

Liz Rain

The

MEET

and

GREET



CHAPTER 1

“Align steering wheel, check rear-view, right at a forty-five-degree angle, invert...and, done.” Jane pressed the button to switch the car off.

“Whoa, one-shot reverse parallel park. Driving goals right there,” Sara said as she jumped out. “And on the wrong side of the road too.”

Jane joined Sara on the footpath and admired the lovely, even distance she had managed to get from the curb. “Like I said in your driving lessons—stick to your process, and you can manage any situation.”

Sara flung her arm around her aunt’s shoulders, and they headed towards Wilshire Boulevard. “You’re the only Aussie I know who’s not shit scared to drive in LA.”

“I first learned to drive in Sydney. The drivers there are a lot more unpredictable than the polite Brisbane motorists you’re used to. The freeways here still scare me, though.”

Sara took a deep breath and flung her head back.

Jane inhaled the dry winter evening air as well. There was no escaping the high concentration of car exhaust pollution, but she didn’t say anything. Sara would only call her a worry wart. Tonight was all about fun, after all. Jane needed it after the year she’d had.

They rounded a corner, and a queue of people came into view, snaking up towards the brightly lit El Rey Theatre.

Jane smiled as Sara skipped and clapped her hands. Sara had expressed joy through movement ever since she was a baby. At twenty years old, she showed no signs of stopping, so she probably never would.

As they joined the end of the queue, Jane assessed the other concertgoers. They were almost exclusively women in their late twenties or early thirties. Jane was nearing forty, so she and Sara fell outside the typical age range.

Jane cleared her throat and tapped her fingertips on the side of her leg. She often shied away from doing things that would cause the people around her to have big reactions, even if they were positive ones.

“Sara.”

“Yes, Aunt Jane.” She smirked, making fun of Jane’s sudden formality of tone. She usually called her just Jane, or sometimes Jane-O.

Jane inclined her head then continued. “I know how much you enjoy this singer’s music, so I upgraded our tickets to premium platinum, front-row balcony—oof!”

Sara had clamped her into a tight hug and was emitting an “eeeeeeee” noise right next to her ear.

Jane smiled. “OK! Listen for a moment. The package also includes a private meet and greet after the concert.”

“Ahhhhh!” Sara wrapped Jane up in another massive hug, bouncing her up and down but not quite able to lift her. “Oh my God! I don’t fricken believe it! What the heck am I going to say to her? Eeeee! Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

Jane righted herself and straightened her button-down shirt. “You’re very welcome.” She cleared her throat again. “Plus, well, this outing was going to end up costing a little less than I originally planned for.”

Sara’s eyebrows creased. “Because you had to resell Lauren’s ticket.”

Jane nodded. “Luckily there are enough fans of this singer in LA that someone on the website wanted it.”

“Hold on.” Sara narrowed her eyes. “You have no idea who we’re going to see tonight, do you?”

“Um, well—I know the name. It’s...” Jane had her back to the theatre but jerked her head around, trying to read the illuminated black-and-white marquee.

Sara jumped in front of her, holding her backpack up to block the view.

Jane jumped. “It’s—oof!” She landed awkwardly. Then, with a swift movement, she dodged around her niece and read the marquee.

“Amber Hatfield!” she said, still trying to catch her breath.

There was a smattering of applause from the group in front of them in line. “Got there in the end, love!” said a bloke in a puffer vest in a broad Australian accent.

Jane flushed and leaned towards Sara. “You know it’s not that I don’t care about you and your interests. Some things just don’t stick in my head

like they should: pop star things, reality TV things, and that TikTok dance you attempted to teach me. I'm sorry."

"Oh shit, no! Don't apologise!" Sara flung her arms around her. "I shouldn't have teased you. You wouldn't be you without your epic blind spot for all things pop culture. Plus, it's more important that things like baseline anthropological studies and peer-reviewed sociology theory papers stick in your head. Just let everything else slide right off, like, you know, a club sandwich off a car roof."

Jane chuckled. "To quote the famous old saying."

Sara gripped Jane's arm. "Oo! The line's moving."

They fell into step as the queue became a slow procession.

"I can't believe you didn't know about Amber Hatfield. She's the definition of a household name. An Aussie legend. It's like never having heard of Vegemite."

Jane glanced skywards for a moment. "I've heard of Vegemite. I guess your Jade Caulfield is a household name in every house but one."

Sara snorted with laughter. "You're low-key hilarious, you know that? Jade Caulfield." She chuckled and shook her head.

Jane's eyes darted back up to the marquee. "Ha ha, yes, got you. Just kidding. *Amber Hatfield* is the name of the musician we're about to see."

The queue stopped again, and they stood for a while, the twilight fading into night-time as Sara chatted to the other fans, scrolled on her phone, and read some of a thick paperback with a unicorn on the cover.

Excited murmurs from the front of the queue reached them, and Jane put away her copy of *Sociological Paradigms and Organisational Analysis* and trudged along with the line.

As they neared the doors, Jane tried to quash the trepidation that was buzzing around her insides. *Pop music isn't all that bad, even at an intense volume, for potentially hours at a time.* She let out a "tsk!". She had forgotten her earplugs. *I'll have sore feet and lifelong hearing loss from this show.*

Jane rolled back her shoulders and reminded herself that doing something different might be the best thing for her.

CHAPTER 2

Amber crashed down into the chair in front of her dressing room mirror. Her skin was hot and had a sheen of sweat. She closed her eyes and took three deep breaths.

Her assistant hovered behind her holding two towels. He stayed silent.

“Gorgeous energy tonight, Teddy,” she finally said, opening her eyes and holding up her hand.

