowing where to go he ended up at the airport thinking that he would catch the first flight South. When he arrived, he found that there was a flight to New York with a connection to LA for which he only had to wait about half an hour. That would do. He was sitting in the departure lounge deleting voice messages from his now extensive network of reporter contacts who wanted to know what was going on with Clarise Chalmers – Will figured that it was now none of his business – when Hap called.

“Will, so sorry to hear about you and Clarise. You and actresses, huh.”

Will supposed Hap meant well. “I should’ve gone for the girl next door type like you said at our first meeting.”

“You should’ve but I’m sorta hoping now you’ll now be able to get to our premiere function.”

“Premiere? For Party Town Terror? When is this.”

“Monday evening.”

“Monday? What this Monday?”

“Yep, a last minute thing,” said Hap. “One of the good theatres had a cancellation and the guy in charge watched our movie. He saw we’re a few cuts above the usual slasher genre and gave us the slot.”

“Monday’s not exactly a prime day,” said Will.

“I know, but we’re new kids on the block. We’ve gotta take what we can get. We won’t be able to fill the theatre but a few of the website reviewers ‘ll be there and we can get some circulation for the promotional pics. Speaking of that now you’re single can you take Danni Devlin to this event?”

“You mean escort her, like a date? I’m going to swear off actresses – anyway, what happened to her mall billionaire, what was his name ... Scranton?”

“He’s history,” said Hap. “Danni asked if you could.”

Will thought that he really did not want to go out but that film represented months of work, and what did it matter?

“Sure,” he said. “Say, you’ve got a big place. Can I crash there tonight?”

“Will, that’d be real cool,” said Hap enthusiastically. “I’ve got just the film for tonight. *Shrine of the Vampire Strippers*. It’s got a whole one star on Rotten Tomatoes.”

“Great, just what I need now a quality movie experience,” said Will.

To Meghan’s fury, the youthful hotel manager summoned from the desk along with someone from hotel security did not immediately throw Bo out of her suite. Instead, afraid of offending the singer who was still a major force in the entertainment industry, he looked for some compromise.

“I’m sure there’s some middle ground to agree on,” he said, standing in the suite’s living room. “Maybe if both parties take some time to cool down.”

“There isn’t any middle ground,” said Meghan, almost growling. She was still in her dressing gown. “And it’s not a question of cooling down. This is my suite. The producers I work for are paying for it. If I say Bo’s to leave then out he goes with his two goons. If he wants to take a suite elsewhere in the hotel that’s your problem.”

“We can offer you another suite, Mr Benjamin,” said the manager, hopefully. “If someone from your admin can arrange it...”

“She’s just hysterical,” said Bo. At least he had put on a tee shirt. “We’re engaged.”

“We’re NOT engaged,” snapped Meghan. “I never saw that stupid story about an engagement until a few minutes ago and I don’t know how or why Bo here thinks we got engaged but we’re not and never were. Now get him out of my hotel room! That is the end of the matter. I want you and the security person to stay here until Bo and his bodyguards leave, and make sure he takes that bottle of wine and those drugs of his with him.”

“Drugs!” said the manager, in alarm. “Mr Benjamin this is Canada, not America. Please remove your drugs from the hotel.”

“You bitch!” said Benjamin.

“Get fucked and get out!” snapped Meghan. “Bella go into my room and get me some clothes, jeans, underwear. I’ll change in your room. And some of that toast you were eating would be good. I’ll eat in the taxi.”

“I’ll ruin you!” snarled Benjamin.

“If he’s not completely gone by the time I come back this evening,” Meghan told the manager, ignoring Bo. “I’ll start complaining to your bosses and the producers.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Meghan then spent a lot of time on her phone. The first call was about apologising to the director Liam who, while still not happy particularly as Meghan was late for the rescheduled shooting, accepted the star’s repeated, heart-felt apologies and urged her to get to the set as soon as possible. Then she spent some time reassuring her mother that no, she was not engaged to anyone least of all Bo Benjamin whom she now heartily detested. No, she did not know where Will had got to and that was a real problem. She had to find him and make things right. Now she had to dash. “Love you but I’ve got a lot to do. I’ll call later.”

After that, in the taxi, she sent a group text to the friend who had left voice messages saying that she was definitely not engaged and never would be to Bo Benjamin who was a total sleaze. Then she called the Sidewalk Stars newsroom. On a Monday morning that consisted of one junior female reporter who initially thought Meghan had called to express her delight at the engagement. Dismayed to find that Meghan was killing the site's prize scoop stone dead, she did not believe the star.

"You could be just a prankster. It's such a good story and Benjamin was so enthusiastic about the hook up," she said.

"Well I'm just as enthusiastic about telling you that it's all crap, so why did you believe him and not believe me?"

"Well, I... it's taken you this long to deny the story which seems odd," said the reporter. "It's been the talk of the town. Why has it taken so long?"

"Never mind that," snapped Meghan, unwilling to say she'd been strung out on drugs for the whole weekend. "I only saw the story this morning and I was horrified. Let's switch to a video call and you'll see it's me."

Even with the video call the reporter was still reluctant to report just on Meghan's say so that there was no engagement.

"Maybe if I call Mr Benjamin's PR," she said.

"You can call anyone you want but it takes two to make an engagement and if I say there isn't one, then it doesn't exist, and it never did. I want a story up now saying that there is no engagement, or I'll really start complaining."

"Okay, okay," said the reporter. "I've just gotta talk to my editor."

"Now!"

"Okay, Ms Chalmers."

This resulted in the show's editors also asking for a video call and got one of Meghan between takes, wrapped in a towel. The show had been hoping for an exclusive interview with the starry eyed fiancée about her life with the rock legend. Instead, it now looked as if they would have to settle for a bare-bones denial of the whole story and they were not happy.

"But Ms Chalmers," said the woman editor, "why did it take so long to deny the story and if Bo Benjamin is not even your boyfriend is there anyone in your life right now?"

"Never mind that, and never mind why it's taken me so long to deny anything. The engagement story is still wrong. There is nothing between us and after this there will never be. I demand that the story be retracted now."

"We can put up something, sure," said the editor, "but we also understand that Benjamin was in your hotel room in Toronto over the weekend."

Meghan was still reluctant to say that she had spent the weekend high, mostly unwillingly, or that she had probably been roofied by something in the wine, not to mention almost certainly raped although she remembered very little about that part of it. Allegations like that would draw the attention of the police, who would want more details about the drug taking. It was also highly embarrassing.

“Well, yes, he was there and I spent part of this morning demanding that hotel management remove him.”

“Okay, so it’s a breakup, after a weekend affair.”

“There is no breakup, there is no affair. Just why I took a day or so to deny the engagement is none of your business. I’m telling you now there was no engagement and never was.”

Meghan’s strenuous denials of the story resulted in an item on the Sidewalk Stars site.

The engagement of the century between siren of the shower Clarise Chalmers and rock legend Bo Benjamin is already on the rocks, but the two sides of this dream hookup differ sharply on how they got there. Clarise has told Sidewalk Stars emphatically that there is no engagement and there never was any. Bo Benjamin says there was an engagement when an old affair rekindled as he visited the star in her hotel room in Toronto. But after a weekend of ecstasy in each other’s arms when they pledged their love for one another, Chalmers turned hostile.

The star admits that Benjamin was in her hotel room but says that there was no ecstasy, no love and no proposal, and she does not know why the rock legend thinks they were ever engaged. She declined to answer questions on why it had taken a day and a half to deny the story but says that she was “horrified” to find Benjamin in her hotel room on Monday and had to get hotel management to remove him.

There you have it you have it viewers, no need for the couple to book a reception room or buy a dream wedding dress just yet. As always Sidewalk Stars will keep you posted.

Meanwhile in LA Will was surprised to find that Danni was living at the Hollywood house of Connie Leighton. Having collected some of his belongings from Meghan’s house, along with his car (a base model Ford had replaced the Saturn at Meghan’s insistence) on the Monday Will drove from Hap’s place to Casa-Connie to find the mansion just as it was when he visited it all those months ago, but this time it was considerably livelier. While he waited in the entrance hall with its sweeping twin staircases he was aware of a hubbub and pulsing music in the main living room. He also saw a forlorn looking but pretty pre-teen girl with frizzy hair dressed in a grubby, cast-off tee shirt, jeans and tatty sneakers sitting on a chair, out of the way.

“Hello,” he said. He nodded towards the living room. “Not going to the party?”

She shook her head. “Adults, drugs,” she said.

“Good girl,” he said.

Then Danni called from the top of the staircases. She was dressed in a backless, low cut halter neck dress in a silver-chainmail-like material.

“Oh wow!” said Will. “Even Clarise would have trouble pulling off that effect.”

Will actually thought that Meghan’s figure was better than Danni’s and that she wore dresses with considerably more style – as opposed to in-your-face revealing - but was not about to say any of that. The porn star was pleased with what he did say.

“You like it,” she said, smiling and clutching a purse that matched the dress as she walked down the stairs.

“It’s distracting me from my troubles. And that means a lot just now.”

“You’re doing well with the compliments this evening, Will,” she said. “Shall we go?”

Will nodded and waved at the girl who gave him a wan smile in return and they walked out, Denni grasping Will’s arm.

“I didn’t know you knew Connie Leighton,” said Will. “If she’s here I should at least say hello.”

This surprised her. “You know Leighton?”

“Sure, I met her a few times organising that joint charity thing a while back. I’ve even been to this house before.”

“Right, I’d forgotten the charity thing. But I’ve never met her and she isn’t here; she’s touring someplace. I came here with another guy who also didn’t know Leighton but knew someone who knew her. You heard the party in the living room?”

“Oh yes.”

“That’s going on all the time, but I don’t think any of those guys know Leighton either,” said Denni. “For some reason, the singer doesn’t come back to clear out all these guests but she does pay for housekeeping to clean up every so often.”

“What happened to the guy you came with?”

“A singer who’s gone on tour. Won’t see him for a couple of months, if then. But I just stayed in the room after he left and no one said anything.”

“And no rent?”

“Not a cent, it’s been great. Should find something soon, but a room here will do for now.”

“It’s good to be so rich you can have a mansion in the prime area of LA with a house full of guests you’ve never met,” said Will. “How well does your channel pay?”

“Not well enough to buy mansions.”

They talked some more about the details of the porno business, Denni impressing Will with her grasp of the business side, then they got to the venue. This did not involve a full Hollywood-style arrival, which was just as well as Will’s Ford was not a stretch limousine, but it did involve Denni posing for photographs against a backdrop of scenes recalling the Hollywood glory days of the 40s and then arm in arm with Will in the theatre foyer. The mainly male audience lining up to get into the film was kept back by security as they ogled the porn star in her dress. As both Hap and Denni intended the resulting pictures went viral, giving the film a publicity boost.

Then they sat down to watch the *Party Town Terror*. There had been no budget for showing the finished product to test audiences as often occurs for major films. Instead, it came to the screen as Will, Hap and Evan intended, and the audience seemed to like it. They certainly raved about it afterwards at the launch party. Although Will had been in LA long enough to discount mere enthusiastic congratulations as something people always say, no matter what they might think of the film, underneath it all he detected genuine interest. The few critics that showed up – all from niche websites – asked Will questions that indicated they appreciated the result.

At one point Wilma, who had turned up with Buck to make up the numbers, pulled Will to one side.

“You remember you were going to provide words for my drawings,” she said.

“I haven’t forgotten,” said Will. It’s called “*David Saves the World*. I’ve done most of it. I just need to think about it some more and, well, you know I’ve hit a rough patch.”

“Poor Will,” said Wilma. “You’ll hate all women now.”

“Not all women,” said Will. “I’ll still think well of female illustrators.”

“That’s something to be thankful for,” said Wilma.

Otherwise, the evening went so well that by the time Will took Denni home, the porn star was hopeful for the future – a hope fuelled by having a little too much to drink.

“A good film, Will,” she said. “Some genuine tension and chills and thrills.”

“Yeah, well, I thought Evan might make a good director but he proved even better than I expected.”

“And don’t forget the scriptwriter and the effects,” Denni said.

“Oh them, but there was that really hot star who ...” Will chose his words carefully, “... Impressed the audience with her acting skills.”

