

A LACEY DOYLE COZY MYSTERY — BOOK TWO

SEASIDE HARBOR

DEATH

AND A

DOG

FIONA GRACE

Fiona Grace
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Аннотация

DEATH AND A DOG (A LACEY DOYLE COZY MYSTERY —BOOK 2) is book two in a charming new cozy mystery series by Fiona Grace.

Lacey Doyle, 39 years old and freshly divorced, has made a drastic change: she has walked away from the fast life of New York City and settled down in the quaint English seaside town of Wilfordshire.

Spring is in the air. With last month's murder mystery behind her, a new best friend in her English shepherd, and a budding relationship with the chef across the street, it seems like everything's finally settling into place. Lacey is so excited for her first major auction, especially when a valuable, mystery artifact enters her catalogue.

All seems to go without a hitch, until two mysterious bidders arrive from out of town—and one of them winds up dead.

With the small village plunged into chaos, and with the reputation of her business at stake, can Lacey and her trusty dog partner solve the crime and restore her name?

Book #3 in the series—CRIME IN THE CAFE—is also available for preorder!

Содержание

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| CHAPTER ONE | 7 |
| CHAPTER TWO | 22 |
| CHAPTER THREE | 37 |
| CHAPTER FOUR | 52 |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. | 71 |

Fiona Grace

Death and a Dog (A Lacey Doyle Cozy Mystery—Book 2)

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Debut author Fiona Grace is author of the LACEY DOYLE COZY MYSTERY series which includes MURDER IN THE MANOR (Book #1), DEATH AND A DOG (Book #2) and CRIME IN THE CAFE (Book #3). Fiona would love to hear from you, so please visit www.fionagraceauthor.com to receive free ebooks, hear the latest news, and stay in touch.



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BOOKS BY FIONA GRACE

LACEY DOYLE COZY MYSTERY

MURDER IN THE MANOR (Book#1)

DEATH AND A DOG (Book #2)

CRIME IN THE CAFE (Book #3)

CHAPTER ONE

The bell above the door tinkled. Lacey looked up and saw an elderly gentleman had wandered into her antiques store. He was dressed in English countryman attire, which would've looked peculiar in Lacey's old home, New York City, but here in the seaside town of Wilfordshire, England, he was just another one of the locals. Only, Lacey didn't recognize him as she now did most of the small town's residents. His bemused expression made her wonder if he was lost.

Realizing he may need some help, she quickly covered the mouthpiece of the telephone she was holding—mid-conversation with the RSPCA—and called over the counter to him, “I'll be with you in just a second. I just need to finish up this call.”

The man didn't seem to hear her. His focus was fixed on a shelf filled with frosted crystal figurines.

Lacey knew she'd have to hurry her conversation with the RSPCA along so she could attend to the confused-looking customer, so she removed her hand from the mouthpiece. “Sorry about that. Could you repeat what were you saying?”

The voice on the other end was male, and he sounded weary as he sighed. “What I was saying, Miss Doyle, is that I cannot give out details of staff members. It's for security reasons. Surely you get that?”

Lacey had heard this all before. She'd first called the RSPCA

to officially adopt Chester, the English Shepherd dog who had more or less come with the antiques store she was leasing (his prior owners, who'd leased the store before her, had died in a tragic accident, and Chester had wandered all the way back to his home). But she'd gotten the shock of her life when the woman on the other end of the line had asked her if she was related to Frank Doyle—the father who'd abandoned her at the age of seven. Their call had gotten disconnected, and she'd rung back every day since to trace the woman she'd spoken to. But it turned out all calls now went to a central call center located in the closest city of Exeter, and Lacey could never track down the woman who'd somehow known her father by name.

Lacey tightened her grip on the receiver and fought to keep her voice steady. "Yes, I understand you can't tell me her name. But aren't you able to *transfer* me to her?"

"No, ma'am," the young man replied. "Beyond the fact I don't know who this woman is, we have a *call center system*. The calls are randomly allocated. All I can do—and have done already—is put a notice on our system with your details." He was starting to sound exasperated.

"But what if she doesn't see the notice?"

"That's a very real possibility. We have tons of staff members who work voluntarily on an ad hoc basis. The person you spoke with before might not have even been into the office since the original call."

Lacey had heard these words before, too, from the numerous

calls she'd made, but each time she wished and prayed for a different outcome. The call center staff seemed to be getting pretty irritated with her.

“But if she was a volunteer, doesn't that mean she might never be back for another shift?” Lacey asked.

“Sure. There's a chance. But I don't know what you want me to do about it.”

Lacey had had enough of cajoling for the day. She sighed and admitted defeat. “Okay, well thank you anyway.”

She put down the phone, her chest sinking. But she wasn't going to dwell on it. Her attempts to find information about her father seemed to be two steps forward, one and a half back, and she was getting used to the dead ends and disappointments. Besides, she had a customer to see to, and her beloved store always took precedence in Lacey's mind above all else.

Ever since the two police detectives, Karl Turner and Beth Lewis, had posted their official notice to say she'd had nothing to do with the murder of Iris Archer—and that she had, indeed, helped them solve the case—Lacey's store had bounced right back. Now it was flourishing, with a steady stream of daily customers made up of locals and tourists. Lacey had enough of an income now to buy Crag Cottage (something she was in the process of negotiating with Ivan Parry, her current landlord), and she even had enough income to pay Gina, her next door neighbor and close friend, for semi-permanent working hours. Not that Lacey took the time during Gina's shift off—she used it to study

up on auctioneering. She'd enjoyed the one she'd conducted for Iris Archer's belongings so much, she was going to hold one every month. Tomorrow, Lacey's next auction was to commence, and she was buzzing with excitement for it.

She went out from behind the counter—Chester raising his head to give her his customary whinny—and approached the elderly man. He was a stranger, not one of her regular customers, and was peering intently at the display shelf of crystal ballerinas.

Lacey pushed her dark curls off her face and came out from behind the counter, heading toward the elderly man.

“Are you looking for anything in particular?” she asked as she drew up beside him.

The man jumped. “Goodness, you frightened me!”

“I'm so sorry,” Lacey said, noticing his hearing aid for the first time and reminding herself not to sneak up behind old people in the future. “I just wondered if you were looking for anything specific, or if you were just perusing?”

The man looked back to the figures, a small smile on his lips. “It's a funny story,” he said. “It's my late wife's birthday. I came to town for some tea and cake, as a sort of remembrance celebration, you see. But as I passed your store, I felt the urge to come in.” He pointed at the figurines. “First thing I saw were these.” He gave Lacey a knowing smile. “My wife was a dancer.”

Lacey returned the smile, touched by the poignancy of the story. “How lovely!”

“It was back in the seventies,” the elderly man continued,

reaching out a shaking hand and taking a model off the shelf. “She was with the Royal Ballet Society. In fact, she was their first ever ballerina with—”

Just then, the sound of a large van careening too fast over the speed bump directly outside the store cut off the end of the man’s sentence. The subsequent *bang* it made as it jolted down onto the other side of the bump made him jump a mile, and the figurine went flying from his hands. It hit the wooden floorboards. The ballerina’s arm snapped right off and went skittering away under the shelving unit.

“Oh my goodness!” the man exclaimed. “I’m so sorry!”