Teddy handed her the hot towel, and she started patting at her neck. The sweat had to come off, but there wasn’t time before the meet and greet for a new face of make-up, or new hair. Just time for an on-the-run touch up. And a new outfit, of course.

She leaned forward and curled her upper lip down, wiping away beads of sweat but none of her lipstick. She gave her reflection a nod.

After twenty-five years as a touring singer, she couldn’t begin to count the hours she’d spent in front of dressing room mirrors. The features she saw there gave her satisfaction—made up with incredible artistry by Fabia—her eyes done with a subtle cat’s-eye flourish.

“We’ve got twelve groups for meet and greets tonight,” said Teddy.

The margins on touring were tight, especially now with transport costs so high. It was never rivers of gold, but recently the diehard fans paying overs for a chance to meet her was often the difference between a tour being profitable and barely breaking even.

“Thank heavens LA is crawling with Aussies, eh?” she said to his reflection over her left shoulder in the mirror.

“There’s always a good number of American fans who want meet and greets too. You’re not a *complete* nobody over here.”

Amber patted her forehead and grinned at her assistant’s ability to deliver a sentence that was a little reassuring but full of snark. She loved

Teddy (short for Tadahisa) to death and appreciated that his Japanese sincerity and seriousness had been blunted down to a truly Aussie shit-talking dryness.

Twelve parties for meet and greets was the best number they'd had on this US tour. On a snowy night in Boise, Idaho, a couple of weeks ago, only one married couple had shown up. Amber could have talked to them much longer, but the two men had needed to head off to avoid a forecasted blizzard.

Amber had questioned whether having the last show of the tour in LA the day after Christmas would sell any tickets, but her management had talked her into it. Their argument was there were plenty of people with disposable income kicking around LA that time of year, and they would be desperate to kill the dead time between Christmas and New Year's.

She scoffed at her reflection. *Desperate souls, doing anything to kill the dead time.* Helping these people was the very point of the entertainment industry, after all. What else was any performer or creator doing?

Teddy headed for the dressing room door. "I'll give you ten minutes and then send Fabia in."

"Five will be plenty."

He nodded and closed the door behind him.

She changed into the new outfit Fabia had hung for her. Some artists who stood demurely at a mic stand for seventy minutes might be able to be within smelling distance of their fans soon afterwards, but Amber's show was high-octane. She couldn't sing her upbeat songs without bouncing around the stage—sometimes on top of a piano or a big bass drum, specially reinforced to take her weight. The new outfit was a blue spangly top and some black shorts. She wiggled in the mirror and smiled at how the spangles caught the light. The little reflections of her dressing table lights danced around the room.

There was a knock, and Fabia came in.

"I love this outfit you got me. Check this out," said Amber and spun around. "I'm a human disco ball."

Fabia laughed. "You look just like my daughter playing dress-ups. I had to give you something pretty for the last meet and greet of the tour." She gave Amber's shoulders a squeeze as she sat down in front of her at the mirror. "Beyoncé takes a team of stylists and a team of make-up-and-hair people on tour with her. You're stuck with little old me picking your outfits and clipping in your hair pieces."

Amber placed her hand over Fabia's. "I'd pick you over Beyoncé and Taylor's teams combined. And throw Miley's in there for good measure!"

Warmth flowed through Amber at the thought of the little team she had assembled around herself. Teddy, with his perfect peacocking hairdos, Fabia bringing in Tupperwares full of leftover empanadillas, and the odd assortment of bandmates and roadies she had collected. They had become her friends, and she trusted them.

When she had first moved to LA more than twenty years ago, aged nineteen with an Australian number one album under her belt, there had been plenty of people promising to propel her to superstardom, who latched onto her because they saw the potential for big dollar signs. But as the years passed, those people had fallen away, and Amber had gotten better at trusting her gut when it came to people's energy.

The energy and love of her little crew sustained her. Touring was gruelling, but as this current US tour wound to a close, she got a little pang of anticipated loneliness when she thought of her comfortable little house. There wouldn't be another person to talk to at all hours of the day or night, to start singing old Wham songs at the drop of a hat, or to fry up eggs and bacon on a camp stove on the side of the road while waiting for a tow truck for their broken-down van in the middle of Nebraska.

She'd had partners, both female and male, and had even been engaged for a period a few years back. But relationships were tough when she was on the road so much, and she had found herself single more often than not.

"There," said Fabia, placing a final touch of lipstick. "You're a picture, my love."

Amber's phone rang, and she jumped.

The country code was Australian. It was the middle of the afternoon there on a workday. Maybe a rep from her management? She pressed the button to accept the call.

"Amber, sweetie! How are you?"

A chill swept down Amber's spine and her hands went numb.

"Darling? It's Mum."

I know. The voice, which she hadn't heard in so long, froze her to the spot. She worked her throat muscles, willing herself back into action. Into a space of control. "What do you want?"

Fabia's eyebrows shot up. She spread her hands out, palms up, in an unspoken question.

Amber nodded and mouthed, *I'm fine.*

Fabia backed towards the door and made an exit, poking her face once more around the door before she closed it behind her. She looked torn, probably wondering if Amber needed privacy or a burly security guard more.

Her mother didn't miss a beat. "Just calling to see how you are, my angel. Checking in on my girl."

Amber shook her head. Her mother's tone sounded for all the world like Amber was responding to her with equal easy warmth. Like a normal daughter should. "I don't know how you got this number, but I want you to lose it. Nothing has changed. I said I didn't want any contact with you, and you need to respect that."

"Amber, if you would just—please. Listen for a—"

"I'll stop your payments if you contact me again. That was the agreement. I'm serious. I'll stop the payments."

Amber hung up and blocked the number.