Denni laughed. “You mean who got her top off?”

“That too.”

She laughed again. “It’s what I do, Will, but it is sweet of you not to say so. I don’t say this to many guys but you have class.”

“Oh right, I’m complimented back,” said Will.

They reached the house and Denni punched in a key code to open the gates. Will stopped at the front door.

“Park over there,” she said, indicating a row of cars in what seemed to be the house’s unofficial guest car park. Then she leant over and kissed him on the cheek. “I’m in a mood to spend time consoling you over the loss of Clarise. Park and come up to my room.”

Will did as he was told. After all, he thought, it hardly mattered.

Film review on niche website Hollywood Horrors –

With Party Town Terror, the core production team of director Evan Zagame, scriptwriter and assistant director Will Moreland and producer and special effects director Jason Hap shows just what can be done on a limited budget. Just as importantly for the guys, porn star Denni Devlin turns in a decent performance in her big screen debut which also includes getting her top off. There is something for everyone.

Below this favourable review was a picture of Will, smiling determinedly, arm in arm with Denni at the premier with the caption reading “hot new couple Will Moreland and Denni Devlin”, which Meghan read with disbelief when Bella showed it to her in a hotel room in New York. After two days of filming and Meghan denying stories of an engagement, they had moved to the Big Apple where the star was due to appear in a fashion show.

An urgent request to the series producers had resulted in a highly recommended, gigantic, bearded French-Canadian called Edouard joining the star’s entourage. Edouard looked truly ferocious but Meghan found him to be sweet. More importantly, as far as the star was concerned, he filled up the entrance hallway to Meghan’s Toronto suite nicely, keeping Benjamin and his goons

away. All Bo had been able to do was ask a hotel employee to pass a note to Meghan, which he did while she was still in Toronto. The woman desk clerk handed this folded note on hotel stationery to Meghan on a silver platter saying, “sorry ma’am, Mr Benjamin insisted that I give this to you.”

“I understand,” said Meghan, sweetly. She then carefully ripped up the note and dropped it back on the platter. “Be sure to tell him I did not read the note.”

“Of course, ma’am,” said the clerk.

As well as being effective in keeping undesirables at bay, Edouard had also proved sufficiently considerate and discreet for Meghan to take him with her to New York – the security man had dual US-Canadian citizenship – where he was now filling up the entrance way to her new suite. Now she was looking at a picture of her boyfriend arm in arm with a porn star.

“We were a happy couple just last week,” she whispered. She found herself tearing up and dashed the tears away impatiently.

“He did find you naked with Benjamin,” said Bella.

“I know what happened!” snapped Meghan. “I just can’t believe it’s all fallen apart so fast. How did it come to this?”

The star realised she was wearing the pendant Will had given to her and recalled how he had said it would be good for ripping off her neck and throwing it at him when they had an argument. She took it off now but by carefully lifting it over her head and putting it in her pocket. Later she would wrap it up and put it in her luggage.

“Maybe it is for the best,” said Bella. “I mean someone of your stature can take their pick and not just a pool Himbo...”

“Will is no Himbo!” snapped Meghan. “What gave you that idea?”

“Emma said he swims and makes coffee.”

“He worked as a barista to pay his way at the University of Chicago,” said Meghan. “I bought a coffee machine for the kitchen at home so he can make my friends coffee. It was good fun. He’s also former national swimming team, as well as writer and assistant director, and he pulled me out of so much shit I’ve lost count. He told me once not to be hospitable to guys in my own hotel room as they’d get the wrong idea. I didn’t listen and look what happened. What I want to know is how long has it been going on with that Devlin girl?”

“You know her?”

“Met her once at an LA night spot. She’s got her own porn channel. She was talking to Will then.”

“I see – well, that’s not so good.” Bella did not know what else to say.

“No, it isn’t,” said Meghan, standing up. “What else is there this week?”

“There’s the fashion show. Friday’s free except for a producer meeting. They’re here in New York and want to talk to you about another film.”

“Cancel it. Call Stella’s office and tell her I’ll reschedule or do Zoom or something. Just not now. What else?”

“There’s a nightclub appearance thing at a hot new night club with Connie Leighton on Saturday night here in New York, as part of the Bad Diva brand. Difficult to get out of that.”

“Connie knows Will. I want to talk to her. But I want to go home straight after that if possible. Find out about flights. I’ll do a private jet if I have to. You can go home when you want but have Edouard go with me to the club and sit in the plane beside me. I don’t want to talk to anyone.”

“You don’t want me at the night club,” said Bella, hopefully.

“I don’t want anyone with me. Edouard knows not to say anything unless I speak to him. Now I’m going to my room. No interviews and I’m not to be disturbed.”

Meghan went to her bed and thought that she might lie there and sob for a while, like Emma.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Will was called out of a pleasant dream where he was back with Meghan by Denni tapping him gently on the cheek and calling his name, as they lay naked together in bed.

“Wha... oh, right, sorry,” said Will. “Bad manners to fall asleep directly afterwards.”

“I didn’t mind Will,” said Denni, amused over Will’s apology. Most men would not have seen anything to apologise over. “You did well but I’ve got to get up early tomorrow. The premiere was a last minute thing and I have got other things to do.”

“Okay, sure. Will got up and put on the tuxedo he had come in but leaving the bow tie in a jacket pocket while Denni watched, a sheet wrapped around her. “Um, call tomorrow or later today maybe?”

“Sure Will,” she said.

“Dinner, maybe?”

“Sounds good, but I won’t know until later what’s happening. Talk then.”

On his way out and despite the long night Will thought he might look into the living room and see what the perpetual party was like. From the doorway and, as far as he could make out in the dim light, there were perhaps 30 people or so in the room. A few couples were dancing to the slowly pulsing music. A few had collapsed on or around a sofa.

One man in a bright green jumpsuit and a ton of gold bling was waving around a lava lamp plugged into a long electrical extension lead saying “look people, it glows, it moves, it transforms. It is a thing of beauty to behold. This lamp is worthy of worship!”

Another, portly gentleman in a suit of a cut and style that would have done credit to a senior private banker, except that it was bright pink topped by a pink bowler hat, was waving around a furled umbrella – a proper one with a curved handle – saying “hear, hear. Hear, hear good sir. But the umbrella remains the key. You can never go out without an umbrella as you may be rained on, even in California.”

Will was just thinking that the party was too way out even for him, when he noticed the child he had spoken to when he came to pick up Danni sitting to one side, her back to the wall. She was looking at him and still seemed to be mournful.

“Hello,” he said. “You’re still up – isn’t it way past your bedtime?”

“No one to tell me to go to bed,” said the girl. “I slept some before.”

“Okay, you’re not here with anyone?”

“I was, but he went out and hasn’t come back.”

“When did he go out?”

“Before noon, yesterday. He said he’d be back soon.” She sounded as if she was about to cry.

“A day and a half ago?”

She nodded.

“You’ve been waiting for him since then?”

She nodded again.

“What have you been doing, just sitting?”

“Mostly. I couldn’t find anything to eat in the kitchen and no snacks in here. I’d have liked to look at the television, but I can’t with the party.”

“Guess not,” said Will. “You haven’t told anyone that you’re alone here.”

By way of answer she waved at the umbrella guy and lava lamp guy, both still holding forth.

“Okay, I get it,” said Will. “But you haven’t eaten since, what, early yesterday?”

She nodded again, looking forlorn.

“I can help with that,” said Will. “I used to live around here and I’ve got the delivery places on speed dial. Lead the way to the kitchen.”

On the way, Will logged on to the delivery service. “Anything you want?”

“I don’t know what to get. I heard some kids talk about nuggets once. They sound good.”

“Coming right up, along with fries and soft drink.”

The kitchen proved to be spacious with an enormous central stone-top table where Will sat on wooden chairs with the girl.

“I’m Will by the way,” said the writer holding out his hand.

“I’m Pud-hole,” said the girl shaking it.

“Pothole?” said Will, thinking that he must have misheard.

“No, Pud-hole.”

“It’s an unusual name.”

“I was born on a commune where they talk a lot about loving nature and animals and all that. They name babies after the first thing anyone sees when the kid arrives. One kid got leaf, another got rain drop. I got Pud-hole because someone saw a Pud-hole.”

“Shouldn’t it be either puddle or pothole?”

“My mum says she asked about that and she was told that was doubting the commune’s laws, which is bad. I’ve been Pud-hole since.”

“Where is your mother now?”

“In jail. Police came to the commune and took her away. I was told she killed some people.”

“Oh wow, that is serious. How long ago was this?”

“Maybe two years.”

“And how old are you?”

“I think I’m ten.”

“You think?”

She shrugged. “I knew there was a world where kids got birthdays and went to proper schools. Sometimes we would see old movies or my mum sneaked me a book, but we didn’t get birthdays on the commune, or Christmas or anything else.”

Over nuggets and fries which Pud-hole ate with relish, William urging her to slow down in case her stomach reacted, more of the story came out. She had spent her whole life until a few days ago on this commune, a large farm a few hours’ drive north of LA. Pud-hole had received some schooling although her life had mainly been about farm chores. When her mother was taken away, life became worse. She was moved from the tiny hut she had shared with her mother into a communal bunk house and put to work minding the chickens and the cows, a job which she hated. The commune’s love of animals did not prevent it from selling the eggs laid by these chickens or milk produced by the cows, but in any dispute between humans and animals, the animals were obviously in the right.

“The cows were just hard work but if I got pecked by the chickens it was my fault for annoying the chickens,” said Pud-hole, indignantly. “I was always being pecked for taking their eggs, so I was always in trouble. Now I hate animals and I hate farms.”

Pleas to be taken to visit her mother or even write to her went unheeded and she never got any message from her. The problem was not so much that her mother had killed people but that she had confessed and co-operated with the police, or so Pud-hole was told. As that broke the laws of the commune Pud-hole’s mother had become a non-person and, by extension, Pud-hole had dropped to the bottom of the commune pecking order, below even the chickens it seemed. In the end, she had busted out by grabbing an opportunity when it presented itself. She saw one of the younger men sneak out to where the commune vehicles were garaged and, suspecting he was going to make a run for it, followed him out. She caught up with the man and begged to be taken with him. The man, Chris, had been one of the few to show any sympathy for her plight and hadn’t taken much convincing.

Chris then crashed a pick-up truck through the commune gates and Pud-hole was off the farm for the first time in her life. They passed neat houses and through towns with shopping centres and schools where kids were playing and she was entranced. Even going hungry for a time had not put her off the wide world outside the commune. She was all for it. Chris apparently knew a girl, a Sarah, who took them to this house. Pud-hole did not know Sarah’s connection to either Chris or the house

As for her family, she did not know who her father was. Her mother had never told her. Chris also did not know. Apart from her mother in jail, she had an uncle on the East Coast – New York, maybe – and a grandmother in a nursing home somewhere but had never met either of them.

“I really want to go and see my mother,” said Pud-hole and I want a different name – I hate Pud-hole – and I’m also sorta curious to know what happened to Chris.”

“That’s quite a back story,” said Will.

“Back story?”

“Sure, you’re in Beverley Hills, part of film industry central, and I’m a writer of a kind. I’ve even been involved in films and when a character comes into a film he or she has a back story saying who they are and how they happen to be there.”

“Films? Really, what films?” said Pud-hole, whose sketchy education had not extended to even basic American geography.

“Never mind that for now. Let’s concentrate on the name thing,” said Will. “As you’re about the only normal person I saw in the room back there why don’t I call you Normal until you decide what name you want and legally change it.”

“Can you do that?”

“Oh sure, but you have to go to a court I think. Or you can just start calling yourself the name you want. For now, let’s do Normal.”

“I don’t mind Normal,” said Normal.

“I guess you can come home with me if you want. I’m staying with a friend after a big breakup myself but I know he’s got spare rooms. He won’t care.”

“Your place sounds good but I still hope Chris might come back,” said Normal. “And I want to be here when he does.”