“Don’t worry,” Lacey assured him, her gaze fixed out the window at the white van, which had pulled up to the curb and drawn to a halt, its engine now idling and belching smoke from the exhaust pipe. “It wasn’t your fault. I don’t think the driver saw the bump. He’s probably damaged his van!”

She crouched down and reached with an arm beneath the shelving unit, until her fingertips brushed against the little jagged edge of crystal. She pulled the arm out—which was now covered in a fine layer of dust—and drew herself back up to standing, just as she saw through the window the driver of the van hopping down from the cabin to the cobblestones.

“You have *got* to be kidding me...” Lacey muttered, narrowing her eyes at the culprit she could now identify. “Taryn.”

Taryn owned the boutique store next door. She was a snobbish, petty woman, whom Lacey had awarded the title of Least

Favorite Person in Wilfordshire. She was always trying to mess with Lacey, to drive her out of town. Taryn had done everything in her power to frustrate Lacey's attempts to start a business here in Wilfordshire, all the way down to drilling holes in her own store wall just to irritate her! And though the woman had asked for a truce after her handyman had taken things a little too far and been caught loitering outside Lacey's cottage one night, Lacey hadn't been so confident she could trust her again. Taryn played dirty. This was surely another one of her tricks. For starters, there was no way she didn't know the speed bump was there—it was visible from her own store's window, for goodness sake! So she'd driven over it too fast deliberately. Then to add insult to injury, she'd parked it right in front of *Lacey's* store, rather than her own, either in an attempt to block the view, or in order to pump fumes in her direction.

"I'm so sorry," the man repeated, pulling Lacey's attention back to the moment. He was still holding up the figurine, now one-armed. "Please. Let me pay for the damage."

"Absolutely not," Lacey told him firmly. "You did nothing wrong." Her narrow-eyed gaze roved back over his shoulder and out the window. She fixed it on Taryn, following the woman as she gingerly waltzed to the back of the van like she had no cares in the world. Lacey's annoyance at the boutique owner grew stronger. "If anyone's to blame, it's the driver." She tightened her hands into fists. "It's almost as if they did it deliberately. Ow!"

Lacey felt something sharp in her palm. She'd squeezed the

broken ballerina's arm so tightly, it had nicked her skin.

"Oh!" the man exclaimed at the sight of the bright globule of blood swelling in her palm. He pincer-gripped the offending arm from the middle of her hand, as if removing it might somehow mend the wound. "Are you okay?"

"Please excuse me for one second," Lacey said.

She headed for the door—leaving the bemused-looking man behind in her store holding a broken ballerina in one hand and a disembodied arm in the other—and marched onto the street. She paced right up to her neighborhood nemesis.

"Lacey!" Taryn beamed, as she heaved up the back door of the van. "Hope you don't mind me parking here? I have the new season's stock to unload. Isn't summer just your favorite season for fashion?"

"I don't mind you parking there at all," Lacey said. "But I do mind you driving too fast over the speed bump. You know the bump is right in front of my store. The noise almost gave my customer a heart attack."

She noted then, that Taryn had also parked in such a manner that her bulky van blocked Lacey's view across the street to Tom's patisserie. *That* was definitely purposeful!

"Got it," Taryn said with fake joviality. "I'll make sure to drive slower when it's time to get in the autumn season's stock. Hey, you should pop in once I've set all this up. Switched up your wardrobe. Treat yourself. You deserve it." Her eyes roved down Lacey's outfit. "And it's certainly time."

“I’ll think about it,” Lacey said tonelessly, matching Taryn’s fake smile with her own.

The second she turned her back on the woman, her smile turned into a grimace. Taryn really was the queen of the back-handed compliment.

When she got back into her store, Lacey discovered her elderly customer was now waiting by the counter, and a second person—a man in a dark suit—had also entered. He was perusing the shelf filled with all the nautical items Lacey was planning on auctioning tomorrow, while under the watchful eye of Chester the dog. She could smell his aftershave even from this distance.

“I’ll be with you in a moment,” Lacey called over to the new customer as she hurried toward the back of the store where the elderly gentleman was waiting.

“Is your hand okay?” the man asked her.

“Absolutely fine.” She looked down at the small scratch in her palm, which had already stopped bleeding. “Sorry for rushing off like that. I had to—” she chose her words carefully, “—*attend* to something.”

Lacey was determined not to let Taryn get her down. If she let the boutique owner get under her skin, it would be akin to scoring an own goal.

As Lacey slid behind the sales counter, she noticed the elderly gentleman had placed the broken figurine upon it.

“I’d like to buy it,” he announced.

“But it’s broken,” Lacey countered. He was obviously just

trying to be nice, even though he had no reason to feel bad about the breakage. It really hadn't been his fault at all.

"I still want it."

Lacey blushed. He really was adamant.

"Can you let me try to fix it first, at least?" she said. "I have some super glue and—"

"Not at all!" the man interrupted. "I want it just as it is. You see, it reminds me of my wife even more now. That's what I was just about to say, when the van went bump. She was the Royal Ballet Society's first ballerina with a disability." He held up the figure, twirling it in the light. Light caught off the right arm, which still looked elegant outstretched despite stopping in a jagged stump at the elbow. "She danced with one arm."

Lacey's eyebrows rose. Her mouth fell open. "No way!"

The man nodded eagerly. "Honest! Don't you see? This was a sign from her."

Lacey couldn't help but agree. She was searching for her own ghost, after all, in the form of her father, so she was particularly sensitive to the signs of the universe.

"Then you're right, you have to take it," Lacey said. "But I can't charge you for it."

"Are you sure?" the man asked, surprised.

Lacey beamed. "I'm positive! Your wife sent you a sign. The figurine is rightfully yours."

The man looked touched. "Thank you."

Lacey began to wrap the figurine up in tissue paper for him.

“Let’s make sure she doesn’t lose any more of her limbs, huh?”

“You’re holding an auction, I see,” the man said, pointing over her shoulder at the poster hanging on the wall.

Unlike the crude hand-drawn posters that had advertised her last auction, Lacey had had this one professionally made. It was decorated with nautical imagery; boats and seagulls, and a border made to look like blue and white gingham bunting in honor of Wilfordshire’s own bunting obsession.

“That’s right,” Lacey said, feeling a swell of pride in her chest. “It’s my second auction ever. It’s exclusively for antique navy items. Sextants. Anchors. Telescopes. I’ll be selling a whole array of treasures. Perhaps you’d like to attend?”

“Perhaps I will,” the man replied with a smile.

“I’ll put a flier in the bag for you.”

Lacey did just that, then handed the man his precious figurine across the counter. He thanked her and headed away.

Lacey watched the elderly man exit the store, touched by the story he’d shared with her, before remembering that she had another customer to attend to.

She looked right to turn her attention to the other man. Only now she saw he had gone. He’d slipped out silently, unnoticed, before she’d even had a chance to see whether he needed any help.

She went over to the area he’d been perusing—the bottom shelf where she’d placed storage boxes filled with all the items she was selling at the auction tomorrow. A sign, in Gina’s

handwriting, stated: *None of this lot is for general sale. Everything will be auctioned!* She'd doodled what appeared to be a skull and crossbones beneath, evidently confusing the Navy theme with a pirate one. Hopefully the customer had seen the sign and would be back tomorrow to bid on whatever item it was he was so interested in.