She placed the phone down in front of the mirror with shaking hands. Her shoulders sagged, and she sighed.

Someone at her Sydney management office must have slipped up. An intern or someone recently hired and wanting to please. Her mother could talk practically anyone into doing anything. It didn't matter where this security breach had come from—it was pretty much inevitable that it would happen again.

She would have to get a new American cell number. Amber couldn't block every incoming number in New South Wales.

She smiled humourlessly. Who was she kidding? The threat of the money being cut off would probably be enough to stop her darling mum trying to speak to her again.

She flung her head back. She would set Teddy to the task of changing her number—after New Years, maybe.

For now, there were more pressing matters—a line of paying customers waiting to be charmed.

She moved her mouth around to release the tension in her jaw and took a deep breath. She gave herself a last once-over in the mirror, leaning in and flicking a tiny clump of mascara off the end of an eyelash.

"The old razzle-dazzle," she said to her reflection and headed for the door.

CHAPTER 3

A young chap with trendy hair and fancy tight, red trousers led them through to the backstage area and to an old wooden corridor. Jane and Sara were at the end of the line of about twenty people. Mr Hairdo told them to wait there and he would show parties through, one by one.

Jane hid a yawn. She had come over to spend Christmas with her sister, brother-in-law, and niece and was going to house-sit and cat-sit for them for a week while they went away skiing in Whistler the following day. It was taking longer than usual to kick her jetlag from the flight from Brisbane. *When did I become middle-aged?*

Sara bounced on the balls of her feet and squealed a little under her breath. She had been in raptures about the concert they had just seen ever since Amber Hatfield bounded offstage after her encore. “I didn’t even ask you—what did you think?”

Jane glanced at the line of diehard fans in front of her. Did she imagine it, or did a few shoulders tense and ears perk up, as if to hear her response? “Well,” she said. Her palms were clammy. This was ridiculous! She had built a career on parsing through personal and societal biases and expressing herself clearly. She looked into her niece’s expectant expression. *The truth shall set you free!* “I enjoyed it,” she lied.

No, it wasn’t a complete lie. It had been much too loud, and all the songs had sounded the same. Jane had been baffled when the audience screamed in recognition after hearing three notes and bellowed along with every lyric. She would not have been able to recite one line of any of the songs she had just heard, even for a million dollars.

But she had enjoyed watching Sara, grinning from ear to ear and dancing with her hands above her head. Jane wondered if she had ever,

once in her life, looked as full of joy as Sara had just been for seventy solid minutes. Maybe when a new peer-reviewed research study she had contributed to was published and put in her in-tray at the university? No, that was pleasing, but it didn't make her dance.

Finally, Mr Hairdo opened a door and ushered the first party through it. A faint, musical "hello" could be heard just before the door shut again.

Sara gasped and grabbed Jane's hands. "That's her! I'm dying. I can't believe I'm going to meet Amber *Freaking* Hatfield."

Many of the other members of the queue murmured similar sentiments.

After a while, the first party, a pair of women clutching vinyl records with the covers scrawled in black Sharpie, was shown out. They made their way past the waiting fans. One was bright red in the face.

Her friend fanned her with a record. "Oh, Brandice, I'm never going to forget this night for as long as I live! Amber is an angel sent from heaven."

Jane frowned and glanced sideways at Sara. Surely these women weren't for real!

But Sara had her hand pressed to her chest and her mouth open. "Was she just the nicest?" she asked.

"Sweet as pie," said Brandice.

"And gorgeous! Didn't look a day over twenty-five, and that's a fact," said her friend.

"Enjoy, enjoy! Goodbye!" The pair waved and blew kisses to the waiting queue of fans.

Jane's head snapped up whenever another party was led out. How funny would it be if just one person, instead of gushing and swooning, reported being underwhelmed? It didn't happen, though.

She thought about all the sociology research she had read over the years about cults, groupthink, and multilevel marketing seminars where people cheered slogans in unison for hours on end. This level of agreement and harmony was often cringe-worthy, and sometimes downright dangerous.

Mary, Mary, quite contrary.

Lauren's voice echoed in her head. She shook it, like she was trying to stop the thought taking hold. Lauren had called her Mary whenever Jane was being, in Lauren's words, a grump. She had called her Mary more often than her real name in the final few months.

At last, they were the only ones left. Mr Hairdo opened the door and gestured for them to enter. Sara exhaled sharply and straightened her shoulders. She didn't move.

Jane linked her arm around her niece's and gently moved them both forward.

Inside, Amber Hatfield finished sipping on the straw of a gigantic cup with a lid and walked up to them. The cup was almost comically large for such a tiny woman.

"Hello, thank you so much for—" Sara burst into tears, and Amber wrapped her in a tight hug. "Aw, honey!"

"I—I'm sorry," Sara said between snuffles and sobs.

"Hey now, sweetie. There, there. No need to cry. You haven't been called to the principal's office to get in trouble. I'm nice, I swear." Amber rubbed Sara's back.

Jane stood with her arms hung by her sides. She wanted to step in and help in some way, but Amber had Sara all wrapped up. She locked eyes with a big man standing in the corner in a security guard's uniform, but his gaze slid away. The situation unfolding in front of him must not have been on his list of responsibilities.

Sara smiled. It was watery, but her breathing was returning to normal.

"Here. Why don't you have a little sip of water." Amber handed Sara a little half-size plastic bottle, like the ones on planes, and offered her a box of tissues.

Sara took a couple.

Jane raised her eyebrows. The room was set up like these tearful breakdowns were common, even expected. No wonder Amber had been so quick to de-escalate the situation.

"If I'm not mistaken, I detect a familiar accent?" Amber said to Jane.