“If you’ve been alone all this time I guess a few more hours won’t matter. But if he hasn’t fronted by tomorrow evening I will insist. You shouldn’t be left alone. Come on, I can at least take you up to bed. Leave some of the nuggets for breakfast. Bring them with you”

Normal consented to being escorted up to the room she had been using. As it happened the room was next to Danni’s and Will thought he could hear whisperings and giggling. Maybe Danni’s talk of an early call had just been an excuse to get rid of him so she could play with others. Will decided that he did not care.

Normal’s room had a big double bed, a wardrobe and an ensuite but few personal belongings. The bed looked as if had been slept in once and there were some folded blankets with a pillow in one corner.

“The one night Chris was here he slept in the bed. I sleep over there,” said Normal pointing at the blankets.

“No clothes, no pee-jays?” said Will.

“I didn’t have time to get anything,” she said. “I didn’t have much to get anyway, but now all I got is what I got on.”

“I see. You should clean your teeth.”

“Don’t have toothbrush or toothpaste,” said Normal.

Will thought for a moment about knocking on Danni’s door and asking to borrow her toothbrush but then thought better of it.

“Well take off your sneakers, jeans and socks at least before you get into bed, and at least rinse your mouth out. A breakfast of sorts is there for when you get up. Looks like I’m coming back tomorrow. I’ll take you to someplace for lunch.”

“Thanks Will,” said Normal. “You’re the first person who’s done anything for me for so long.”

“You mean apart from Chris, I guess, but don’t mention it,” said Will.

On his way back home, Will thought that Normal had been given such a rough time she deserved some help and, in any case, he could use the distraction.

Will returned about midday. Danni had told him the gate key code so he went right in. A security service monitored the mansion, he discovered later, but did not bother anyone who knew the key code and were obviously just coming and going. Normal, sitting in her usual post out of the way in the main entrance hall, jumped up when Will arrived.

“Here you go,” said Will, handing her a day pack he had picked up at a shopping mall on the way. “Yours.”

“Thanks, Will,” said Normal, looking at the pack as if she had just been handed a diamond. “That’s really nice of you.”

“It was just a few bucks, like these tee shirts I picked up.” He handed them to her. They were both white. One had letters saying ‘Future President’ on it. Another had ‘Totally Awesome’. “They should be close enough to your size.”

“They’re new,” said Normal in an awed tone, looking at them. “They’re so ... so clean and white. Thanks, Will.” Then to Will’s distress she started crying. He patted her awkwardly on the back. Crying young girls were not his scene. “I’ve never had any new clothes before,” she said between sobs.

“They were just a few bucks off the remainder table,” said Will, also tearing up.

“What’s a remainder table,” she sobbed. She hugged him around the waist then stepped back to rub her eyes. “Sorry,” she said. “Thank you.”

“Don’t be,” said Will. “The next item is way less fun.” He handed her a paper packet. “A kid’s toothbrush and toothpaste. Go use them and change the tee shirt. You’ll be way more presentable in public and we’ll go out to lunch. I’ll wait here.”

“But I wanted to wait for Chris. The takeaways yesterday were good.”

“I searched online for Chris and cult and I found someone who I think is your Chris,” said Will. “He’s in police custody. Would you believe he tried to kill the leader of your cult a couple of days ago?”

“Kill him? Really?”

“Yep. He tried to kill the Reverend Hallelujah Jones, head of The Church of the Natural God.”

“That’s them, that’s the people who run the farm.”

“A Chris Jenson confronted the Rev Jones outside the reverend’s Bel Air mansion wielding a kitchen knife, but before he could do anything much he was crash tackled by the reverend’s security detail and handed over to the police. He’s now on remand where we can visit him. Go up, change and use that toothbrush and toothpaste. Then put anything you want to take in that pack. After we visit Chris I’ll take you to my friend’s place. I’ll wait here.”

As Will waited in the entrance hall Danni came in.

“Will?” she said. “You were going to call.”

“Oh it’s okay, I’m here for someone else.”

“And who would that be?” she said, indignantly.

Normal appeared at the top of the stairs in the tee shirt that said 'Future President' pack slung over one shoulder.

"Her, in fact," said Will gesturing at Normal. "I found her alone and hungry, hunting for something to eat in the perpetual party."

"Oh right," said Denni, her indignation vanishing. "I've seen you around," she said to Normal. "That Tee shirt is better."

"Will got it for me," said Normal.

Explanations ensued.

"If you're going to do the clothes thing, Will, some new jeans would look good," said Denni. "Maybe new sneakers and take her to a hairdresser to clean up this." She patted Normal's frizzy hair.

"I can do that," said Will. "Are we on for dinner tonight?"

Will fully expected Denni to say she couldn't make dinner that night but she said yes and that Will could pick her up at seven. The writer was a little puzzled that he was not being put off but agreed like the gentleman he was and left with Normal.

"You and the Red Witch, eh?" said Normal.

"Red Witch?"

"My name for that lady," said Normal, but would not say anything more about her.

Will took Normal to a Mall where they bought jeans, sneakers that did not look as if they had been subjected to a nuclear strike, underwear, socks, and two more tee shirts in different colors. After that came the hairdresser and when Normal emerged, Will thought that now she had shaken-off the street kid look and looked considerably more cheerful, his protégé had a certain charisma or star quality about her. Then they went to a late lunch at one of the restaurants around the entrance to the movie theatres. Normal was enthusiastic about all of it, including the simple joy of being able to choose from a menu, and was entranced by the big screen over the entrance to the theatres showing the trailers for the films now being played.

"Kids told me about places like this," said Normal. "This is awesome. Can we go and see a movie? I've never done that at a theatre. I saw a couple on a screen at the farm, but never in any place like this."

"Sure, I guess. Not right now, we've got to see Chris."

The jail holding Chris Campbell was a formidable looking stone building painted white with a large tower and in the general style that Will thought of as West Coast civic. After the writer's driver's licence had been recorded they were led to a booth in which sat a good-looking, crew-cut young man – he could not have been more than eighteen – in prison clothes. Like Normal he seemed thin and drawn but was losing some of his pallor thanks to three meals a day in prison.

"Hey, Pud-hole," said Chris, grinning. "I'm glad someone found you. Sorry I didn't come back but well, I ended up here."

Will and Normal explained how they happened to be there and that Pud-hole was now Normal

"You didn't tell anyone about Normal?" said Will.

“I did,” said Chris, “but I never knew the address, apart from it being in Beverley Hills. All I knew was that it was a really big house.”

“Then how did you find it, and how did you find the reverend’s place?”

“Through Sarah. We met on the commune but her folks managed to get her out. She smuggled a note into me with a phone number saying she was in LA so I busted out, taking Pud-hole – Normal – here with me. Poor kid was being treated really badly.”

“I sure was,” said Normal.

“The girl knew about the house you stayed that one night?” said Will.

“Said it was a place to stay, then I wanted to confront the reverend and, well, shit got out of hand. Sarah ran away. I haven’t been out in the world since I was a kid so I hadn’t kept her phone number or the address of the place I had been at. The cops were not happy with me.”

“Guess not,” said Will.

“Now they’re talking about putting me in prison for years for attempted murder.”

“You didn’t get near the reverend, right? You didn’t hurt the man?”

Chris shook his head. “Didn’t touch him. Didn’t even mean to kill him.”

“Do you have any sort of police record – have you been spoken to by the police for any reason?”

“First time I was even in a police station was when they arrested me.”

“Then you can probably be plead down to a lesser charge. The cops won’t have much interest in you; just want to get you through the system. Tell you what, I’ll find a cheap lawyer – it’d be better than the court-appointed ones – and get him or her to negotiate with the district attorneys. My generosity does not extend to paying for a trial, or anything much beyond a plea deal. Plead guilty to the lesser charge, promise not to go anywhere near the reverend again, and you may be back again on the mean streets of LA soon. Do you have any family?”

“A mother in Oakland, last time I had contact with her.”

“I’ll ask the lawyer to find her.”

“Thanks, Will,” said Chris, looking relieved.

“Get yourself straightened out, forget about this Church of the Natural God thing and have a good life,” said Will. “Now we have to find Normal’s mother. Do you happen to know what prison she’s in?”

“I dunno the name of it,” said Chris, “but I know it’s near a town called Granite Resort, a long way from the commune. I heard the boss talking once and the town’s name stuck with me.”

“We’ll see what we can do with that,” said Will. “Take care, Chris.”

Finding a lawyer proved to be simpler than Will thought, as the breed tended to cluster around remand centres, and he asked one of the guards if he could recommend anyone. The recommendation produced a young, bustling man who seemed to know his business and had a banking machine for payments. Will paid him some money; warned the man that his generosity was limited and left him to it.

“We’ve done something for Chris,” he told Normal as they walked to the car. “Now we can get you settled in my friend’s place and find your mother.”

“Great!” she said. “Is there a television at this place?”

“No problem – with cable.”

As it happened, Hap had acquired a live-in girlfriend, a pleasant if not particularly motivated 20s-something called Moira who Will remembered as being an assistant make-up lady on the Party Town Terror set. Moira was delighted to keep Normal company as she watched Disney movies – this being a novel experience for the girl.

“Will, we’re getting some traction with Party Town,” said Hap. “The theatre says they’re selling tickets. Now a theatre in New York wants to use it for late night screenings.”

“Multi-outlet distribution across two states,” said Will. “Sounds good; sounds great. If we’ve got an extra one this early, we’re bound to get more.”

“That’s what I’m hoping,” said Hap. “I also sent that *Jungle Kids* idea you had around to a few places.”

Now fancying himself as a producer, Hap had asked Will for an idea or two and the writer had given him a treatment for a series about four children abruptly cut off from their parents on a remote planet who then have to survive in a jungle filled with terrifying animals and hazards while dodging aliens looking for them and trying to reunite with their parents. But Hap wanted other financiers involved to share the costs, and risks, involved in producing even a pilot episode for such a series.

“Any takers yet,” said Will.

“Nothing, but I’m hoping Party Town will give us some credibility. You going to watch a film tonight?”

“Sorry, gotta date, maybe later in the week.” Will had never said anything about Denni

“Already? You’ve been busted up for all of a week.”

“Just someone I know, don’t think much will come of it.”

An internet search showed that the Eastern California Women’s Prison was close to the town of Granite Resort and a call got through to an inmate liaison officer who knew Normal’s mother, Amelia Marchetti, and about her missing daughter.

“She has been driving us crazy about her daughter,” said the officer. “The police were unable to find her, although they went twice to that commune.”

“She says she was taken to a cellar twice and not allowed out for hours,” said Will.

“Probably when the police visited.”

Visits were allowed on weekends but in the circumstances, a special visit could be arranged if only so that inmate Marchetti would shut up about her daughter. Will was given an address and a time in the afternoon of the next day.

“Normal, we’re doing a road trip to see your mum, tomorrow,” Will said, interrupting the second movie of the day. “Early start, bring your pack.”

“Will that’s great!” said Normal, hugging him “Thank you, thank you. You going to watch a movie with us?”

“Not tonight. Your Red Witch is calling me.”

“She’s not my Red Witch.”

Will thought he detected a note of disapproval and in the circumstances, even from a ten year old, he was not surprised. But Normal could be left to watch movies with Moira happily agreeing to feed her and get her into bed at an appropriate time while Will went off on his unapproved date.

Despite Normal's disapproval and Will's general reluctance to go anywhere, however, dinner went well with Denni proving good company. They went back to Connie Leighton's place and got down to the serious business of coupling. Then as they lay in each other's arms, Denni said "there's something else I want to try, Will." She got out of bed wrapped a towel around her and went to another room. A few seconds later, another man and a woman came in also in towels which they discarded and advanced on the bed.

This was not to Will's taste at all but he thought that it hardly mattered and he might as well go along for the ride. He had not seen either person before. The woman seemed okay in a long, lank dark haired kind of way while the man, to whom Will paid little attention at first, was a proto-typical Californian surfer type with bleached-blond hair and tattoos. The couple advanced on the bed then the woman got in beside Denni and the man advanced on Will.

Alarmed, Will kicked off the bed sheets that had been covering him, got both feet on the surfer's chest and shoved hard. The man fell on the floor at the foot of the bed.

"Hey man, what's your problem?" he asked, getting up and rubbing his chest.

"What's yours?" said Will. "I'm not gay."