Lacey took one of the boxes filled with items she'd not yet valued out, and carried it back to the desk. As she took out item after item, lining them up on the counter, she couldn't help feeling excitement coursing through her. Her last auction had been wonderful, yet tempered by the fact she was hunting for a killer. This one, she'd be able to fully enjoy. She'd really get a chance to flex her auctioneers muscles, and she literally couldn't wait!

She'd just gotten into the flow of valuing and cataloguing the items when she was interrupted by the shrill sound of her cell phone. A little frustrated to be disturbed by what was undoubtedly her melodramatic younger sister, Naomi, with a single-parent-related crisis, Lacey glanced over at the cell where it lay face up on the counter. To her surprise, the ID flashing up at her was *David*, her recently ex-husband.

Lacey stared at the flashing screen for a moment, stunned into inaction. A tsunami of different emotions rushed through her. She and David had exchanged precisely zero words with one another since the divorce—although he seemed to still be on speaking terms with Lacey's *mother* of all people—and had dealt

with everything through their solicitors. But for him to be calling her directly? Lacey didn't even know where to begin theorizing why he'd be doing such a thing.

Against her better judgment, Lacey answered the call.

"David? Is everything okay?"

"No, it's not," came his sharp-sounding voice, bringing forth about a million latent memories that had been lying dormant in Lacey's mind, like dust stirred.

She tensed, preparing for some terrible bombshell. "What is it? What happened?"

"Your alimony didn't come through."

Lacey rolled her eyes so hard they hurt. Money. Of course. There was nothing that mattered more to David than money. One of the most ludicrous aspects of her divorce from David was the fact that she had to pay him spousal support because she'd been the higher earner of the pair. It figured that the only thing to compel him to make actual contact with her would be *that*.

"But I set the payment up through the bank," Lacey told him. "It should be automatic."

"Well, evidently the Brits have a different interpretation of the word automatic," he said haughtily. "Because no money has been deposited in my bank account, and if you weren't aware, the deadline is today! So I suggest you get on the phone to your bank immediately and resolve the situation."

He sounded just like a headmaster. Lacey half-expected him to finish his monologue with the phrase, "you silly little girl."

She squeezed the cell phone, tightly, trying her hardest not to let David get to her, not today, the day before her auction that she was so looking forward to!

“What a clever suggestion, David,” she replied, wedging the phone between her ear and shoulder so she could free her hands and use them to log onto her online bank account. “I’d never have thought to do that myself.”

Her words were met by silence. David had probably never heard her use sarcasm before, and it had thrown him. She blamed Tom for that. Her new beau’s English sense of humor was rubbing off on her very quickly.

“You’re not taking this very seriously,” David replied, once he’d finally caught up.

“Should I be?” Lacey replied. “It’s just a mix-up at the bank. I can probably get it taken care of by the end of the day. In fact, yes, there’s a notice here on my account.” She clicked on the little red icon and an information box popped up. She read it aloud. “*Due to the bank holiday, any scheduled payment dates that fall on either Sunday or Monday will reach accounts on Tuesday.*” Aha. There you go. I knew it would be something simple. A bank holiday.” She paused and looked out the window at the throng of passing people. “I did think the streets looked extra busy today.”

She could practically hear David grinding his teeth through the speaker.

“It’s actually extremely inconvenient,” he snapped. “I do have bills to pay, you know.”

Lacey looked over at Chester, as if in need of a comrade in this particularly frustrating conversation. He raised his head off his paws and quirked up an eyebrow.

“Can’t Frida lend you a couple million bucks if you’re short?”

“Eda,” David corrected.

Lacey knew full well the name of David’s new fiancée. But she and Naomi had taken to calling her Fortnight Frida, in reference to the speed with which the two had gotten engaged and now she couldn’t think of her as anything else.

“And no,” he continued. “She shouldn’t have to. Who even told you about Eda?”

“My mother might have let it slip on one or two dozen occasions. What are you doing talking to my mom anyway?”

“She’d been a part of my family for fourteen years. I didn’t divorce *her*.”

Lacey sighed. “No. I guess not. So what’s the plan? The three of you go and bond over a mani-pedi?”

Now she was trying to wind him up, and she couldn’t help herself. It was quite fun.

“You’re being ridiculous,” David said.

“Isn’t she the heiress to a false nail emporium?” she said with feigned innocence.

“Yes, but you don’t have to say it like that,” David said, in a voice that catapulted the image of his pout-face right into Lacey’s mind’s eye.

“I was just speculating on how the three of you will likely

spend your time together.”

“With a tone of criticism.”

“Mom tells me she’s young,” Lacey said, changing course. “Twenty. I mean, I think twenty might be a little too young for a man your age, but at least she’s got a full nineteen years to work out whether she wants children or not. Thirty-nine is the cut-off point for you, after all.”

No sooner had she said it than she realized just how much like Taryn she sounded. She shuddered. While she had no qualms over Tom’s mannerisms rubbing off on her, she most certainly drew the line at Taryn’s!

“Sorry,” she mumbled, back-tracking. “That was uncalled for.”

David let a beat pass. “Just get me my money, Lace.”

The call went dead.

Lacey sighed and put the phone down. As infuriating as the conversation had been, she was absolutely determined not to let it bring her down. David was in her past now. She’d built a whole new life for herself here in Wilfordshire. And anyway, David moving on with Eda was a blessing in disguise. She wouldn’t have to pay him alimony anymore once they married, and the problem would be solved! But knowing the way things usually went for her, she had the feeling it would be a very long engagement.

CHAPTER TWO

Lacey was in the middle of her valuing work when, out the window, Taryn finally moved her huge van, and the view to Tom's store across the cobblestone streets opened up. The gingham Easter-themed bunting had been replaced with summer-themed bunting, and Tom had upgraded his macaron display so that it now depicted a tropical island scene. Lemon macarons made up the sand, surrounded by a sea of different blues—turquoise (cotton candy flavor), baby blue (bubblegum flavor), dark blue (blueberry flavor) and navy blue (blue raspberry flavor). Tall stacks of chocolate macarons, coffee macarons, and peanut macarons formed the bark of palm trees, and the leaves had been constructed out of marzipan; another food-based material Tom was proficient at working with. The window display was awe-inspiring, not to mention mouth-watering, and it always drew a huge crowd of excited tourist spectators.

Looking through the window to the counter, Lacey could see Tom behind it, busy delighting his customers with his theatrical displays.

She sank her chin onto her fist and let out a dreamy sigh. So far, things with Tom had been going wonderfully. They were officially “dating,” which was Tom's choice of word, not hers. During their “defining the relationship” discussion, Lacey had

put forth the argument that it was an inadequate and childish term for two full-grown adults embarking on a romantic journey together, but Tom pointed out that since she wasn't employed by Merriam-Webster, the terminology wasn't really hers to decide. She'd conceded on that particular point, but drew the line at the terms 'girlfriend' and 'boyfriend'. They were yet to decide on the appropriate terms to refer to one another and usually defaulted to 'dear'.

Suddenly, Tom was looking at her and waving. Lacey jerked up, her cheeks warming at the realization he'd just caught her gazing at him like a schoolgirl with a crush.

Tom's waving gesture turned into a beckoning, and Lacey suddenly realized what the time was. Ten past eleven. Tea time! And she was ten minutes late for their daily Elevenses!