Jane blinked.

Amber raised her eyebrows and cocked her head a little.

Jane wasn't the type to be starstruck easily, unless she counted that time she had met Laureate Professor Clare Figgins-Thorpe from the Australian National University after a talk on anthropological interconnectivity a few years ago. But having the woman whom she had just watched perform to screaming fans right here in front of her in a little room, looking so intently at her, created a strange dissonance that threw her a little. Plus, Amber was so...bright. Eye-catching blonde hair, all different little hints of colour on

her face—even her fingernails were a loud orange. And she was wearing a shirt that shone and reflected the light. Jane had the urge to shield her eyes as if she had been dazzled, but at the same time, it was difficult to look away.

“Um, yes. We’re Australian. Like you.” Jane nodded. She cleared her throat, all of a sudden remembering that Amber was an actual person, so normal manners and conversational conventions applied to this very strange situation. “I’m Jane, and this is my niece, Sara.” She gestured to Sara. The last thing she wanted to do was monopolise all the time at this meet and greet. Mr Hairdo was probably outside the door with an old-fashioned stopwatch, like a very overdressed swim coach.

“Sara, lovely to meet you. Do you live here in LA, or are you visiting?”

Sara’s eyes went wide. Her throat muscles started working, but to no avail.

“Uh,” said Jane, hoping to give her niece another minute to recover herself. “Sara and her parents live here. I’m visiting from Brisbane.”

“Aw, beautiful! I love Brissie. Some great venues. I played the Fortitude Valley Music Hall this year.”

There was a short silence. Sara looked at her, still with a stunned expression.

“We, uh, very much enjoyed your concert tonight. Thank you,” Jane said. She was fully aware how idiotic she sounded. *Thank you?* She was talking to an internationally renowned singer, not her Uber driver.

But it was so important that this experience was a positive one for Sara, who had built it up so much in her head. If the whole conversation crashed and burned, Sara would be devastated.

“No, thank *you* for being part of such a great audience. What song did you enjoy the most?”

Now it was Jane’s turn to be a deer in the headlights. Her throat muscles worked overtime, but no words came out. “Mmmmmmmm. Yep. Favourite number, hey? It would have to be... the one—the one about...the heart?” She finished this response in a pitch so high, only dogs would have heard it.

Amber pressed her lips together.

Was she annoyed?

“‘The Moonlight Moves Me’.” Sara’s voice rang firm and clear.

“Oh, fantastic,” said Amber. “That’s one of my absolute favourites to perform. I wrote it with—”

“Benny Linten. The same month he was signed for his first album.” Sara’s words tumbled out.

Jane neck muscles loosened for the first time since they’d walked into the room.

Amber giggled. “Wow! You really know your stuff, Sara. Benny really is a sweetheart. Hey, what’s your favourite song off his latest album?”

And they were off to the races. Sara was utterly charmed by her idol, like a snake in a basket in the thrall of a guy with a flute.

Jane’s cheeks started to ache. She was grinning too.

Amber chatted, laughed, and took Sara by the arm. At one point, Sara asked how Amber got her ideas for songs.

Jane pressed her lips together. How many times must the singer have been asked that question?

But Amber’s brows knitted, and she answered in a very genuine way, her eyes intent on Sara the whole time.

After a few minutes of chat, Sara was on a happy rolling boil. “And Jane bought the tickets for me for Christmas. You should have seen my face when they fell out of my card. My dad got a photo. She said she originally bought three, but then Lauren broke up with her, so—” She sucked air between her teeth. “Shit, sorry Jane. I didn’t mean to mention Lauren.”

Jane flinched. She forced a smile, although her face struggled to cooperate. “It’s fine.”

“Let me get Teddy back in here to take some photos!” Amber said, sounding for all the world like the idea had just occurred to her. She gave a brisk double tap on the door.

Mr Hairdo took his place at a tripod with a big camera on it.

Amber and Sara smiled as the camera clicked.

“Let’s get some fun ones, Sara. Say ‘LA, baby!’” Amber dragged Sara close with one arm, and they threw their other arms into the air.

“LA, baby!” Sara laughed.

Jane stood behind Mr Hairdo’s shoulder to watch her niece having the time of her life.

“Get a close-up, Ted!” said Amber.

She squeezed Sara with both arms, their cheeks pressing together.

Jane shuddered inwardly. Amber was brave, getting so up-close-and-personal with complete strangers. This flu season had already been a bad one. She had a mini bottle of hand sanitizer in her pocket and a big pump

bottle in the car. Hopefully Sara could be impressed upon to use a good amount of it.

"Jump in here, Jane," said Amber, waving her hand.

"Oh, no thank you," she replied, a little louder than she meant to. She was surprised Amber had remembered her name, having heard it just the once. Jane was terrible with names.

"Come on, Aunt Jane!"

"Yes, don't you want to memorialise this night forever?" Amber asked. Amber and Sara both laughed.

Jane didn't get what was funny. She ran what they had just said in her mind but couldn't identify the joke.

Jane moved forward and stood next to her niece.

"Nope, I'm too short to be on the end. Plus, I like being the centre of attention." Amber pulled Jane by the arm and positioned her on her other side.

Amber held Jane loosely around the waist. She hung on a little tighter as Mr Hairdo asked them to say cheese.

Amber's hair was very close to Jane's face. It smelt good, something floral but not too sweet. She had expected it to smell of chemicals, like old-fashioned hairspray.

But since when had she started noticing how people's hair smelled, let alone forming unsolicited preconceptions about it?

She blinked a few times. *Focus up! You're going to look in these photos like a confused stranger who wandered in off the street.* "Cheese."

"Perfect!" said Amber.