Denni burst out laughing, while the other woman looked on, puzzled. "Hugo, I forgot to tell him." Will stood up, naked, by the bed and stared at her, as did surfer Hugo while Denni continued to laugh. "That was so funny," she said eventually.

That was enough for the writer, who now realised he didn't want to be there or have anything further to do with Denni. He put on his shorts and tee shirt and grabbed the rest of his clothes thinking he would change downstairs.

"Hey, is this going to be a problem in any future films you guys do?" said Denni, realising what was happening.

"I'm not petty," said Will. "Let's pretend this never happened." He paused at the door. "You guys have fun now." Then he left.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Gaining access to Eastern California Women's Prison on a non-visitors day was not easy. A guard at the gate tried to get rid of them and only allowed them through when he had confirmed Will and Normal had an appointment. Then a male guard who happened to come out of the reception area door as they were coming in also tried to warn them off, grunting when he was told they had an appointment with inmate liaison officer Rachel Novik, and gesturing at the reception desk. The civilian receptionist looked owlishly at Normal through thick glasses and said, "I know who you are", then called officer Novik.

That officer proved to be a tall woman in her fifties who emphasised her height by wearing her hair in a bun. She shook Will's hand and then exclaimed, "you're the image of your mother" to Normal who beamed. The girl had been apprehensive on the long drive up, and the initial hostility had not helped.

Officer Novik took them down a corridor and into a room with a single window with bars set high on one wall where they sat on plastic chairs at a large table. Will suspected that it was a room set aside for lawyers to meet their clients. After a few minutes, the door opened and Normal's mother, Amelia Marchetti, literally exploded into the room, shouting "Pud-hole", giving Normal time only to exclaim "ma" before lifting her daughter off her feet in a monster bear hug in clear defiance of the signs saying, 'no physical contact permitted'. A male guard who had come in with Marchetti moved to intervene but was waved away by the liaison officer.

Then Normal managed to choke out, "ma, too tight, you're squeezing me".

"Marchetti, that's enough," said Novik, "you'll hurt your daughter".

Amelia released Normal then put on the girl on her lap and mother and daughter alternately cried and babbled together for a time, Amelia repeatedly saying that she was "so sorry" about what had happened, and she had written to everyone she could think of and complained to the officers, and Normal exclaiming indignantly "I was hungry Ma and all I did was mind cows and chickens, and I was always in trouble and no-one cared".

As Will's phone had been taken off him at reception, all he could do during this crying session was to exchange a few words with Officer Novik.

"What house did you find her in?" asked Novik.

"It belongs to the singer Connie Leighton. The singer herself is on tour but she tolerates all sorts of people coming and going and I saw Normal – I call her that as she was the only normal person there – just sitting to one side waiting. Turned out the guy who helped her bust out of that commune had left her at the house and gone off to try to assassinate the head of the church that ran it and got caught, so he never came back."

"Right, I read about that," said Novik. "The item caught my eye thanks to Marchetti here driving me crazy over the commune."

"Sorry about that," said Normal's mum, wiping her eyes.

Now that Will could see Amelia properly he realised that Normal was a copy of her mother.

"You got out with someone, baby?" said Amelia, smiling at Normal.

"Chris decided to drive out, Ma," said Normal. "Busted through the gates in one of those farm trucks."

"Chris?" said Amelia.

"Chris Campbell," said Will.

"Oh right, Chris at the bakery. He was a nice young man."

"He was the only one who helped me," said Normal. "He gave me extra bread when I was really hungry. I got him to take me with him when he busted out."

"That was really good of him," said Amelia, "and thank you too," she said to Will, "but who are you?"

Will told her that he was a writer on the fringes of the film industry who happened to find Normal in Connie Leighton's house.

"Do you know the singer?" asked Amelia.

"Met her a few times. I helped organise a dinner dance benefit for a children's hospital some months back."

"That was with that rival of hers Clarise Chalmers. Do you know her as well?"

"I did Ms Chalmers' PR for a time. That's how I came to be involved in the charity event."

"What's she like, as a person?" asked Novik, while Amelia cuddled Normal. Even a prisoner reuniting with her daughter after two years did not stop the guards from showing interest in celebrity gossip. Will was told later that celebrity gossip helped pass the time in jail.

"Fierce. She fired me three times for not doing exactly what she said to do – well four times, counting the last time which stuck." Will was not about to tell them he was a boyfriend who got dumped in the most painful of circumstances. "Now she's gotten engaged to the singer Bo Benjamin, who I've also met and is a total arsehole, so I'm going to stay fired."

"No longer engaged," said Novik. "In fact, she denies there was any engagement. Got the singer thrown out of her hotel room."

"Didn't hear that," said Will, puzzled. "Since I've left that job I haven't paid much attention to the news. But to get back to the problem at hand what am I going to do with Normal here? I didn't have the heart to just hand her over to family services as I should have done from the start." Normal looked apprehensive at this. "Is there any family to leave her with?"

"No there isn't," said Amelia. "I have a brother in New York but I lost contact with Francis years ago and I don't think you can leave a child with him. My mother is in a nursing home eating up savings from my time as an actress, but she doesn't even remember who I am."

"You were an actress?" asked Will, thinking that he never seemed to get away from actresses.

"Yep," she said, holding Normal close. "I had a long running part in a soap and a few television shows, but my career was coming to an end then I got this bug about nature and ended up on the commune."

"Okay, how did you end up here? I heard you killed someone."

"It wasn't me and it was an accident. Me and another man set fire to some logging equipment, as part of the anti-development thing. He said he'd checked there was no-one around and I kept watch while he set the fire, but there were two homeless people sleeping under the logging machine. I didn't want to go with him after that and we had a real argument over it. The cops later caught him trying to set more fires and asked him about that incident and he got back at me by saying that I'd set the fire. He got three years I got twenty."

"Oh wow, how much of that will you have to serve?" asked Will.

"Served two, maybe eight to go," said Novik.

"Normal here will be well into dating and colleges by the time you get out," said Will. Amelia nodded.

"What about the father? Is he the firebug?"

“Not him. I had an affair with a married man on the commune. It didn’t last long and he left with his wife before I started to show. I never told him about Pud-hole.”

“Normal, Ma,” said Normal, still on her mother’s lap, rubbing tears out of her eyes. “I want to be known as Normal until I find a name I like. I hate Pud-hole.”

“Okay, baby,” said Amelia. “Your grandmother’s name is Louise. You could try that.”

“I’ll think,” said Normal, although it did not sound as if she much liked Louise.

“That brings me to another question,” said Will. “Does it really say Pud-hole on the birth certificate?”

“I don’t know if there is one,” said Amelia. “That was part of the problem I had with the police.”

“Yes, that was a problem,” said Novik.

“There was no record that Pud-hole, sorry Normal, ever existed,” said Amelia, “and the commune denied that anyone had ever been born on the farm, although there were other children.”

“No birth certificate!” said Will. “Oh wow, that’s interesting. Do you know where we can find Normal’s dad?”

Much later, after more tears and hugging and promises that Normal would write and visit when she could, Will and Normal were back on the road.

“Thanks, Will,” said the girl. “I really missed my mum.”

“No problem. Your mum really cared for you; thought she might squeeze you to death when she first saw you.”

Normal giggled; for the first time Will could remember. “Where are we going?”

“We won’t go back to LA tonight. Hap has a country place not far from here we can stay at.”

“What kind of place is it?”

“It has scenic water views,” said Will.

“Does it have a television?”

“Oh yes.”

That satisfied her until they stopped at the gas station and convenience store that was the main feature of the hamlet of Mystery Valley. Will bought frozen beef patties thinking that at least he knew how to fry meat, a salad kit and a packet of gravy that could be just put in the microwave. That would do for dinner. On a whim he gave Normal ten dollars and told her to buy sodas and maybe anything else that caught her fancy. As he put the groceries in the car Will saw Normal talking to the store clerk. When she came out, carrying the sodas, she carefully scanned the landscape around the convenience store. She continued to scan the sides of the road as they drove away.

“What were you talking to the store clerk about?” asked Will.

“I saw a story about Wolves coming back into the mountains on the board behind him,” said Normal.

Newspaper articles of local interest had been clipped out and pinned up on a board at the store. Will had not paid them much attention.

“Wolves?”

“He said that Wolves were coming back into these mountains.”

“Maybe, in small numbers,” said Will. “and I doubt that there are any around here.”

“He said that there were hundreds and that there had been attacks nearby.”

Will laughed. “He was teasing you.”

“I hate animals and I’m terrified of Wolves,” said Normal. “I had to wait up by the hen house at night sometimes to scare away foxes, and Wolves are giant foxes – that’s what he said.”

“I see,” said Will.

“Are there Wolves in Los Angeles?”

“Not wolves with fur and teeth,” said Will. “Maybe of the two legged kind that hang out at bars.”

“So there are wolves.”

“Not of the kind you think.”

That did not satisfy her. She kept a careful eye out for lurking animals as they took their goods into the house, then kept peering out of the windows as Will set up the stove and refrigerator.

“Don’t think you’ll see any out there,” said Will. “They only come out at night, anyway.”

Later, after carefully inspecting the surrounding wasteland from the house’s windows and realising that there was not much cover for Wolves, Normal relaxed sufficiently to ask about the water views Will had mentioned. Will took her to the side veranda and pointed at the stream.

“We had a drainage ditch with more water at the farm,” she said, after looking at the stream.

“I said there were water views I didn’t say there was a lot of water,” said Will. “Come on, we’ve got time for a walk to stretch out legs before dinner. Let’s walk up to the top of that hill and see what’s there.”

“What happens if there are wolves?”

“Why do you think I’m getting you to come along? I can run faster than you so the wolves will stop to eat you. I’ll get away.”

Normal was sensible enough to know that she was being teased but still kept a careful eye on the tree line as they walked towards it.

“Can’t I stay with you?” she said after they had been walking for several minutes. “I mean you said you should have given me to child services, but I don’t know who they are.”

“That’s a part of the government that deals with kids like you. I dunno what the official name is in California but whatever the name they’d find you a good foster home – one without wolves.”

“You’ve been nice to me,” said Normal. “I’d prefer to stay with you.”

Will was touched. “I guess I’d like that to – something in my life - but I doubt that it’d be allowed. They’d want someone who has a girlfriend at least; preferably a wife and I don’t have either. All I’ve got to show in that department is a string of relationship disasters. I don’t have a job at the moment either, or even a place of my own and that wouldn’t look well to child services at all.”

“They have to give the okay?” asked Normal.

“A court has to approve but an okay from child services is vital. You can certainly stay with me for a time as the government doesn’t know about you. No birth certificate, remember? But that also means you can’t go to school or do anything much in your life.”

“Maybe if we find you a girlfriend and a job?” said Normal.

“I’ve been trying the girlfriend route for some time and nothing seems to work,” said Will.

When they returned Normal watched with interest as Will fried the patties and then mixed the salad.

“This is good, Will,” she said as she ate. “About your girlfriends; there was Red Witch...”

“Very brief.”

“Good as I don’t think I could have stuck with her,” said Normal. “Then there was Meg the stabber, Charlotte the cheater and Violet who ran away for a theatre job. I guess this is not a good track record, Will.”

“Great, I’m getting relationship advice from a ten year old.”

“Got to look closely at this area,” said Normal. “If I can get you a steady girlfriend, I can hang around. Say now that I’m finished where am I meant to take my plate?”

“I’m glad you asked that,” said Will.

A few minutes later Normal found herself at the kitchen sink washing dishes while Will looked on.

“Is this what happens in kitchens?” she asked.

“Cooking utensils have to be washed, so do plates. You never had to do washing up before?”

“Didn’t use plates much. Was given bread, mostly, and ate with my hands outside. Sometimes toasted, sometimes stale. Got different pastes on it. And I got these pills – vitamins I think.”

“Sounds grim,” said Will.

“It was horrible,” she said. “Can we watch a film after this?”

“In a few minutes. If I’m going to be cast in the role of dad, then I should check where you’re at with your schooling. Clear up the table once you’ve finished your dish washing labours. I’ll be back in a moment.”

When Will visited Meghan’s place he had put most of his personal library in the trunk of his car. He retrieved a book, flicked through it until he found the section he wanted then handed it to Normal.