"Come on, Chester," she said quickly, as excitement leapt into her breast. "It's time to visit Tom."

She practically ran out of the store, only just remembering to flip her 'Open' sign over so it read '*back in 10 minutes*' and lock the door. Then she hop-skipped across the cobblestone street toward the patisserie, her heart beat *thump-thump-thumping* in time with her bouncy steps, as her excitement at seeing Tom ratcheted up.

Just as Lacey reached the door of the patisserie, the group of Chinese vacationers Tom had been entertaining moments earlier came streaming out. Each was clutching an extremely large brown paper bag stuffed full of delicious-smelling goodies,

chattering and giggling to each other. Lacey held the door patiently, waiting for them to file past, and they politely bowed their heads in thanks.

Once the path was finally clear, Lacey went inside.

“Hello, my dear,” Tom said, a large grin lighting up his handsome, golden-hued face, making laugh lines appear beside his twinkling green eyes.

“I see your groupies just left,” Lacey joked, coming toward the counter. “And they bought a ton of merchandise.”

“You know me,” Tom replied, with an eyebrow wiggle. “I’m the world’s first pastry chef with a fan club.”

He seemed to be in a particularly jovial mood today, Lacey thought, not that he ever seemed anything but sunny. Tom was one of those people who seemed to breeze through life unperturbed by the usual stresses that got the best of us down. It was one of the things Lacey adored about him. He was so different from David, who would get stressed by the smallest of irritants.

She reached the counter and Tom stretched up on his arms to kiss her over it. Lacey let herself get lost in the moment, only breaking apart when Chester began to whine his displeasure at being ignored.

“Sorry, buddy,” Tom said. He came out from behind the counter and offered Chester a chocolate-free carob treat. “There you go. Your favorite.”

Chester licked the treats right out of Tom’s hand, then let out a

long sigh of satisfaction and sank down to the floor for a snooze.

“So, what tea is on the menu today?” Lacey asked, taking her usual stool at the counter.

“Chicory,” Tom said.

He headed into the kitchen at the back.

“I haven’t had that before,” Lacey called out.

“It’s caffeine free,” Tom called back, over the whoosh of a faucet and the banging of cupboard doors. “And has a slight laxative effect if you drink too much.”

Lacey laughed. “Thanks for the heads-up,” she called.

Her words were met by the clink and clatter of chinaware, and the bubble of the kettle boiling.

Then Tom reappeared holding a tea tray. Plates, cups, saucers, a sugar bowl, and a china teapot were on it.

He placed the tray down between them. Like all of Tom’s crockery, the items were completely mismatched, their only linking theme being Britain, as if he’d sourced each one from a different patriotic old lady’s yard sale. Lacey’s cup had a photograph of the late Princess Diana on it. Her plate had a passage from Beatrix Potter written in delicate cursive beside a watercolor image of the iconic Aylesbury duck, Jemima Puddleduck, in her bonnet and shawl. The teapot was in the shape of a gaudily decorated Indian elephant, with the words *Piccadilly Circus* printed on its bright red and gold saddle. Its trunk, naturally, made the spout.

As the tea brewed in the pot, Tom used silver tongs to select

some croissants from the counter display, which he placed on pretty floral plates. He slid Lacey's toward her, followed by a pot of her favorite apricot jam. Then he poured them both a mug of the now brewed tea, sat in his stool, held up the mug, and said, "Cheers."

With a smile, Lacey clinked hers against his. "Cheers."

As they sipped in unison, Lacey had a sudden flash of *déjà vu*. Not a real one, like when you're certain you've lived this exact moment before, but the *déjà vu* that comes from repetition, from routine, from doing the same thing day in day out. It felt like they had done this before, because they had; yesterday, and the day before that, and the day before that. As busy shop owners, Lacey and Tom often put in overtime and worked seven-day weeks. It had come so naturally, the routine, the rhythm. But it was more than that. Tom had automatically given her her favorite toasted almond croissant with apricot jam. He didn't even need to ask what she wanted.

It should have pleased Lacey, but instead, it perturbed her. Because that's exactly how things had been with David to begin with. Learning each other's orders. Doing little favors for one another. Small moments of routine and rhythm that made her feel like they were puzzle pieces that fit perfectly together. She'd been young and foolish and had made the mistake of thinking it would always feel that way. But it had just been the honeymoon period. It wore off a year or two down the line, and by that point, she was already stuck in marriage.

Was that all this relationship was with Tom? A honeymoon period that would eventually wear off?

“What are you thinking?” Tom asked, his voice intruding on her anxious rumination.

Lacey almost spat out her tea. “Nothing.”

Tom raised a single eyebrow. “Nothing? The chicory has had such little impact on you all thoughts have vacated your mind?”

“Oh, about the chicory!” she exclaimed, blushing.

Tom looked even more amused. “Yes. What else would I be asking?”

Lacey clumsily placed the Diana cup back on the saucer, making a loud clatter. “It’s nice. Licorice-y. Eight out of ten.”

Tom whistled. “Wow. High praise. But not quite enough to dethrone the Assam.”

“It will take an exceptional tea to dethrone the Assam.”

Her momentary panic that Tom had mind-reading abilities subsided, and Lacey turned her attention to the breakfast, savoring the flavors of homemade apricot jam combined with toasted almonds and yummy buttery pastry. But even the tasty food couldn’t keep her mind from wandering to the conversation with David. It had been the first time she’d heard his voice since he’d stormed out of their old Upper East Side apartment with the parting declaration, “You’ll be hearing from my lawyer!” and something about hearing his voice again reminded her that less than a month ago she’d been a relatively happily married woman, with a stable job and an income and family nearby in the city

she'd lived her whole life. Without even knowing she was doing it, she'd blocked out her past life in New York City with a solid wall in her mind. It was a coping strategy she'd developed as a child to cope with the grief of her father's sudden disappearance. Evidently, hearing David's voice had shaken the foundations of that wall.

"We should go on a vacation," Tom suddenly said.

Once again, Lacey almost spit out her food, but Tom couldn't have noticed, because he kept speaking.

"When I'm back from my focaccia course, we should go on a stay-cation. We've both been working so hard, we deserve it. We can go to my hometown in Devon, and I'll show you all the places I loved as a child."

Had Tom suggested this yesterday *before* her call with David, Lacey probably would've bitten his hand off at the offer. But suddenly the idea of making long-term plans with her new beau—even if it was only one *week* in the future—seemed to be jumping the gun. Of course, Tom had no reason not to be confident with his life. But Lacey herself had not been long divorced. She'd entered into his world of relative stability at a point when literally *every* bit of hers had become unmoored—from her job, to her home, to her country, and even her relationship status! She'd gone from babysitting her nephew, Frankie, while her sister, Naomi, went on yet another disastrous date, to shooing sheep off her front lawn; from being barked at by her boss, Saskia, in a New York City interior design firm,

to antique-scouting trips in London's Mayfair with her peculiar cardigan-clad neighbor and two sheep dogs in tow. It was a lot of change all in one go, and she wasn't entirely sure where her head was at.

"I'll have to see how busy I am with the store," she replied noncommittally. "The auction is taking more work than I anticipated."