When the photos were done, including some selfies on Sara's phone (she couldn't possibly wait the twelve hours until the email came through with all Mr Hairdo's photos attached), they said their goodbyes. Sara and Amber hugged like old friends at an airport.

Mr Hairdo pointed them down the corridor towards the exit.

"Can you even?" Sara said.

Jane wasn't sure what this meant or how to respond, so she stayed silent.

"Amber is a dream. My hands are still shaking. I need to splash some water on my face. And pee. Not at the same time, though. You know what I mean."

Sara ducked through a dark-green door into the loos.

Jane looked up at the ceiling of the El Rey Theatre hallway. A modern smoke detector flashed its little blipping light, but otherwise the woodwork, and even the dark-maroon paint, could have been original.

Jane yawned. The absence of Sara was also the absence of the excited energy that had carried Jane through the long evening. And Sara would be leaving for longer the next day. *More time alone.* The days stretched out grey and empty in front of her.

"Excuse me."

Jane started.

Mr Hairdo had snuck up and was standing right beside her. His bright-orange sneakers had masked the sound of his approach.

"Sorry, sorry. Amber asked me to give this to you." He handed her a folded piece of lined paper.

"Oh, um, my niece already got an autograph."

He winced. "No, uh, this is not for your niece. It's for you. Thank you." He walked a few steps backwards, then turned tail and hurried away.

Jane narrowed her eyes as he retreated. *Very strange behaviour.* There was a lot about this unusual evening that put her off kilter.

She unfolded the scrap of paper. The top had the little bits still on it, where it had been ripped from a notepad.

In deep purple pen was written: *Amber Hatfield.* Followed by a series of digits that looked like an American cell phone number.

Jane narrowed her eyes so much, her vision went grey.

CHAPTER 4

Jane's phone buzzed and rang in the middle of the big kitchen-island bench.

"No caller ID," said Sara, craning her neck to see the screen.

"Probably some robo-scam," said Jane's brother-in-law, Bill, his mouth full of Cinnamon Toast Crunch and milk.

"Screen it, I reckon," said her sister Barbara.

Jane screwed up her nose. The pop singer's phone number was burning a hole in her bedside table drawer upstairs. There was no way she had tracked down Jane's contact details with secret technology that only famous people had access to—was there? There was a lot about this city Jane didn't know.

The phone pealed and vibrated some more. Jane shook her hands next to her head then grabbed the phone and hit the green button. "Hello?"

"Hi. Jane? It's Lauren."

Sara, who was sitting closest to Jane, let out a groan. She mouthed Lauren's name to her parents, and they both groaned as well.

"Have I caught you at an inopportune time? Are you at some kind of farm?" Lauren asked.

A tiny muscle twitched next to Jane's right eye. The musical English-accented voice in her ear had not so long ago been the soundtrack that ran through her mind. Her therapist had set her an exercise to write down everything that voice said to her in a constant loop late at night, and burn it.

"No. What can I help you with?"

"Oh, straight to it, I see. Well, it's Wordsworth, I need to take him to the vet."

Jane stomach plummeted. They had gotten the Cavalier King Charles Spaniel as a puppy eight years before. He now lived with Lauren. Jane didn't have any visitation rights because Lauren said seeing her again would confuse him and set off his anxiety. "Is he OK? What's going on?"

Sara mouthed *Wordsworth* to Barbara and Bill, and they looked at each other wide-eyed. Sara rubbed Jane's back with a firm hand.

"I need the pet insurance policy number," Lauren said. "Do you have it?"

"No, I, uh..." Jane put her hand to her throat. Her face was hot.

"We agreed you would continue to pay for the policy," Lauren said. "You have been making the payments, haven't you? We agreed. I'm bearing the cost of all his food and grooming."

"No, I mean, yes, I've set up a direct debit. It's all taken care of. But I don't have the policy documents with me. I'm in LA. They were in one of the boxes I dropped off at your lawyer's chambers. What's wrong with Wordsworth?"

Lauren sighed. "He's fine. I'm taking him to get his teeth cleaned next week. I just couldn't put my hand on the insurance card. It's hard for me to go through your boxes, you see? It's painful."

Sara groaned.

Jane stalked out to the deck to let Sara reassure her parents about the health of Jane's former dog.

The wintry morning air was bracing. "Jesus Christ, Lauren. I thought there was some emergency! Isn't it midnight over there?"

Lauren drew a shuddering breath. "Don't shout at me, Jane. You know how it triggers me."

Jane put the phone on mute and let out a wordless "ahhhh-hhhh" of frustration, startling two sparrows that flew from a shrub and up into the sky with a flurry of tiny wings. Jane watched them as they rose, trying to slow her breathing.

She put the phone back to her ear. *Time to extricate myself without sustaining any further damage.*

"... anything of you without you flying off the handle. It's not the easiest thing, you know. I never thought I would be looking after him by myself. I know you left, but I hope you still have some concern for Wordsworth's welfare."

Left. The word still stung. Sure, Jane had moved out, but only after Lauren had ended it and asked her to leave. "Lauren—"

"I built my life around you, and I'm sorry if I don't have every aspect organised to within an inch of its life. Not everyone can pick up the pieces so quickly, you see? Not everyone can compartmentalise."

"Look—"

Lauren's voice went up in pitch and wavered. "I'm sorry I've interrupted your Los Angeles holiday. I, well, I thought you wouldn't mind helping me. Hello? Are you still there?"

"Shit." She still had the phone on mute. She fumbled to tap the button. "The policy details are in one of the boxes. Goodbye." She hung up and slumped down onto a wooden sun lounge. The slats were like ice against the backs of her thighs. She pressed her fingertips to her eyebrows and massaged her head.