“Read from the place I’ve marked.”

“I’ve never seen a book this big,” said Normal. Then she read, occasionally stumbling: “Throughout the South for fifty years there would be bitter-eyed women who looked backward, to dead times, to dead men, evoking memories that hurt and were futile... futile?”

“Means no use in doing it. Doesn’t help.”

“Okay... futile, bearing poverty with bitter pride because they had those memories. But Scarlett was never to look back.” Normal looked at the title page. “Gone with the Wind, Margaret Mitchell.”

“That was very good reading,” said Will. “I’m impressed.”

“This Scarlett never looked back?”

“She was from a rich family but was on the losing side of a war and became poor – went hungry for a time. I thought of it because although her character isn’t a likeable one and doesn’t exactly have a happy end in the book, she’s a survivor. But also I thought that neither of us should look back. It doesn’t help.”

“Can I read this?” asked Normal.

“Oh, sure. It’s advanced for a ten year old but it can’t hurt to try. There’s also a very famous film which follows the book reasonably closely. Maybe to watch that first might help. Don’t think we’ve got access to it here. Let’s see what’s available.”

The next morning Normal got up, checked for wolves from her bedroom window, then made herself toast as she had been taught to do at Hap’s place spread with margarine and jam. She was happily adapting to life outside the commune. Will was working on something on his computer which he had set up on the kitchen table, and she read over his shoulder while munching on toast.

David saves the world

It was a bad day for David when the aliens invaded. He could see their black ships in the sky. Someone had to fight them, but his parents were out for the day. The babysitter was watching television. It was up to David.

“What’s this for?” asked Normal.

“A friend of mine has drawings she wants to put in a bedtime story book of kids playing at being spacemen and wants a story to go with the drawings. Don’t munch in my ear darling and put a plate under the toast so you don’t just leave crumbs on the floor.”

“Okay,” said Normal and got the plate. Then she read -

David had a spaceship in the garage but it needed more energy. His Dad had told him that batteries had energy. He found a small square battery on a bench in the garage and put it in his spaceship. Then he took off, firing at the Alien spaceships.

“Hey wait,” said Normal. “You can’t have the kid killing aliens. Mums would never read a story like that to their kids, and where’s the girl? You gotta have a girl as well.”

“Hmmm! I guess that’s right,” said Will. “What about David and Michelle save the world.”

“Better,” said Normal. Then she read as Will wrote.

David’s sister Michelle was already at the garage.

“You need someone who’s smart to fight aliens,” she said.

“I’m smart,” said David.

“I’m smarter,” said Michelle. “I’m almost as smart as mum.”

“No one is that smart,” said David.

They got in the spaceship, took off and flew at the aliens.

“Yair!” they cried. “Yair! Go away aliens!”

“Yair?” asked Normal.

“Well, what would kids say to scare away aliens?”

“Yair is good.”

“What are my ferocious aliens going to look like?” asked Will.

“Wolves?” said Normal.

Will wrote to the point of Michelle and David confronting the King Wolf, a ferocious beast with sharp teeth and fur, in the throne room on his home planet.

“We are so angry because we’re thirsty,” said King Wolf. “We don’t have anything to drink.”

Michelle got a drink box from her lunch and gave it to King Wolf. Who tasted it. Straight away he became less fierce.

“That is very good,” he said.

“Our mum gives us a drink box to take to school every day,” said David.

“Your mother is a very smart woman,” said the King Wolf. “Go in peace. We will not fight Earth any longer.”

“That’s good Will,” said Normal. “Kids and their mums might like that.”

“I’ll see if it suits. Time to pack up. Wash up the breakfast things, pack up your stuff and clean your teeth. We’ll hit the road. We may be able to see your dad on the way.”

“My dad?”

“Pretty sure it’s your dad. I’ve even made an appointment.”

Will and Normal were waiting outside the house for sale when Samuel P. Lewis, realtor drove up in an aging Ford. He was a large, broad-shouldered man running distinctly to middle-aged fat, but in his younger days his square jaw and soft brown eyes would have earned him a second look from a lot of women.

“Hello folks!” he said cheerfully. “Great day for buying a house.”

“Sure is,” said Will, shaking his hand. “This is Grace.” He gestured at Normal.

Mr Lewis hesitated when he saw Normal then shook her hand. “You sure do remind me of someone, young lady. But that was years ago. Let’s go in, shall we?”

The house was a small white-clapboard, two-bedroom affair with a flat iron roof and a large living room window overlooking the front garden and driveway.

“The price range you nominated doesn’t get you much, even in this area,” said Mr Lewis when they got to the living room, “but it’s comfortable enough.”

“I’m sure it is,” said Will. “But this meeting is not about buying the house. You were a member of the Church of the Natural God about a decade ago where you knew one Amelia Marchetti? This is Amelia’s daughter.”

“Hello dad,” said Normal.

“Oh my lord!” said Lewis.

A lot of explanation later and having gotten over the initial shock, Samuel P. Lewis proved to be quite pleased that he had a daughter.

“I had no idea you even existed until just now, young lady,” he said, as they sat around the kitchen table. “My wife had two children who now live with us, but I don’t have any of my own or at least I didn’t. It was really quite a brief thing with your mother which she ended. A few others left about the same time as my wife and I, and she never said who your dad was until yesterday?”

Normal shook her head.

“You’ve had a tough time; I’m real sorry about that. I’ll do what I can to make it up to you, but I can’t take you. My business is in the pits just now and I’m dependent on my wife financially. She has money. The moment I take you home, looking so like your mother, I’ll be taken straight to the divorce courts. Are there any other options?”

“Just me, it seems,” said Will, “and I don’t think I’d be allowed. I just got dumped hard, like I always do, and I’m between writing jobs. The decision can be put off for a time, however, as Normal here doesn’t have a birth certificate.”

“Oh right,” said Lewis. “The Church was nutty about acknowledging any laws other than their own when I was on the farm.”

“I’ll leave you with my number and take yours,” said Will. “You can always just explain the calls by saying I have an interest in real estate in the area.”

Lewis nodded. “Don’t suppose you want to buy the house?”

“Sorry, although it seems nice. Not sure where I’m going just yet.”

Lewis gave Normal a self-conscious hug and waved them off.

“Now you have two parents,” said Will on the drive back, “even if neither can do much for you.”

“Better than what I had before,” said Normal, cheerfully. “Where are we going now?”

“Back to Hap’s. He wants to watch bad slasher movies with me. I’m sure Moira won’t mind watching a couple of kid’s movies with you.”

“You don’t want me to watch those bad movies?” asked Normal.

“I’m the dad here and I say those movies are definitely not suitable for young ladies. Kids movies for you.”

As it happened when they returned to Hap’s place, the multi-millionaire was enthusiastic over the increasing attention which *Party Town Terror* seemed to be getting.

“Two more screens in New York and one of those is for an evening showing,” said Hap. “Plus another here in LA and one in San Diego. The comic con crowd have heard about it.”

“That’s good,” said Will. “You might even make some of your money back.”

“Maybe,” said Hap. “I’m hopeful. In the meantime, it’s generated enough credibility for me to get a call over that *Jungle Kids* thing by some producers who want to fill a gap left by some show that dropped out. We can do the pilot on a back lot with computer graphics, but I need you to go and pitch the show to these guys.”

“Me?”

“It’s your idea. You’ve done the treatment you’ve got the characters sketched out and you’ve got a script.”

“Half a script. I’d better start work on fleshing it out. You’re not presenting with me?”

“Got software development business to attend to – business where I don’t lose money,” said Hap. “Just do the pitch; try not to mess up.”

“You getting Evan to direct?”

“He’s already on board. If we get it, the time frame is crazy. We gotta grab whoever’s around.”

“If that’s the case, then Normal come here a sec.” Normal, who had been talking to Moira, came and looked up questioningly at Will. “Why not test Normal here for the part of Dana, the smart, tough one who knows about animals and the jungle?”

“But I hate animals and I don’t know anything about them or about jungles,” protested Normal.

“The animals will be just production guys wearing tags for the computer images. You won’t have to go anywhere near animals and you just read your wise words off a script.”

“Sounds better,” said Normal.

“Your mum was an actress remember?” said Will. “She was in soaps. You might have something. Just test anyway,” he said to Hap. “Evan should have the say on this.”

“Sure, whatever,” said Hap. “Evan is coming over tomorrow. You want to try a screen test young lady?”

“Doesn’t sound so bad,” said Normal, shrugging her shoulders.

Will was deep in his script work when Connie Leighton of all people called him.

“Connie, this is an honor,” said Will. “What can I do for you?”

“You remember my brother, Ty – he said you found him someplace along with Meg.”

“I remember very well.”

“He’s gone missing again and my mum is worried. I’m well out of LA now, can you look in the same place?”

“Oh sure, I think I remember where that house was.”

“Thanks, Will. I’ve always figured Ty just has to find his own way, but my mum wants to get him into rehab. I’m not hopeful but if you find him could you pass on the request? I can get a spot for him no problems.”

“I can do that,” said Will, “but my understanding of these things is that if he doesn’t want to go to rehab then there’s no point in forcing him.”

“That’s my understanding of it too, Will,” said Connie. “Just try. If he says no it’s his choice, but it gets my mother off my back. Now, what is all this about Meg getting engaged? I thought you two were an item.”

An hour later, Will thumbed the call button on the front gate intercom for the drug house where he had met Ty.

“No walk-ins,” said a voice before Will had a chance to say anything. “Cars only with the gate key number.”

“I’m here to pick up Ty Leighton,” said Will. “His family are concerned about him and I’ve got some money to pay what he owes. But if you don’t let me in to get him I’ve got to try other means and that might involve talking to the cops and I don’t want to do that. Let me in, I pay what he owes and we both walk away.”

Whoever was on the other end of the intercom did not reply for several seconds, then Will heard the street gate click.

“Walk straight to the front door,” the intercom said.

The bearded man with hot, black eyes was in his usual spot by the door. Will nodded at him; the man sneered. Evil Buddha was in the living room and, if he remembered Will from the party, made no mention of it.

“Seven hundred dollars,” he snarled.

“I don’t see Ty. Let’s see him and then I hand over the money.”

This statement earned him another sneer, then Evil Buddha jerked a thumb at an open door at the far end of the room. As on his first visit, Will heard the faint murmur of voices from that darkened room. He walked in and became aware of people, men and women, lying on couches and beds scattered through the room – perhaps a dining room with the table and chairs taken out. A few were talking quietly with their neighbours but most were silent. A single attendant, a whippet-like male with blonde hair, sat on a chair at the other end of the room. He wore a breathing mask that filtered the air and a stethoscope. A monitoring instrument of some sort was on the table next to him. Will suddenly just wanted to find Ty and get away from that house as soon as possible.

“Ty?” said Will, uncertainly. The murmuring stopped. The attendant paid no attention to him. Will switched on the flashlight attachment on his phone and scanned a few of the couches, to find Connie’s brother in a far corner.

“Come on,” said Will lifting him up. Close up Ty smelt.

“Wha...” said Ty.

“Connie’s been hassling me about you; said she’d get her bodyguards to beat me up if I didn’t get you.”

That was nonsense, of course, but Will was trying to kid Ty into coming and he was sure the singer wouldn’t mind.

Ty smiled. “Tough kid. Say you were with Meghan that time.”

“That’s me. Come on.”

He grabbed the still high Ty around the waist and half lifted, half marched him out to reception, counted out the hundred dollar notes he had taken from a bank machine just before coming to the house then hurried past the ferocious doorman, out to his car.

By the time they got to Hap’s place Ty had come down from his high sufficiently to ask, “how much do I owe you, man?”

“I’m Will and it’s Connie who owes me. She got me to get you out of there. Pay her.”

“Okay, and thanks.”

“She also said to tell you once and only once, that the rehab option is open – she said to ask just to get your mum off her back.”

“Yeah, well that option’s been open for a while, I guess,” said Ty. “But I couldn’t face them.”

“You don’t have to face them,” said Will. “I’m sure it can be arranged so that you go straight in and don’t speak to either of them.”

They walked through to the kitchen while Ty thought about it.