"Sure," Tom said, sounding in no way like he'd read between the lines. Picking up on subtleties and subtext was not one of Tom's fortes, which was another thing she liked about him. He took everything she said on face value. Unlike her mom and sister, who'd needle and prod her and dissect every word she said, there was no guessing or second-guessing with Tom. What you saw was what you got.

Just then, the bell above the patisserie door tinkled, and Tom's gaze flicked over Lacey's shoulder. She watched his expression turn to a grimace before he returned his gaze to meet hers again.

"Great," he muttered under his breath. "I'd been wondering when my turn would come for Tweedle-dee and Tweedle-dum to pay a visit. You'll have to excuse me."

He stood, and went round from the back of the counter.

Curious to see who could elicit such a visceral response from Tom—a man who was notoriously easygoing and personable—Lacey swiveled in her stool.

The customers who'd entered the patisserie were a man and woman, and they looked like they'd just walked off the set of

Dallas. The man was in a powder blue suit with a cowboy hat. The woman—much younger, Lacey noted wryly, as seemed to be the preference of most middle-aged men—was in a fuchsia pink two-piece, bright enough to give Lacey a headache, and which clashed terribly with her Dolly Parton yellow hair.

“We’d like to try some samples,” the man barked. He was American, and his abruptness seemed so out of place in Tom’s quaint little patisserie.

Gosh, I hope I don’t sound like that to Tom, Lacey thought a little self-consciously.

“Of course,” Tom replied politely, the Britishness in his own tone seeming to have intensified in response. “What would you like to try? We have pastries and...”

“Ew, Buck, no,” the woman said to her husband, yanking on his arm to which she was clinging. “You know wheat makes me bloat. Ask him for something different.”

Lacey couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow at the odd pair. Was the wife incapable of asking her own questions?

“Got any chocolate?” the man she’d referred to as Buck asked. Or, more like demanded, since his tone was so boorish.

“I do,” Tom said, somehow keeping his cool in front of Loudmouth and his limpet of a wife.

He showed them over to the chocolate display and gestured with a hand. Buck grabbed one in his meaty fist and shoved it straight into his mouth.

Almost immediately, he spit it back out. The little gooey, half-

chewed lump splattered onto the floor.

Chester, who'd been very quietly sitting at Lacey's feet, suddenly sprang up and launched for it.

"Chester. No," Lacey warned him in the firm, authoritative voice he knew full well he had to obey. "Poison."

The English Shepherd looked at her, then mournfully back at the chocolate, before finally going back to his position at her feet with the expression of a scorned child.

"Ew, Buck, there's a dog in here!" the blond woman wailed. "It's so unhygienic."

"Hygiene is the least of his troubles," Buck scoffed, looking back at Tom, who was now wearing a slightly mortified expression. "Your chocolate tastes like garbage!"

"American chocolate and English chocolate are different," Lacey said, feeling the need to jump in to Tom's defense.

"You don't say," Buck replied. "It tastes like crap! And the queen eats this junk? She needs some proper American imports if you ask me."

Somehow, Tom managed to remain calm, though Lacey was seething enough for the both of them.

The brute of a man and his simpering wretch of a wife swirled out of the store and Tom fetched a tissue to wipe up the spit out chocolate mess they'd left behind.

"They were so rude," Lacey said incredulously, as Tom cleaned.

"They're staying at Carol's B'n'B," he explained, looking up at

her from his hands and knees as he circled the rag over the tiles. “She said they’re awful. The man, Buck, sends every single meal he orders back to the kitchen. After he’s eaten half of it, mind you. The wife keeps claiming the shampoos and soaps are giving her a rash, but whenever Carol supplies her with something new, the originals have mysteriously disappeared.” He stood up, shaking his head. “They’re making everyone’s life a misery.”

“Huh,” Lacey said, popping the last bit of croissant into her mouth. “I should count myself lucky, then. I doubt they have any interest in antiques.”

Tom patted the counter. “Touch wood, Lacey. You don’t want to jinx yourself.”

Lacey was about to say she didn’t believe in such a superstition, but then she thought of the elderly man and the ballerina from earlier, and decided it was better not to tempt fate. She tapped the countertop.

“There. The jinx is officially broken. Now, I’d better go. I still have tons of stuff to value before the auction tomorrow.”

The bell above the door tinkled and Lacey looked over to see a large group of kids come hurtling inside. They were dressed in party frocks and were wearing hats. Amongst them, a small, tubby blonde child dressed as a princess and carrying a helium balloon, yelled to no one in particular, “It’s my birthday!”

Lacey turned back to Tom with a small smirk on her lips. “Looks like you’re about to have your hands full here.”

He looked stunned, and more than a little apprehensive.

Lacey hopped off the stool, pecked Tom on the lips, then left him at the mercy of a bunch of eight-year-old girls.

*

Back in her store, Lacey got on with valuing the last of the Navy items for tomorrow's auction.

She was particularly thrilled with a sextant she'd sourced from the most unlikely of locations; a charity store. She'd only gone in to buy the retro games console they had displayed in the window—something she knew her computer-obsessed nephew Frankie would love—when she spotted it. An early nineteenth-century, mahogany-cased, ebony-handled, double-framed sextant! It was just sitting there on the shelf, amongst novelty mugs and some vomit-inducingly cute models of teddy bears.

Lacey hadn't quite believed her eyes. She was an antiques novice, after all. Such a find must've been wishful thinking. But when she'd rushed over to inspect it, the underside of its base had been inscribed with the words 'Bate, Poultry, London', which confirmed to her she was holding a genuine, rare Robert Brettell Bate!

Lacey had called Percy straight away, knowing he was the only person in the world who'd be as excited as she was. She'd been right. The man had sounded like all his Christmases had come early.

"What are you going to do with it?" he asked. "You'll have

to hold an auction. A rare item like that can't just be popped on eBay. It deserves fanfare."

While Lacey had been surprised someone Percy's age knew what eBay was, her mind attached to the word *auction*. Could she do it? Hold another one so soon after the first? She'd had an entire estate's worth of Victorian furniture to sell before. She couldn't just hold an auction for this one item. Besides, it felt immoral to buy a rare antique from a charity store, knowing its true value.

"I know," Lacey said, hitting on an idea. "I'll use the sextant as a lure, as the main attraction of a general auction. Then whatever proceeds I make from its sale can go back to the charity shop."

That would solve two dilemmas; the icky feeling of buying something under its true value from a charity, and what to do with it once she had.

And so that's how the whole plan had come together. Lacey had bought the sextant (and the console, which she'd dropped in her excitement and almost forgotten to pick back up), decided on a naval theme, then got to work curating the auction and spread the buzz about it.

The sound of the bell over the door pulled Lacey from her reverie. She looked up to see her gray-haired, cardigan-clad neighbor, Gina, waltzing in with Boudicca, her Border Collie, in tow.

"What are you doing here?" Lacey asked. "I thought we were meeting for lunch."

“We are!” Gina replied, pointing at the large brass and wrought iron clock hanging on the wall.

Lacey glanced over. Along with everything in the “Nordic corner,” the clock was amongst her favorite decorative features in the store. It was an antique (of course), and looked like it might have once been attached to the front of a Victorian workhouse.

“Oh!” Lacey exclaimed, finally noticing the time. “It’s one-thirty. Already? The day’s flown by.”