The sliding door opened, and Sara peeked her head out. "Jane? We have to leave for the airport in ten minutes. Are you OK?"

Jane stood. "Yes, sweetie, I'm fine." She put her arm around Sara's shoulders.

Sara hugged her aunt around the middle. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, well, I'm relatively unscathed. I'm toughening up, I suppose."

"Just don't get too tough. Not everyone is like Lauren. Some people out there are nice and normal and not servants of pure evil."

Jane smiled, although she didn't feel like it. "Thank you. I'll try to remember that."

"Now, you'd better come back inside. Your toes have turned blue."

She sat back down at the kitchen island.

Barbara stood and put her arm around her. "Put the kettle on, will you, Bill?"

Jane leant against her sister and sighed.

Barbara was six years older and had fallen into the role of the "little mother" for Jane a lot when they were growing up, picking up on social cues that Jane sometimes missed and gently steering her in the right direction. She had turned a knack for minimising potential interpersonal issues into a lucrative career and was now an in-demand HR and corporate conflict-resolution consultant.

Barbara cradled Jane's head in her arms for a second, then sat on a stool next to her. "Are you sure you're going to be OK here? I feel like we shouldn't leave you alone so soon after Christmas. We can reschedule the ski trip if you need us to stay."

Bill's hand wobbled as he put Jane's cuppa down. He replaced an aghast expression with one of compassionate understanding.

Jane sat up straight. "No, don't be silly. The break-up is ancient history. It's time I stopped going to water whenever Lauren feels the urge to get in touch with me. I'll be fine here. I've got a pile of new research to read before the semester starts up." She took a sip of tea and started to feel a fraction better, as if what she was saying were true. "Plus, I won't be alone. I'll have the cat. Now, go and pack. It's almost time to go to the airport."

"Hey, come here." Barbara dragged her up by her armpits and wrapped her in a hug. "You're bullshitting the hell out of me right now, but I know how strong you are. You're going to be OK. I love you."

Jane rested her cheek against her sister's hair, breathing in comfort while she had the chance. "I love you too. And I am going to be OK."

She had been putting one foot in front of the other for so long, it had to lead to "OK" in the end. *Or else, where am I going?*



"You need to spread her wet food out in little bits around her dish."

"Why?" Jane asked. "Does she like to pretend she's in an overpriced restaurant where smears of different mashed veggies cost sixty-five dollars?"

Sara snorted from the back seat.

Barbara scoffed. "No. If it's in a big pile, she eats it too fast, then spews it up."

"Lovely," said Jane. She pulled her car into the drop-off area at LAX and put on her hazard lights.

Bill jumped out and ran to the car boot to grab everyone's big suitcases.

Jane looked into her wing mirror for the slightest break in the traffic flying by, then dashed out of the car onto the relative safety of the footpath.

Barbara wrapped her up in a hug. "The cat's completely neurotic, but she'll be well-behaved for you. I think you'll have a steadying influence on her."

"I don't know about that." Jane flinched as a minibus honked its horn, managing to be louder than the dozens of other vehicles honking at the same time; they were like a deranged choir of geese.

"You just need to stop answering calls from hidden numbers," Bill said.

"Yes, good tip. Thank you."

Her sister's family stood there, cool as cucumbers, seeming not to notice the chaos of cars and buses stopped at crazy angles behind them, or speeding around trying to gain entry.

Barbara and Bill had split their time between LA and Brisbane since they'd gotten married decades before, and had lived stateside full-time since Sara finished high school and enrolled in a psychology degree at the University of Southern California. All three of them seemed to have a shiny, hardened shell around them.

Maybe I'll develop my shell if I spend enough time in this insane metropolis.

"Remember Selenia's kitty Valium is top right in your bathroom cabinet. Give her half a pill if her hair starts coming out in big clumps," said Barbara.

"Or if she forgets how to use her litter tray and wees on the floor," Sara added.

"I didn't know this house-sitting gig would involve quite so much cleaning up of excrement." Jane hugged Sara and her brother-in-law. "Have the most wonderful time. Message me when you land."

Barbara held onto her for longer than an airport hug was meant to go for.

Jane was eventually able to disentangle herself, but her sister grabbed onto her hand at the last minute.

"I can be on the first flight home if you need me," Barbara said.

"All I need you to do is enjoy this trip. You've worked so hard this year. Promise me you won't worry."

"I promise you I will try not to worry."

Jane smiled. "Good enough."

Sara ducked back for one more hug. "Thank you so much for taking me to the show last night. It was a dream come true. Amber was the best Christmas present ever."

"You're welcome, my love. Now, best go or you'll miss your flight." Jane's stomach plunged as her family walked off, wheeling big suitcases and turning back every so often to wave. It wasn't because she was going to miss them too badly but because now that the hustle and bustle of getting them to the airport was done, her mind was free to tumble back into the maddening loop of thoughts she'd been spinning all day.

Plus, Lauren had made everything worse. She could imagine Sara saying *as usual!* This lightened her mood for a few seconds.

Jane risked life, limb, and sanity by hurrying back out into the traffic and jumping in her car by the driver's-side door. Her adrenaline and cortisol spiked as she pulled back out into the LAX traffic and didn't start to level out again until she was off the I-105 and back on the surface streets of Silver Lake.

She exhaled slowly, loosening her grip on the wheel. A knotty thought hit her again.

Amber Hatfield.

Why had the strange, sparkly woman given Jane her phone number? She seemed like the kind of person who did a lot of things on whims. Jane didn't like whims. They had an uncomfortable way of turning well-ordered worlds upside-down.

A tension headache built in her temple. She shook her head and rolled her shoulders.