“Thanks man, but I’ll still pass,” he said finally.

“Whatever. I’ve got a griller here I can make something. Get food into you and then Connie might not have me beat up.”

“Sure Will, something grilled if it keeps you healthy.”

Normal walked in. She was wearing Moira’s cast-offs as pee-jays.

“Hello,” said Ty.

“Hi.”

“You should be in bed,” said Will.

“Got thirsty. Thought I’d get some of that bottled water Moira’s got. She said I could.”

“Oh sure,” said Will.

“Nice kid,” said Ty after Normal had gone. “Yours?”

Will told Ty about how he had found Normal at Connie’s house and about her history. The next morning when he got up he found Ty deep in conversation with Normal and heard them laughing.

Later that morning Ty said, “if I agree to rehab I don’t have to speak to Connie or my mum?”

“I’m sure I can arrange to have a driver take you straight there, no questions asked.”

Ty sighed. “Talking to Normal made me think I should try. She’s quite a kid – a survivor.”

“She is,” said Will.

“Can you call Connie’s people and get them to set it up for me?”

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Meghan’s stretch limousine passed long lines of hopefuls waiting to get into the new nightclub, The Stellar, uptown from the Marquee and downtown from the Lavo and Paradise. The owners wanted to make a splash and what better way than to spend money to get the entertainment industry bad girls Connie Leighton and Clarise Chalmers together.

Meghan certainly did not feel like smiling but she was a professional and able to put on a game face at command. She made the big Hollywood entrance and smiled her way through a row of fans behind a rope who had been waiting for hours to exchange a few words or take a selfie with the big star. Edouard followed close behind watching the crowd carefully. Then it was into the club with its endless thumping music and a few words with the owner who declared himself delighted that the star could come. Meghan smiled as best she could. Then she saw Connie. As it was before the dancing started, they could still talk over the music.

“You’ve been keeping the Bad Diva brand in the news,” said Connie. “And you dumped Will.”

“I didn’t dump Will.”

“He says you did.”

“What? You’ve spoken to him?”

“Sure, I called him to see if he could get Ty from that drug house you guys found him in. He said he walked in on you naked with Bo Benjamin.”

Meghan nodded and told her what had happened.

“Oh man, you got roofied and stabbed Will?” said Connie. “That explains a lot. Didn’t think you’d go for Bo.”

“Soon as I got clear headed I had Bo thrown out of my suite, and I’ve been doing damage control ever since. Now Will’s gone off with that red-haired porn star.”

“That’s over. I asked him about that and he said he was upset about being dumped with just a text and she offered. Considering what’s happened and if you want him back you can overlook some red-haired action.”

“But I didn’t dump him. I didn’t text him.”

“I didn’t think you’d do it like that but he sent me the text,” said Connie.

“I never sent him any text.”

Connie got out her phone, tapped it a few times then gave it to Meghan who read the text.

“But I never sent this,” said Meghan, after reading it. “I was out of it for the whole weekend and the number I have for him doesn’t work. I’ve tried calling him but I just get number no longer in service.”

“Get my man, Colby here to have a look at it.” Connie laid a proprietorial hand on the man who had been standing next to her eyeing the crowd.

“Never can get used to these clubs,” said Colby. Meghan noted that he was tall and good looking. “Let me look at the phones.”

“I liked your nerd so I got one of my own,” said Connie, smiling. “Like you and Will, I can push him around and he doesn’t care.”

“The problem is that the number you have is different to the one in Connie’s phone,” Colby said.

“Really?” said Meghan. “But I haven’t changed it.”

“It’s always been the same number since the hospital benefit,” said Connie.

“Can you change it please?”

“No problem,” said Colby. He tapped Meghan’s phone a few more times. “You know Will’s number is listed in your calls on Monday.”

“But Will didn’t call me.”

“Now I see. You missed it because the number is blocked.”

“What? I haven’t blocked anyone. I don’t know how to block them.”

“Will also said your new assistant – Bella, was it? – found him at the police station and told him you’d decided he was out,” added Connie.

“She never told me she saw Will,” said Meghan, then realisation hit her. “Bella’s done all this. She sent the text, blocked Will’s number and changed it in the list. That’s why I haven’t been able to contact him.”

“That makes sense,” said Connie, “but why would she do that? What has she got against Will?”

“Oh, she has a mad idea that part of being an assistant is finding a good match for me and thinks Will is a himbo – a bunch of muscles who makes coffee.”

“He’s sure got the muscles from what I understand,” said Connie, “but he ain’t no himbo.”

“I know Will,” said Colby. “I would have said smartest guy in the room.”

“What I don’t understand,” said Meghan, “is why did Bo make up that crap about being engaged. I mean, I was out of it but I’m sure I wasn’t asked and what did he need me for? I’m certain he doesn’t care for me and he’d have groupies all over him.”

“Maybe because he’s on the way out,” said Connie. “Heard it from one of the managers. He’s still one of the majors but he was having trouble filling the stadiums in Australia. Now they’re booking smaller venues for him. It’ll happen to me sooner or later, I hope later. But it’s happening to him now and he knows it. In a couple of years, he’ll be on nostalgia tours playing to older audiences at the larger clubs. It’ll be all over and he hasn’t kept his money. Maybe he thought a big time marriage to you would keep the media attention on him, keep him on top that bit longer. You didn’t need him at all. He needed you.”

Meghan thought about that for a few moments, feeling more hopeful than she had done for days. Maybe she could get back with Will, and she was grateful to Connie for the help.

“You know I broke up with Ty over drugs.”

“I worked that out later, but you could have told me at the time,” the singer said.

“He begged me not to, said he’d clean up.”

“That boyfriend in college you said I stole he came onto me and I didn’t know you were dating him.”

“I realised that afterwards,” said Meghan. “Other girlfriends said he tried them.”

“And I won that prom queen contest fair and square,” said Connie. “Those things are a popularity contest as much as anything and back then you were a hard arse.”

“Yeah, well, I guess, sorry about that,” said Meghan.

“You ladies have quite a history,” said Colby.

“It’s all over between red-haired and Will?” asked Meghan.

“She’s onto several others, so my spies in that house tell me,” said Connie. “It’s a useful source of gossip, but when I get back to LA it’ll be time to clear it all out and have the engagement party.”

“Engagement?”

“Sure, me and Colby. He popped the question.”

“Congratulations!” said Meghan and meant it. “I hope you two will be very happy.”

“I told Will,” said Connie, “and he said I wasn’t gaining a husband but losing a hit breakup song.”

Meghan smiled.

“The way the music industry is,” said Connie, “the hit was real tempting, but I’ll keep Colby.”

“Worth more than a hit, I guess I can live with that,” said Colby, grinning.

“Oh yeah, and Will got Ty to go into rehab,” said Connie.

“That’s great! Your family has been trying to get him to go for a while I’m told,” said Meghan.

“Only it wasn’t Will it was someone called Normal – a cult survivor.”

“Normal? What sort of name is that and who is this person?”

“I dunno,” said Connie. “In all the excitement I forgot to ask details. He said he found her hungry in my house waiting for someone else.”

“Her?”

“Don’t think it’s anything like that but, like I said, I didn’t ask. When you speak to Will and it all checks out you face some competition, my mother wants to marry him. Come on, let’s do our jobs and work the room.”

Later in the limousine on the way to the airport, Meghan closed the partition between herself and Edouard and the local driver, who were discussing ice hockey, and called Bella. It was very late but her assistant was out on the town and apparently enjoying herself.

“Bella can you step away from the crowd, there’s a few things to discuss,” said Meghan. She was quiet and calm, but there was a note in her voice that caught Bella’s attention.

“Yes, boss,” she said, excusing herself and stepping outside the bar she had been in.

“I was just talking to Connie Leighton at The Stellar.”

“Right, how was it?”

“Good. Connie said she’d spoken to Will a couple of days ago about something else, and Will said he’d got a text from me dumping him.”

Bella was silent for a moment, then said “oh yes”.

“A friend of hers looked at my phone and found that Will’s number had been changed in the contact list and his right number had been blocked. There is only one person who could have done all that. You must have worked out my pass code.”

“Well, yes, I thought that I should...”

“I’m also told you saw Will at the police station and you told him I’d said it was over.”

“You sorta did say that.”

“I was out of my mind on drugs for heaven’s sake, and that total sleaze Benjamin kept me strung out the whole weekend. You didn’t realise that something was wrong?”

“You just seemed happy, and Bo Benjamin is such an idol it seemed like a good fit.”

“He’s a sleaze, who was hoping a hook up with me might keep his career from sliding down hill. Connie said he’s on the way out.”

“He’s still such a legend and I only worked out that Will had been there on the Sunday when I asked about two bags in the entrance hall.”

“You didn’t see what happened? I thought you did.”

“No, I went out for coffee as I thought it would be better if you were alone with Bo. I was just told the bodyguards had grabbed someone who got into the room and thought it was an intruder. Then after realising the bags didn’t belong to anyone I searched them and found that ring – quite a sweet ring I thought.”

“Ring!?! What ring?”

“There was a ring case in Will’s shoulder bag with a ring in it.” Bella had not remembered the ring until she talked about searching the bags and the reference had just slipped out. She also had not fully realised just how serious Meghan was about Will until that moment. She added lamely. “I don’t know why it was there.”

“Go on,” said Meghan, an edge to her voice. “Then what happened?”

“I went down to the police station and vouched for him to the police, then told him you’d moved on.”

“What did he say?”

“He said he’d heard you gotten engaged at the hospital and was sorry he couldn’t make you happy.”

“Oh my god!” said Meghan, putting her free hand to her face. “What a disaster. Then you sent that text and changed the numbers?”

“Well, yes, I thought it was for the best. I thought that you wouldn’t want your new relationship with Bo Benjamin spoiled by old boyfriends trying to contact you.” In fact, Bella had changed the numbers to save her job but she was not about to admit that.

“Really?” said Meghan. “What made you think you had the right to mess with my love life? I hired you as my assistant not as my mother, and for the record my mother adores Will.”

“I was trying to help and, well, he did catch you with Benjamin.”

“I know what I did and I know I messed up, big time, but let’s get one piece of business over with first. In England if someone loses their job they say they’ve been sacked, or they’ve been given the sack don’t they?”

“Now wait..” said Bella.

“Well guess what this is America,” Meghan shouted into the phone, “and you’re fired! You come near me or mine again and I’ll ram half a dozen lawyers up your scrawny rear end!” She hung up and flung the phone on the seat beside her. After a moment’s thought she picked it up and blocked Bella’s number as now she knew how to do it.

Edouard rang on the intercom. “Everything all right, ma’am?”

“Just taking care of business, Edouard. Everything is fine.”

Then she rang Emma. As LA was three hours behind New York her other assistant was still up.

“How are you feeling now?”

“I’m okay, I’ve stopped crying,” said Emma. “I can work. Josh was trash and I’m better off without him.”

“Atta girl!” said Meghan. “Cause I need you to be my assistant this week, or until Mia comes back.”

“Okay, um, what’s happened to Bella?”

“I just fired her arse!”

“Really? Like the way you use to fire Will...”

“No as in go now and change the security passcode on the house as I think that was all she had access to. And remember to send me the new access code so I can get into my own house. I’m on my way back now.”

“Okay, um, about you and Will, what’s happening there?”

Meghan told her what she had found out.

“Oh wow!” said Emma. “That’s why the engagement announcement which I didn’t believe.”

“The trouble was that Bella didn’t know me so she didn’t deny it or get help and Will handles my publicity as you know and he was in hospital and a police station – after I’d helped stab him.”

“Poor Will,” said Emma.

“Poor me, too,” said Meghan.

“Sure, poor you, but you can’t blame Will for what happened and afterwards he thought he’d been dumped. Do you think there’s a chance for you guys?”

“I have to find him and either beg for forgiveness and for him to come back, or I’ll kill him.”

“Oh okay,” said Emma, then asked tentatively “do you know which way you’re leaning? As your assistant, I need to know as you might want a lawyer, or maybe a weapon. I’m not sure I can get a gun.”

“No guns for now,” said Meghan. “I may yet be begging, but it’s a thought. Is there anything happening on Monday?”