It was the first time the two friends had planned to close up shop for an hour and have a proper lunch together. And by “planned,” what really had happened was Gina had plied Lacey with too much wine one evening and twisted her arm until she caved and agreed to it. It was true that pretty much every local and visitor in Wilfordshire town spent the lunch hour inside a cafe or pub anyway, rather than perusing the shelves of an antiques store, and that the hour closure was very unlikely to dent Lacey’s trade, but now that Lacey had learned it was a bank holiday Monday, she started second-guessing herself.

“Maybe it’s not a good idea after all,” Lacey said.

Gina put her hands on her hips. “Why? What excuse have you come up with this time?”

“Well, I didn’t realize it was a bank holiday today. There are tons more people around than usual.”

“Tons more people, not tons more *customers*,” Gina said. “Because every single one of them will be sitting inside a cafe or pub or coffee shop in about ten minutes’ time, just like we

should be! Come on, Lacey. We talked about this. No one buys antiques over lunchtime!”

“But what if some of them are Europeans?” Lacey said. “You know they do everything later on the continent. If they have dinner at nine or ten p.m., then what time do they have lunch? Probably not one!”

Gina took her by the shoulders. “You’re right. But they spend the lunch hour having a siesta instead. If there are any European tourists, they’ll be asleep for the next hour. To put it into words you might understand, *not shopping in an antiques store!*”

“Okay, fine. So the Europeans will be sleeping. But what if they’ve come from further afield and their biological clocks are still out of sync, so they’re not hungry for lunch and feel like shopping for antiques instead?”

Gina just folded her arms. “Lacey,” she said, in a motherly way. “You need a break. You’ll run yourself into the ground if you spend every minute of every day inside these four walls, however artfully decorated they may be.”

Lacey twisted her lips. Then she placed the sextant down on the counter and headed for the shop floor. “You’re right. How much harm can one hour really do?”

They were words Lacey would soon come to regret.

CHAPTER THREE

“I’ve been dying to visit the new tearoom,” Gina said exuberantly, as she and Lacey strolled along the seafront, their canine companions racing one another through the surf, wagging their tails with excitement.

“Why?” Lacey asked. “What’s so good about it?”

“Nothing in particular,” Gina replied. She lowered her voice. “It’s just that I heard the new owner used to be a pro-wrestler! I can’t wait to meet him.”

Lacey couldn’t help herself. She tipped her head back and guffawed at just how ludicrous a rumor it was. But, then again, it hadn’t been that long ago that everyone in Wilfordshire thought she might be a murderer.

“How about we take that hearsay with a pinch of salt?” she suggested to Gina.

Her friend “pfft” her, and the two set about giggling.

The beach was looking particularly attractive in the warmer weather. It wasn’t quite hot enough for sunbathing or paddling, but plenty more people were starting to walk along it, and buy ice creams from the trucks. As they went, the two friends fell into easy chatter, and Lacey filled Gina in with the whole David phone call, and the touching story of the man and the ballerina. Then they reached the tearoom.

It was housed in what was once a canoe garage, in a prime

seafront location. The prior owners had been the ones to convert it, turning the old shed into a somewhat dingy cafe—something Gina had taught her was referred to in England as a “greasy spoon.” But the new owner had vastly improved on the design. They’d cleaned the brick frontage, removing streaks of seagull poop that had probably been there since the fifties. They’d put a chalkboard outside, proclaiming *organic coffee* in the cursive writing of a professional sign writer. And the original wooden doors had been replaced by a shiny glass one.

Gina and Lacey approached. The door swished open automatically, as if to beckon them inside. They exchanged a glance and went in.

The pungent smell of fresh coffee beans greeted them, followed by the scent of wood, wet soil, and metal. Gone were the old floor to ceiling white tiles, the pink vinyl booths, and linoleum flooring. Now, all the old brickwork had been exposed and the old floorboards had been varnished with a dark stain. Keeping up with the rustic vibe, all the tables and chairs appeared to be made from the planks of reclaimed fishing boats—which accounted for the smell of wood—and copper piping concealed all the wiring of several large, Edison-style bulbs that hung down from the high ceiling—accounting for the metallic smell. The earthy smell was caused by the fact that every spare inch of space had a cactus in it.

Gina gripped Lacey’s arm and whispered with displeasure, “Oh no. It’s ... *trendy!*”

Lacey had recently learned during an antique-buying trip to Shoreditch in London that *trendy* was not a compliment to be used in the place of ‘stylish’, but rather had a subtext of frivolous, pretentious and arrogant.

“I like it,” Lacey countered. “It’s very well designed. Even Saskia would agree.”

“Careful. You don’t want to get pricked,” Gina added, making an exaggerated swerving motion to avoid a large prickly-looking cactus.

Lacey “tsked” her and went up to the counter, which was made of burnished bronze, and had a matching old coffee machine that surely must be decorative. Despite what Gina had heard, there wasn’t a man who resembled a wrestler standing behind it, but a woman with a choppy, dyed blond bob and a white tank top that complemented her golden skin and bulging biceps.

Gina caught Lacey’s eye and nodded at the woman’s muscles in a *see, I told you so*, way.

“What can I get ya?” the woman asked in the thickest Aussie accent Lacey had ever heard.

Before Lacey had a chance to ask for a cortado, Gina nudged her in the ribs.

“She’s like you!” Gina exclaimed. “An American!”

Lacey couldn’t stop herself from laughing. “Erm... no, she’s not.”

“I’m from Australia,” the woman corrected Gina, good-naturedly.

“Are you?” Gina asked, looking perplexed. “But you sound exactly like Lacey to me.”

The blond woman instantly flicked her gaze back to Lacey.

“Lacey?” she repeated, as if she’d already heard of her. “*You’re Lacey?*”

“Uh... yeah....” Lacey said, feeling quite odd that this stranger somehow knew about her.

“You own the antiques store, right?” the woman added, putting down the little notepad she’d been holding and shoving her pencil behind her ear. She stuck out her hand.

Feeling even more bemused, Lacey nodded and took the hand being offered to her. The woman had a strong grip. Lacey briefly wondered whether there was any truth to the wrestling rumors after all.

“Sorry, but how do you know who I am?” Lacey queried, as the woman pumped her arm up and down vigorously with a wide grin on her face.

“Because every local person who comes in here and realizes I’m a foreigner immediately goes on to tell me all about you! About how you also moved here from abroad on your own. And how you started your own store from scratch. I think the whole of Wilfordshire is rooting for us to become best friends.”

She was still shaking Lacey’s hand vigorously, and when Lacey spoke, her voice shook from the vibration.

“So you came to the UK alone then?”

Finally, the woman let go of her hand.

“Yeah. I divorced my hubby, then realized divorcing him wasn’t enough. Really, I needed to be on the other side of the planet to him.”

Lacey couldn’t help but laugh. “Same. Well, similar. New York isn’t exactly the other side of the planet, but with the way Wilfordshire is, sometimes it feels like it may as well be.”

Gina cleared her throat. “Can I get a cappuccino and a tuna melt?”

The woman seemed to suddenly remember Gina was there. “Oh. I’m sorry. Where are my manners?” She offered her hand to Gina. “I’m Brooke.”

Gina didn’t make eye contact. She shook Brooke’s hand limply. Lacey picked up on the vibes of jealousy she was giving off and couldn’t help but smile to herself.