She hadn't slept well the night before. She always tried to get at least seven and a half hours of good-quality sleep but had tossed and turned.

Jane took a deep breath. She always felt better when she could follow a problem down a line of logic to the solution.

So what's the problem?

She couldn't decide whether to contact Amber Hatfield. And the uncertainty was tying her stomach up in knots and making her brain fuzzy.

Amber must have given Jane her number because there was some other meet and greet add-on she was able to offer Sara. She couldn't even begin to imagine what it could possibly be. Once at the university, another staff member had been given a short video message from a retired football player by his grandchildren for his birthday. Her colleague had been thrilled.

Jane frowned again now, baffled by what some people liked.

A text message was the best option. She would send a text and never receive a reply. This would annoy her, as it got to the heart of two of her pet peeves—loose ends left untied and people being inconsiderate. It really wasn't worth it.

Better than a call, though. Jane grimaced. She imagined the dial tone trilling on and on in her ear, then being abruptly commanded to leave a voicemail. Or worse, a ten-second message that would be converted to text! An arbitrary time limit, plus the added indignity of having your remarks

converted by a computer. The possibility for ambiguity and confusion was too much to handle.

Or *even* worse, if Amber answered, in the middle of a facial treatment with cucumbers on her eyes. Or on a red carpet doing that pose women do where they stick one leg forward, cameras flashing all around her?

Jane supposed, on second thought, it was probably not usual to hold a red carpet at 10:48 in the morning—but this *was* Hollywood, after all.

The headache got stronger.

There was a possibility of a result that would benefit Sara, so she had to do something. She couldn't get to the bottom of why this whole situation was spinning her out so much. There was only one way to get to the end of it.

She turned right into the parking lot of a Jack in the Box fast-food restaurant. She parked, fumbled for her phone, and pulled the slip of paper out of her jeans pocket.

She squared her shoulders as she keyed the number into her phone and typed up a text message.

Hello, Amber. It's Jane here from yesterday evening's meet and greet. You gave me your number, so I am following up. What can I do for you? Regards.

The text bubble turned green as she hit send.

There. She had done her due diligence for her niece. It would be annoying to have the unanswered text sit there on her phone, but she would cope. Jane exhaled and relaxed back into her seat a little.

Her phone pealed its beeping ringtone and started to buzz.

She dropped it, tried to retrieve it out of midair, then fumbled it onto the floor on the passenger side. She reached down to grab it but went too quick—the seatbelt engaged, and she jerked backwards, pain shooting through her chest.

"Bloody stinking hell!" She tried again, slower this time. She stretched across and down. Her fingers scrabbled for the phone. She made a last mini-lunge, but the seatbelt engaged again.

"Bastard bleeding damnation!" She unclicked the seatbelt, fell forward and did a half roll onto the passenger seat. During this maneuver, she managed to grab her phone and hit the green circle.

"Hello?" Jane said. She tried to shift onto her back, but her metal water bottle caught her between the shoulder blades. "Gah!"

"Hi?" said the voice through the phone. "It's Amber here. Amber Hatfield. Have I, uh, caught you at a bad time?"

Jane looked upwards out the passenger window at the cloudless LA winter sky. "No, I, uh, no, it's as good a time as any." She heaved herself upright as silently as she could. Sitting back in the driver's seat, she smoothed her hair.

"Well, thank you for texting me. I wasn't sure you would."

Jane narrowed her eyes, not sure how to respond. She had expected Amber to launch into a spiel about a special signed mascara bottle she wanted to offer to Sara, or a vinyl record with the cover made entirely of magenta feathers. "You're welcome."

"Thanks, I..."

There was a pause. Jane pursed her lips. She was damned if she was going to say "you're welcome" again.

"Look," Amber continued. "I've got a few days free coming up. I was wondering if you would like to, maybe, meet up? Maybe do some LA things, since you said you're visiting."

Jane frowned, really flummoxed now. "Do you mean Sara? She's gone on a family trip to the snow."

"No, I didn't mean Sara. I meant you."

Jane slumped into her seat. Granted, she didn't know much about celebrity meet and greets, but she was pretty sure this type of invitation was not a usual element of them.

"Are you free tomorrow?" Amber asked.

No, I'm busy. Goodbye forever, you strange woman. Jane was about to gladly extricate herself from this confusing conversation. But she stopped. She had been a researcher for many years, and one of her great joys was considering a question and really diving in to get to the bottom of it.

Was she free tomorrow? She had to feed Selena the cat in the morning and at night. Other than that, she had planned to read a little and go for a walk around her sister's neighbourhood. If there was somewhere that looked nice for lunch, maybe she would stop in. Read some more. Try not to think about Lauren.

"Yes, I am free tomorrow," Jane said. Adhering to Selena's schedule was important, but it didn't count as "plans."

"Oh, great. Let's meet for coffee in the arvo and go from there? I'll text you the address of a nice place I know. Sara said you're in Silver Lake."

Jane's thoughts were all a jumble. It was considerate of Amber to remember so much about her. Or was this level of recall off-putting? No, it was nice when people were accommodating. "OK," she said.

"Awesome! I'll text you soon with the deets. See you tomorrow."

"Goodbye."

The silence inside the car was loud. A feeling of unreality settled on Jane. Had that really just happened? Maybe she had hit her head against the glovebox a minute ago and had a very realistic hallucination.

She cracked the window to let some air in. The Jack in the Box car park that had been nearly empty when she arrived was now about half full. The bustle of car doors being opened and shut, and music being played somewhere nearby, calmed her.