“I’ll have to check but a film financier backing that *Moon Shadow* project you’re starting next week has asked for a meeting. It came through on the business line just today. The problems in Vancouver have caused them concerns and want to ask you directly what happened. As shooting is about to start they’re asking if it can be Monday.”

“How embarrassing, oh all right! First thing Monday and then we find Will.”

“Okay.”

After hanging up from Emma, Meghan looked in a side pocket of the bag she had with her, found the locket Will had given her and put it around her neck.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

On Monday morning Meghan was being driven along Hollywood Boulevard in her BMW, Emma by her side, George and Noah in the front seats. Maybe it was time to get a stretch limousine, she thought, as even the spacious BMW was becoming crowded. But the garage at her house was too small for such a car, and was she really going to move simply because she needed a stretch limo?

That was something she would have discussed with Will. Then it occurred to her that she had first met Will in a bar close to where they now were, and she was grateful for the sunglasses she wore as they hid the fact that her eyes were wet. She was also glad that Emma was on the phone busy sorting out her engagements with Stella Buckingham's office and the modelling agency she also used. Emma's scarifying boyfriend experience had made her both quieter and perhaps more serious about her job. She had been paying the bills with the account she and Mia had access to, she told the star. More importantly, as far as Meghan was concerned, Will also had access to that account but had not touched a dime. He had been back to the house, however, while Emma had been out and taken away some of his stuff, and that was a real concern.

She had to find Will but had put off making that vital call on the Sunday. She had arrived home only on Sunday morning, after lengthy delays at the airport and on the roads, too tired to do anything but crash for a few hours. Then she put off the call partly out of dread over what might happen.

"Here we are Meghan," said George. He was now the star's full time security guy and, like all others in her entourage, now called her by her proper first name. "We'll get out and Noah will find parking elsewhere."

She nodded and stepped out not waiting for George to open the door, to audible gasps from passers-by who hurriedly reached for their phones. The financier's office was one flight up where the receptionist started gushing the moment she saw the star.

"Oh Ms Chalmers, what an honour it is to meet you. We're delighted you could come."

"Eh, delighted," muttered Meghan, sunglasses still on, and did her best to smile.

One of the senior executives appeared almost immediately at the mention of the star's name and also gushed about it being an honour.

"Not at all," said Meghan automatically.

"Mr Babbage, you still have your original nine thirty appointment," said the receptionist. "They just came in. I've put them in the smaller conference room and told them you'll be a while now."

"That's fine, that producer guy Hap told me not to get him started on his theories about Star Wars and he'll be fine."

The fog that had settled over Meghan's mind suddenly cleared. "Wait, theories about Star Wars?" she said. "Is that other person Will Moreland by any chance?"

"Why yes, Ms Chalmers, but your appointment was the more important, of course, so we..."

"Where is this smaller conference room?"

"Just down the corridor there," said the receptionist pointing, "but you're in the larger conference room this..."

Meghan, who did not care where the larger conference room was, kicked off her high heels and ran down the corridor much to the astonishment of the receptionist and Babbage. Emma scampered after her bleating "Meghan, honey, maybe I should go first and see how things are."

After a moment's hesitation George picked up the shoes and followed, saying "I'll be back to explain" over his shoulder.

Meghan saw Will and what appeared to her to be a young girl in this small conference room – a normal work conference room with full length windows on the corridor side – and charged through the door. Normal saw her coming and jumped out of the way saying “whoa!”

Will also jumped up to meet the onrushing Meghan torrent and was backed up against the wall a finger pointed at his face.

“You,” said Meghan. “How long was it going on between you and Red and who is this Normal person?”

“It was all very short with Denni,” said Will, “just a couple of days after you stabbed and dumped me.”

“You’re Meg the stabber?” said Normal. “Far out! You’re famous!”

“And who is she?” demanded Meghan flinging her other arm out to point at Normal.

Emma and George had also arrived at the meeting room to stand uncertainly just inside the door.

“That is Normal,” said Will. “Say hello Normal.”

Normal waved and gave her best cheesy grin. “Hi!”

“I found her hungry and totally alone at Connie’s place.”

“Oh!” said Meghan looking at Normal, then back at Will. “There’s no one else?”

“Normal here said she’d look for girlfriends for me but hasn’t started yet.”

Normal nodded confirmation.

“We need to talk,” said Meghan. “Sit!” she pointed at a nearby small leather sofa.

“If this is about the formal exit interview and how I’ll find some nice girl to be happy with can’t we take it as read,” said Will. “I could do without an exit interview.”

“It’s not over Will Moreland!” Meghan said. “It was never over!”

“It’s not? But I thought...”

“Let me explain,” she said. “Sit!” She pointed at the sofa again.

“Oh okay,” said Will hesitantly. “Hi guys,” he said to George and Emma who said ‘hey’ back. “Maybe you could take Normal here out and wait down the corridor. You can swap life stories and, Emma, can you keep an ambulance on speed dial.”

“Ambulance on call. You’ve got it, Will.”

Will and Meghan sat on the sofa. Meghan finally took off her sunglasses.

“I love you I want you back,” said Meghan. “There I said it.”

“But what about me finding you with Benjamin?”

“That was a mistake..”

“A mistake!” snapped Will.

“I mean the mistake was taking the drugs he offered,” said Meghan almost sobbing. “I wouldn’t have done anything without that. I didn’t want him at any time.”

“Drugs?” said Will, eyeing Meghan narrowly, then he picked the star up and swung her over to his lap.

“I got a confused call from Connie on Saturday night,” he said. “She also talked about drugs but she was so high or drunk or whatever I didn’t get what she said. Let’s hear what happened from the beginning.”

“To recap,” said Will after the explanations, “despite being a world-famous movie star you made the classic chic mistake of being hospitable to a guy expecting him to behave himself after I warned you not to do that. As a result, you got drugged, roofied and, well, raped.”

Looking sheepish, Megan nodded.

“There was no betrayal on your part, just a huge mistake,” said Will, “or maybe an ordinary mistake which had all these horrible consequences, which we must make sure is not repeated. Let’s look at increasing your entourage and adopting procedures about letting in guys. There are a lot of wolves out there and you shouldn’t accept drugs or drinks from them while alone in your dressing gown. You also shouldn’t have gone there without your own security guy. That other guy you had in should have been there from the start and kept Benjamin’s bodyguards out of the suite.”

She nodded. “Fair enough.”

“And I have an apology - I’m sorry I didn’t realise it at the time and gone back to the hotel or called the police.”

“Bella was the huge mistake. I really messed up there as well.”

“Judging people just on an interview is impossible. You weren’t to know that she’d get these strange ideas or that those ideas would have horrible results, or that she’d try to cover up her mistakes. Only have people you’ve known for a while as assistants. In other words, the mistake is maybe not to leave hiring decisions to the last minute.”

Meghan nodded. “Okay.”

“More importantly this is all horrible. We should get Benjamin arrested for rape.”

“I don’t remember much about it,” said Meghan. “I only remember you coming in, in a haze, and at the time I thought the whole thing hilarious. Will I’m so sorry, I would never have done anything voluntarily. You didn’t see anything was wrong?”

“I didn’t see your eyes which would have been the give-away, then I got jumped by the bodyguards and knocked out – are we going to the police?”

“Mother told me to do that but she even checked it out with lawyers and there might be problems in proving anything. No one at the time realised that I was drugged up and we don’t have the drugs or the wine for testing. Anyway, it’s really embarrassing.”

“Reasonable doubt I suppose,” said Will. “What we can do if you want, is to give the world a big hint about what really happened by taking out a restraining order against Benjamin, citing the fact that you had to run out of the hotel room to avoid him, get a maid to hide you and hired a bodyguard to keep him away, but he still passed notes to you. Easy to show all of that especially just for a restraining order, and it’ll be a warning to others.”

She nodded. “Okay, let’s do that.”

“After that totally horrible experience did you manage to finish off the filming?”

“That was worse,” said Meghan, “I had to do this shower scene but we ran out of hot water halfway through and there was no time to heat more so both myself and Don” (her co-star) “had to do it in this nearly cold water. We did a lot of yelling and moaning but because it was so cold.”

Will laughed. “You poor thing.”

“Hey, no laughing,” said Meghan laughing herself, glad that the conversation had turned to lighter matters. “You try acting passionate when you’re freezing, and what about you and that Red Devil person.” She thumped Will on the chest. “What happened there?”

“That turned bad real quick,” said Will. “I was in her room a couple of times then she went and got two friends of hers, a man and a woman, and I thought ‘this is interesting’.”

“I bet!” said Meghan, pushing herself away from Will’s body to glare at him.

“But it turned out that the girl was for her and the guy was me.”

“Nooooo!”

“I had to fight this guy off.”

Meghan laughed and lay down again on Will. “Was he good looking?”

“Hey, no laughing,” said Will, laughing in his turn. “That’s serious for a guy. I can’t judge whether a guy is good looking.”

Normal, Emma and Henry waiting down the corridor heard the laughing and thought that the ambulance might not be needed.

“If you say so,” said Meghan, resting her head against Will’s cheek. “I love you, are you going to come back home?”

“I want to come back but there is a complication – Normal. She has been hanging around with me the past week and she has no one at all.”

“No family?”

“Nope, I’ll explain later but her mum is in jail and her dad can’t acknowledge her.”

“This sounds like quite a story,” said Meghan.

“It is but as I can’t bring myself to turn her over to child services, I’m going to apply to be her guardian.”

“What?” said Meghan sitting up again. “We’d be like parents?”

“I won’t be adopting her, just get myself declared guardian so I’d be legally responsible for her to the courts. No need for her to go to a foster home.”

“We’ll have a child in the house?”

“It’s not as if she’s a baby or a toddler. She’s ten and seems to have it together. Maybe those will be famous last words, but I don’t think so.”

Meghan sank back onto Will. “But you won’t be able to stay with me on location like you used to,” she said in a small voice.

“Meghan Kowalski, I’m not leaving you alone for any length of time after what just happened,” said Will, sharply. “Along with the re-organisation of your entourage which is part of the deal, maybe we can come to some arrangement over a nanny. Mrs Mendez has a sister looking for a job. I won’t be able to stay as much as I did but I can balance the two.”

“We can do that,” said Meghan, playing with Will’s collar.

“There is also a related issue,” said Will, dragging his shoulder bag to him, with Meghan still on his lap, then rummaging inside it.

“A single guy applying to be guardian of ten year old girl might be seen as creepy.” He brought out the ring case and flipped it open to show the ring that Bella had seen back in Vancouver. Meghan went still. Will put the case on the conference table. “But a guy applying for a

guardianship who is engaged to the most glamorous woman in Hollywood – a woman who he happens to be crazy in love with – is not so creepy.”

“I see,” said Meghan quietly, looking at Will.

“This is early in the reconciliation process, but you did use the L Word, twice.”

“I did, didn’t I,” said Meghan.

“I’m now meeting your L Word back and raising you the E Word.”

“Are we in a card game now?”

“We’re playing an age-old game,” said Will. “But just before we start this round given what happened last time do you by any chance have anything sharp or pointed in your hands?”

Meghan spread her hands to show that she was not holding anything.

“What about anywhere in the room?”

They made a show of looking, then Meghan said, “I can always look in the other rooms” and made to get up, but Will pulled her back. She giggled and that told him he was going to be accepted.

“Just stay put Meghan Kowalski. I’m trying to be romantic here and you want to look for things to stab me with. I might point out that our last encounter was the sort of nightmare event that makes serial killers out of guys. I’d be featured in one of those streaming series where I’m a fiendishly clever serial killer murdering blonde fiancées who is hunted by a specialised police squad. They’d work out my motivation for the killings and then shoot me. In the final scene they’d say something like ‘poor guy - terrible what happened to him’, but I’d still be shot.”

Meghan laughed. “Poor Will – but I can’t imagine you being a serial killer.”

“I don’t want to be one, as on those shows it involves getting shot. Where was I?”

“Being romantic.”

“Oh right, yes. You know I tried very hard not to fall in love with you.”

“Did you?” said Meghan.