“Gina’s my partner in crime,” Lacey told Brooke. “She works with me in my store, helps me find stock, takes my dog for playdates, imparts all her gardening wisdom to me, and generally has kept me sane ever since I came to Wilfordshire.”

Gina’s jealous pout was replaced by a sheepish smile.

Brooke smiled. “I hope I get my own Gina, too,” she joked. “It’s a pleasure to meet you both.”

She retrieved the pencil from behind her ear, making her sleek blond hair swish back into place. “So that’s one cappuccino and tuna melt...” she said, writing on the notebook. “And for you?” She looked up at Lacey with expectancy in her gaze.

“A cortado,” Lacey said, looking down at the menu. She

quickly scanned everything on offer. There was a wide array of very tasty-sounding dishes, but really the menu consisted solely of sandwiches with fancy descriptions. The tuna melt Gina had ordered was in fact a ‘skipjack tuna and oak-smoked cheddar toastie’. “Erm... The smashed avo baguette.”

Brooke noted the order down.

“What about your furry friends?” she added, pointing her pencil between Gina and Lacey’s shoulders to where Boudicca and Chester were pacing around in a figure eight motion in their attempts to sniff one another. “Bowl of water and some doggie kibble?”

“That would be great,” Lacey said, impressed by how accommodating the woman was.

She would make a great hotelier, Lacey thought. Maybe her job back in Australia had been in hospitality? Or maybe she was just a nice person. Either way, she’d made a great first impression on Lacey. Perhaps the Wilfordshire locals would get their way and the two would go on to become firm friends. Lacey could always do with more allies!

She and Gina headed off to choose a table. Amongst the vintage patio furniture, they had the option of sitting at a table made of a door on its side, thrones made out of tree stumps, or one of the nooks, which were made from the halves of sawn up rowing boats filled with pillows. They went for the safe option—a wooden picnic table.

“She seems absolutely lovely,” Lacey said, as she slid to

seating.

Gina shrugged and flopped down on the bench opposite. “Meh. She seemed *alright*.”

She’d gone back to jealously pouting.

“You know you’re my fave,” Lacey told Gina.

“For now. What about when you and Brooke buddy up to chat about being expats?”

“I can have more than one friend.”

“I know that. It’s just, who will you end up wanting to spend more time with? Someone your own age who owns a trendy store, or someone old enough to be your mother who smells of sheep?”

Lacey couldn’t help but laugh, though it was without malice. She reached across the table and squeezed Gina’s hand.

“I meant it when I said you keep me sane. Honestly, with everything that happened with Iris, and the police and Taryn’s attempts to drive me out of Wilfordshire, I really would’ve lost my mind if it hadn’t been for you. You’re a good friend, Gina, and I don’t take that for granted. I’m not going to abandon you just because a cactus-wielding ex-wrestler’s arrived in town. Okay?”

“A cactus-wielding ex-wrestler?” said Brooke, appearing beside them holding a tray of coffees and sandwiches. “You wouldn’t be talking about me, would you?”

Lacey’s cheeks went instantly hot. It wasn’t like her to gossip about people behind their backs. She’d only been trying to cheer Gina up.

“Ha! Lacey, your face!” Brooke exclaimed, thumping her on

the back. "It's fine. I don't mind. I'm proud of my past."

"You mean to say..."

"Yup," Brooke said, grinning. "It's true. There's really not as much of a story there, though, as people have made out. I wrestled in high school, then college, before doing a year-long stint professionally. I guess small-town English folk think it's more exotic than it is."

Lacey felt very silly now. Of course everything could be blown out of proportion and distorted as it was passed from one person to the next along the small town gossip system. Brooke being a wrestler in the past was as much of a non-event as Lacey having worked as an interior designer's assistant in New York; normal for her, exotic for everyone else.

"Now, as for wielding cactuses..." Brooke said. Then she gave Lacey a wink.

She decanted the food from the tray to the table, fetched bowls of water and kibble for the dogs, then left Lacey and Gina to eat in peace.

Despite the overly complicated description on the menu, the food was actually terrific. The avocado was perfectly ripened, softened enough to lose its bite but not too soft as to be mushy. The bread was fresh, seeded, and nicely toasted. In fact, it even rivaled Tom's and that was the highest praise Lacey could really give anything! The coffee was the real triumph though. Lacey had been drinking tea these days, since it was constantly being offered to her, and because there wasn't a local place that seemed

to match up to her standards. But Brooke's coffee tasted like it had been shipped straight here from Colombia! Lacey would *definitely* switch to getting her morning coffee from here, on the days when she started work at a sensible hour rather than at a time when most sane people were still snoozing in bed.

Lacey was halfway through her lunch when the automatic door behind her swished open and in waltzed none other than Buck and his silly wife. Lacey groaned.

"Hey, chick," Buck said, clicking his fingers at Brooke and thudding down into a seat. "We need coffee. And I'll take a steak and fries." He pointed at the tabletop in a demanding way, then looked over at his wife. "Daisy? What do you want?"

The woman was hovering at the door on her tippy-toed stilettos, looking somewhat terrified of all the cactuses.

"I'll just have whatever has the least carbs in," she murmured.

"A salad for the missus," Buck barked at Brooke. "Easy on the dressing."

Brooke flashed Lacey and Gina a look, then went off to make her rude customers' orders.

Lacey buried her face in her hands, feeling secondhand embarrassment for the couple. She really hoped the people of Wilfordshire didn't think all Americans were like this. Buck and Daisy were giving her entire country a bad name.

"Great," Lacey muttered as Buck began loudly talking at his wife. "These two ruined my tea date with Tom. Now they're ruining my lunch break with you."

Gina looked unimpressed with the pair. "I've got an idea," she said.

She bent down and whispered something to Boudicca that made her ears twitch. Then she released the dog from her leash. She went pelting across the tearooms, leapt at the table, and grabbed the steak clean off Buck's plate.

"HEY!" he bellowed.

Brooke couldn't help herself. She burst out laughing.

Lacey gasped, amused by Gina's antics.

"Get me another," Buck demanded. "And get that dog OUT."

"I'm sorry, but that was my last steak," Brooke said, flashing a subtle wink at Lacey.

The couple huffed and stormed out.

The three women burst out laughing.

"That wasn't your last at all, was it?" Lacey asked.

"Nah," Brooke said, chuckling. "I've got a whole freezer stuffed full of them!"

*

It was drawing up toward the end of the workday and Lacey had finished valuing all of the naval items for tomorrow's auction. She was so excited.

That was, until the bell rang and in waltzed Buck and Daisy.

Lacey groaned. She wasn't as calm as Tom, and she wasn't as jovial at Brooke. She really didn't think this meeting would go

well.

“Look at all this junk,” Buck said to his wife. “What a load of nothin’. Why did you even want to come in here, Daisy? And it smells.” His eyes went over to Chester. “It’s that disgusting dog again!”

Lacey clenched her teeth so hard she half expected them to crack. She tried to channel Tom’s calm as she approached the pair.

“I’m afraid Wilfordshire is a very small town,” she said. “You’ll run into the same people—and dogs—all the time.”

“It’s you,” Daisy asked, evidently recognizing Lacey from their two earlier run-ins. “This is your store?” She had a ditzy voice, like your average Valley Girl airhead.