Another research question lodged itself into her brain. *What on earth was going on?*

For starters, her headache was gone. She rubbed her neck, wondering if she had sustained mild whiplash. She had made an early New Year's resolution to get out of her comfort zone more, but she hadn't intended to cause herself physical injury.

She looked at her watch. About twenty-eight hours to mull it all over before she was due to meet Amber Hatfield for coffee, and "go from there." *Whatever the hell that means.*

CHAPTER 5

"You really don't have to drive me. I can get a Lyft," said Amber.

Teddy pulled the car door shut. "Nonsense. I'm happy to chauffeur. I can add it to my resume for when you kick me to the curb and I need to find another B-list celebrity who needs an assistant."

Amber gave his arm a playful slap. "I know you're trying to give me shit, but 'B-list?' I'm stoked with that. Surely I'm actually more like F-list."

He laughed as he started the car. "Or P-list. How far down the alphabet do the lists go?"

"Oh, har har. Add 'comedian' to your resume." She looked out the car window at the Santa Monica footpath.

"Just be glad you never made it to A-list. You wouldn't be going to meet a complete stranger in a public place without a full security detail and tactical snipers on every surrounding rooftop."

"True, true. But Jane isn't a *complete* stranger. We've both met her."

Amber glanced sideways at Teddy, who kept his eyes on the road ahead.

"What?" Amber asked. "What is that non-reaction?"

Teddy puffed out his cheeks. "Just that, babe. A non-reaction. Look, I was just very surprised that you've made this date. I was there for most of the time you spent with her. Unless she was a completely different person when you and her and the niece were together without me, I'm just not sure, well, what she gave you. You know, that warranted me rushing out to give her your number? It's not like you do that kind of thing lightly."

"What do you mean? Are you saying I usually have three months of flirting, then a six-month emotional affair with someone before I ask them out on a first date?"

Teddy scoffed. "Yeah, something like that. Or exactly that."

"And how does that usually work out for me?"

He took one hand off the wheel to mime something plummeting and crashing into the earth, complete with sound effects.

Amber smiled. "Geez, don't hold back or anything, Ted."

"Sorry."

"The definition of madness is doing something over and over and expecting a different result. I thought I'd mix it up."

Teddy wrinkled his nose. "So this is some kind of social experiment?"

Amber sighed. *What was it?* Not a social experiment. Something new, though. But was it a good idea? Her insides were swishing around uncomfortably, so maybe not. "I met someone new, thought she was hot, took a big swing. I might clear the rope or lose middle stump."

"Huh?"

"Sorry, cricket reference."

"I was in the baseball club in elementary school in Japan, but I'll never understand cricket."

"Awwww, you were? You would have been so cute in your little knickerbockers! And here was me thinking you're allergic to all sports."

"Quit changing the subject."

Amber scowled. "OK, OK. So, what is it? You think I've gone nuts? Would you find it so hard to believe I'm not insane if Jane looked like, I dunno, Jessica Alba?"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. First of all, who is Jessica Alba? And second of all, Jane being hot is not up for debate. Jane is a smoke show. Tall, dark, and handsome? Break me off a piece!"

"We've talked about this, Teddy. A big part of your job is to pretend to get my Elder Millennial references. If you make me feel old, I'll go full diva on you."

Teddy sucked air in through his teeth. "Oh. God. No. Let me try that again. Jane is easily as hot as Jessica Alba, the...Italian tennis player?"

"Bah-bow." Amber did her best impression of a wrong guess on *Wheel of Fortune*.

"Gah!" He gripped the wheel tightly with both hands. "I give up! On all of it. You're a grown woman—"

"And then some!"

He ignored her and ploughed on. "And you can give your number to however many sexy, awkward women you like."

Amber bowed with a flourish. "Oh, thank you. How kind. I appreciate that and intend to take full advantage."

Teddy chuckled and shook his head.

Amber watched Culver City fly past the window. Her guts felt like they were being squeezed by a boa constrictor. She took a deep breath, telling herself it was normal to be nervous for a date. Teddy was right—she never put herself out there this quick.

Was sending Teddy to chase Jane down with her number a moment of madness? She pictured Jane when she had first walked into the meet and greet. Even now, she smiled out at the footpath. Jane had been the picture of a fish out of water. Looking around like the backstage area of a pop concert was as strange as the surface of Mars.

Amber had had to bite her lip to stop from laughing out loud. She hadn't been able to help herself and teased Jane a little, quizzing her about her favourite song of the night. It was something she never, ever did. Usually the ease and comfort of fans generous enough to pay for a ticket, let alone the cost of a meet and greet, was of utmost importance to her.

But something had made her want to push Jane. Get a reaction out of her. Make her sweat.

And what had been revealed was how much Jane loved her niece. Amber could see how hard it was for Jane to smooth over an awkward situation while her niece floundered. But she had kept on. And the look of pure joy she had when Sara had started to enjoy herself shone.

When Jane left, Amber had felt her absence like a little chill in the air. So she had grabbed a pen and sent Teddy on a chase, thinking there was about a zero per cent chance of Jane actually getting in contact with her.

When the text had come through like a formal reply to a tax audit notice, Amber had hit the call button right away. Jane on the phone had been just the same as Jane in person. Genuine to the core. No schmooze or bullshit. Amber had felt like an absolute nutter proposing they spend the afternoon together and had nearly fallen off the couch when Jane said yes.

"What do you think Jane does for a living?" she blurted to Teddy as they neared their destination. "Librarian?"

"Hmmmm. Sexy professor? Supreme Court judge? Vegas showgirl?"

Amber scoffed. Teddy was trying to ease her nerves by being stupid. She appreciated him for it.

The GPS told them their destination was just ahead on the right. Her insides jolted. *Time to put your money where your mouth is, Hatfield.*

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