“Yep, my track record with actresses was not good at all, if you recall and I didn’t want to go through that again. Why do you think it was so easy to fire me those times, or that I never tried to sell myself to you or make any sort of sweet talk or flirt.”

“I’m glad I didn’t get the sweet talk or flirting,” said Meghan. “I can’t imagine that from you.”

“Maybe that was my mistake,” said Will. “If I’d tried sweet talking you’d have got rid of me fast. As it was for a while there you had a boyfriend.”

“And you had a girlfriend.”

“I was an older woman’s sex stop – not that I minded. Then you ambushed me with those club dresses of yours. Particularly the one you wore after that drug party thing. I had takeaways and there you were, a vision, and you kissed me. It wasn’t fair.”

“I remember,” said Meghan. “And all’s fair in love and something else.”

“Anyway, over this past week, I thought history had repeated itself and I was doomed to be a serial killer.”

“I don’t want you to become a serial killer of blondes.”

“Then accept the ring. See how it fits. No need to set dates just yet. Of course, I’ll sign whatever pre-nup you want.”

She put her left hand up to his mouth.

“You bet you will,” she said then drew her hand back and waggled the fingers. “Hit me.”

Will put the ring on her finger and they kissed.

“Are we going to set a date?” she said gazing at her ring.

“I just thought to delay, see how your mum and friends react.”

“Only my reaction matters and I’m wearing the ring,” said Meghan. “Anyway, my mother has been a cheerleader for Team Will day one and my friends wouldn’t give you your shirt back. They’ll deal.”

“Okay, that’s good, but we still have check schedules. A honeymoon of a couple of weeks would be good. What about being a spring bride? It can get hot in LA in summer and that’s enough time to prepare. Should hold your mother for the moment until we check schedules.”

Meghan nodded, still gazing at her ring. “The real problem may be announcing to the world as I’m still getting calls about the engagement with Bo and I’ve denied it like a million times.”

“I can clean that up, and in our announcement, we can quote Jane Austin.”

“Jane Austin?” said Meghan, finally taking her eyes off her ring to gaze at her new fiancé in astonishment.

“Sure, Austin. I’ll explain later. For now, we should ask Normal if she wants to come home with us. As it means she might avoid that trip to child services I don’t think she’ll mind.” Will raised his voice. “Hey Normal! Come in here!”

Normal came in, followed by Emma, curious about what was happening. The assistant saw the ring and gushed, “congratulations! I hope you two will be very happy!”

“Thank you,” said Meghan, beaming.

“I’m glad I don’t have to buy a gun.”

“Gun?” said Will.

“We were discussing what to do if this meeting went in a different direction,” said Meghan.

“Okay, no gun is good,” said Will.

“Normal, is it?” said Meghan. “I want Will to come back to live with me and I’m happy for you to come too. I guess I’ll be a sort of mum and I’ve no idea what I’ll be like at that, but we can try to get along.”

“Are there any wolves around your place?” asked Normal.

“Wolves?” said Meghan looking at Will.

“I’ll explain later,” said Will. “No wolves, just a cat.”

“I think I can handle a cat,” said Normal. “Do you have a dishwasher?”

Meghan looked at Will again.

“Yes you have a dishwasher,” said Will.

“I have a dishwasher,” said Meghan.

“I’m in,” said Normal. “Does this mean I don’t go to child services?”

“Boosts the chances a whole lot,” said Will. “Incidentally, Normal here tested for a pilot of a kids series the team is putting together - *Jungle Kids*.” She may get the part,” he started laughing, “of the smart, tough kid who knows about the planet’s animals.”

“Hey, no laughing,” said Normal, laughing herself. “It’s your script.”

“If you get it I’m going to put in lots of alien wolves. Now, guys can you excuse as again for just a couple of minutes, as something else has occurred to me.”

“What else has occurred to you Will Moreland?” asked Meghan after the others had gone.

“There is one other condition about my coming back that I’m going to insist upon.”

“And what other condition is that?”

“You have to listen to my theories on Star Wars.”

“Noooo!” said Meghan, burying her head in Will’s shirt. “Oh very well, it won’t kill me I suppose.”

“The thing is that the Jedi Knights were this unaccountable sort-of galactic police force, that became a power bloc and an obstacle to reform of the military when a real crisis hit the Empire....”

“Yes, dear,” said Meghan, gazing at her ring.

FIRST EPILOG

Sidewalk Stars News reader Barbara flashed her gleaming teeth. “The top news today folks and the real surprise is that Clarise Chalmers, the siren of the shower, has announced her engagement to boyfriend and business consultant William Moreland who is scriptwriter for the surprise hit of the season *Party Town Terror* billed as a slasher with style.

“Unlike the previous engagement announcement between Chalmers and rock legend Bo Benjamin, this time both sides agree that they are engaged. As Moreland, a former member of the national swimming team who has also written children’s books, has previously been reported as paring with *Party Town* star Denni Devlin, the announcement blindsided a lot of people.

However, the happy couple have responded by quoting Jane Austen. For those that remember the classic novel *Pride & Prejudice* at the end of the book heroine Elizabeth Bennet surprises even her own sister by suddenly declaring that she is going to marry William Darcy, the man she has spent most of the book denouncing.

In response Elizabeth says that “Perhaps I did not always love him so well as I do now. But in such cases as these, a good memory is unpardonable.”

“There you are Ken, who can argue with the greatest romantic fiction writer of them all. The couple are going to forgive and forget each other’s errors, but not those of Bo Benjamin.”

“That’s right Barbara,” said Ken who appeared on camera in front of a photograph of a law court to establish his legal credentials. “The couple have taken out a restraining order against the rock legend and his bodyguards, which sheds some light on what happened in Toronto where Chalmers’ previous supposed engagement was announced. Among other allegations, Chalmers says that she ran out of her hotel room after Benjamin grabbed her and had a maid hide her. Then she insisted that hotel management throw Benjamin out of her suite, along with drugs the singer

had with him and a bottle of wine which the actress says, and I quote the documents handed to the court 'a strange effect on her'. Chalmers has declined to comment further on what she meant by 'strange effect'."

Benjamin has completely denied any wrongdoing but another woman has come forward to make a complaint to police about an incident in a New York hotel room...

Singer Bo Benjamin in his rock uniform of black leather pants, black shirt and jacket and single silver bracelet around his neck knocked on the hotel room door, flowers in hand. After a few moments, the door was flung open and a furious Will charged out, grabbing the rock star's shirt and driving him straight into the bodyguard standing behind him, forcing them both back against the wall. The second bodyguard tried to intervene, but Will spared one hand for a split second for a vicious chop on the man's Adam's apple. The bodyguard fell away, choking.

"What was in that wine?" he snarled in Benjamin's face.

The first bodyguard tried to push away from the wall but was pinned against it by the swimmer's considerable strength. He could not get any leverage. He tried to hit Will but could not get around his boss.

"Just something to help people relax," gasped the singer.

"Relax! I'll show you relaxed," said Will and he threw Benjamin against the second bodyguard. The singer slumped to the ground. Will had decided not to hit Benjamin as the singer was slight and might do some real damage.

"I was visiting my fiancée," protested Benjamin from the floor.

"We were never engaged," said Meghan who had also come out of the room. She was amazed at this sudden show of aggression from her normally mild fiancé and, to her own surprise, gratified that her honour was being defended in this way. "You drugged and raped me and lied about this engagement, that's what happened. Now I'm engaged to Will."

"You have choices thing one and thing two," said Will to the bodyguards. The first bodyguard had prised himself off the wall and was eyeing Will for a charge, but George had also come out to stand on between him and Will. "If we had decided to press charges with the police, you two would have been investigated along with the boss as accomplices to rape – you can accept that risk or make a stand."

"We didn't know about the wine.." said the first bodyguard.

"Shut up!" snapped Will. "Save it for someone who wants to listen. Just remember what I said about choices and remember that there is a court order preventing any of you from coming within one hundred yards of us. Do not let me see you again or I'll get you busted for breaching the order. I'd say, 'have a nice life' but I dunno if that's going to happen."

"Bo, never come near me again," said Meghan and went back into the hotel room, followed by Will and George, who gave them a little wave as he closed the door.

SECOND EPILOG

The gleaming teeth of Sidewalk Star's announcer Ken seemed to have lost some their sheen. "Bad news for rock legend Bo Benjamin today, Barbara. Another allegation amounting to an accusation of rape where the victim is drugged through a combination of wine and drugs has surfaced, and this time the police have witnesses. Two of the star's bodyguards have come forward to paint a picture of systematic abuse by the star.

The camera switched to announcer Barbara, whose teeth gleamed just as white as ever, in front of a line chart labelled sales which showed the line plummeting. "Sales of the rock star's music are crashing, record labels can't get away from him fast enough and tour promoters now want nothing to do with him, and you know what Ken?

"What Barbara?"

"Good!"

Family court justice Maureen F. Adams spread out the papers on her desk.

"Regarding the application of William Thomas Moreland to be the legal guardian of the child now known as Grace Louise Marchetti," she told the courtroom audience which included Normal sitting at a table in front of her looking anxiously at the judge, "I can't see any moving parts. There is a favourable report from child services, letters from the mother, father and maternal uncle saying they are unable to take the child and that the guardianship seems the best outcome. There are character references for Mr Moreland, including a glowing reference from the singer Connie Leighton, as well as a letter expressing support from his fiancée Clarise Chalmers who has taken the trouble to come to my court today. It is a great pleasure to have you in my court Ms Chalmers, I take it that press gaggle outside are all about you."

"The pleasure is all mine, your honor," said Meghan seated beside Will and a little behind Normal, "and, yes, everything I do seems of interest to the media."

"Well sooner you than me, Ms Chalmers," said Justice Adams, "the more important point for this court, is that there are resources and to spare for this child. My only remaining concern is arrangements for the child's education."

Normal's counsel, an intense middle-aged woman wearing glasses with thick rims who had been recommended by Will's mother, stood up.

"Your honour, Grace Marchetti has won a role in an eight-part series for one of the streaming services called *Jungle Kids*. The studio producing the series is legally required to school the four children, including Grace, all of about the same age on set and tutors have been hired to do so. There is a document setting out those points on your desk."

Justice Adams sorted through the papers and found the document.

"I see, a Hollywood fairy tale ending it would seem. Very well, I hereby grant the guardianship application." Her honour scribbled a signature on the piece of paper in front of her and dated it. "I can also hand over a newly issued birth certificate for Grace which was forwarded to my office for some reason, rather than yours."

"That's where it went to," said the lawyer. "Thank you, your honour."

“But before I send Grace Louise Marchetti out into the wide world I have something I want to tell her. Grace Louise Marchetti stand there.” The judge pointed to a spot in front of her desk.

Normal who was now Grace came forward hesitantly.

“Yes, ma’am?” she said tentatively.

“Your honour,” corrected her lawyer.

“Your honor,” said Grace.

“In a private conversation I had with your lawyer I understand you have certain concerns about wildlife in Los Angeles,” said the judge eyeing Grace sternly.

“I guess ma’ .. I mean your honour.”

“In telling you this I know that I have the entire weight of the Californian judicial system behind me.” She leant forward. “There are no wolves in Los Angeles.”

“No wolves your honor?”

“No wolves.”

“But what happens if I meet a wolf?”

“Then that wolf is in contempt of court and your lawyer will tell you what a serious matter that is. A wolf in contempt of court has no power and will disappear. Grace Amelia Marchetti here are your documents, go forth and have a good wolf-free life.”

“Yes, your honour, thank you, your honour,” said Grace, smiling. She took the documents and handed them to Will who put them into a folder. The writer then exchanged a few words with the lawyer whose office would also arrange for an appeal on Grace’s mother’s sentence. It was thought with a little effort Amelia Marchetti might be free two or three years earlier than originally expected.

Will and Meghan walked out of the courtroom as Grace skipped off chanting “I am Grace. I am Grace.”

“Maybe I can warn her later that there are lots of two-legged guy wolves in Los Angeles,” said Will.

“Not just yet,” said Meghan, putting her arm around Will’s “and when you do you can tell her that if she looks hard enough, she can find one that isn’t a wolf.”

They walked down the corridor towards the throng of waiting reporters.

Mark Steven Lawson is a retired Australian business journalist.

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