“It is,” Lacey confirmed, feeling increasingly wary. Daisy’s question had felt loaded, like an accusation.

“When I heard your accent in the patisserie, I figured you were a customer,” Daisy continued. “But you actually *live* here?” She pulled a face. “What made you want to leave America for *this*?”

Lacey felt every single muscle in her body tense. Her blood started to boil.

“Probably for the same reasons you chose to vacation here,” Lacey replied in the calmest voice she could muster. “The beach. The ocean. The countryside. The charming architecture.”

“Daisy,” Buck barked. “Can you hurry up and find that thing you dragged me in here to buy?”

Daisy glanced over at the counter. “It’s gone.” She looked at

Lacey. "Where's the brass thing that was over there before?"

Brass thing? Lacey thought back to the items she'd been working on before Gina's arrival.

Daisy continued. "It's like a sort of compass, with a telescope attached. For boats. I saw it through the window when the store was closed over lunch. Did you sell it already?"

"Do you mean the sextant?" she asked, frowning with confusion over what a ditzy blond like Daisy would want with an antique sextant.

"That's it!" Daisy exclaimed. "A sextant."

Buck guffawed. Obviously the name amused him.

"Don't you get enough sextant at home?" he quipped.

Daisy giggled, but it sounded forced to Lacey, less like she was actually amused and more like she was just being accommodating.

Lacey herself was not amused. She folded her arms and raised her eyebrows.

"I'm afraid the sextant is not for sale," she explained, keeping her focus on Daisy rather than Buck, who was making it very hard for her to stay personable. "All my naval items are going to be auctioned tomorrow, so it's not for general sale."

Daisy stuck out her bottom lip. "But I want it. Buck will pay double what it's worth. Won't you, Bucky?" She tugged on his arm.

Before Buck had a chance to respond, Lacey interjected. "No, I'm sorry, that's not possible. I don't know how much I'll fetch

for it. That's the whole point of the auction. It's a rare piece, and there are specialists coming from all over the country just to bid on it. The price could be anything. If I sold it to you now, I may lose out, and since the proceeds are going to charity, I want to secure the best deal."

A deep furrow appeared across Buck's forehead. In that moment, Lacey felt even more aware of just how big and wide the man really was. He was well over six feet, and thicker than two of her put together, like a large oak tree. He was intimidating, in both size and mannerism.

"Did you not just hear what my wife said?" he barked. "She wants to buy your thingamajig so name your price."

"I heard her," Lacey replied, standing her ground. "It's me who's not being listened to. The sextant is not for sale."

She sounded far more confident than she felt. A small alarm bell in the back of her mind started ringing, telling her she was plowing headfirst into a dangerous situation.

Buck took a step forward, his looming shadow stretching over her. Chester leapt up and growled in response, but Buck clearly wasn't fazed and just ignored him.

"You're refusing me sale?" he said. "Isn't that illegal? Isn't our money good enough for you?" He pulled a pile of cash from his pocket and waved it under Lacey's nose in a decidedly threatening manner. "It's got the Queen's face on it and everything. Isn't that enough for you?"

Chester began to bark furiously. Lacey gave him a hand signal

to stop, and he did, obediently, but he still held his position as if he were ready to attack the second she gave him the go ahead.

Lacey folded her arms and squared off to Buck, aware of every inch he loomed over her but determined to hold her ground. She wasn't going to be bullied into selling the sextant. She wasn't going to let this mean, hulking man intimidate her and ruin the auction she'd worked so hard for and was so looking forward to.

"If you want to buy the sextant, then you'll have to come to the auction and bid on it," she said.

"Oh, I will," Buck said through narrowed eyes. He pointed right in Lacey's face. "You bet I will. Mark my words. Buckland Stringer *will* win."

With that, the couple left, swirling out the store so fast they practically left turbulence in their wake. Chester ran to the window, put his front paws up against the glass, and growled at their retreating backs. Lacey watched them go, too, until they were out of sight. It was only then she noticed how much her heart was racing, and how much her legs were trembling. She gripped the countertop to steady herself.

Tom had been right. She'd jinxed herself by saying the pair had no reason to come to her store. But she could be forgiven for assuming there was nothing of interest for them in here. No one would have been able to guess by looking at her that Daisy had any desire to own an antique navy sextant!

"Oh, Chester," Lacey said, sinking her head into her fist. "Why did I tell them about the auction?"

The dog whined, picking up on the note of mournful regret in her tone.

“Now I have to put up with them tomorrow as well!” she exclaimed. “And what’s the likelihood they know anything of auction etiquette? It’s going to be a disaster.”

And just like that, her excitement for her auction tomorrow was doused like a flame between fingertips. In its place, Lacey felt only dread.

CHAPTER FOUR

After her encounter with Buck and Daisy, Lacey was more than ready to lock up for the day and head home. Tom was coming over tonight to cook for her, and she was really looking forward to curling up on the couch with a glass of wine and a movie. But there was still the till to balance, and stock to tidy, the floors to sweep and the coffee machine to clean... Not that Lacey was complaining. She loved her store and everything that went along with owning it.

When she was finally finished, she headed for the exit, Chester in tow, noticing that the hands on the wrought iron clock had reached 7 p.m., and outside it was dark. Though spring had brought longer days with it, Lacey had yet to enjoy any of them. But she could feel the change in the atmosphere; the town seemed more vibrant, with many of the cafes and pubs staying open longer, and people sitting on the tables outside drinking coffee and beer. It gave the place a festive vibe.

Lacey locked up her store. She'd become extra diligent since the break-in, but even if that had never happened, she'd have gotten this way, because the store felt like her child now. It was something that needed to be nurtured and protected and cared for. In such a short space of time, she'd fallen completely in love with the place

“Who knew you could fall in love with a store?” she mused

aloud with a deep sigh of satisfaction for the way her life had turned out.

From beside her, Chester whinnied.

Lacey patted his head. "Yes, I'm in love with you too, don't worry!"

At the mention of love, she remembered the plans she had with Tom that evening, and gazed over at his patisserie.

To her surprise, she saw all the lights were on. It was most unusual. Tom had to open his store at the inhuman hour of 5 a.m. to make sure everything was ready for the breakfast crowd at 7, which meant he usually closed at 5 p.m. on the dot. But it was 7 p.m. and he was clearly still inside. The sandwich board was still out in the street. The sign in the door was still turned to open.

"Come on, Chester," Lacey said to her furry companion. "Let's see what's going on."

They crossed the street together and went inside the patisserie.

Right away, Lacey could hear something of a commotion coming from the kitchen. It sounded like the usual sounds of clattering pots and pans, but in hyperdrive.

"Tom?" she called out, a little nervously.

"Hey!" his disembodied voice came from the back kitchen. He used his normal sunny tone.

Now that Lacey knew he wasn't in the middle of being burglarized by a macaron thief, she relaxed. She hopped onto her usual stool, as the clattering continued.

"Everything okay back there?" she asked.

“Fine!” Tom called in response.

A moment later, he finally appeared in the archway of the kitchenette. He had his apron on, and it—as well as most of his clothes underneath and his hair—were covered in flour. “There’s been a minor disaster.”

“Minor?” Lacey mocked. Now that she knew Tom wasn’t fighting off a kitchen intruder, she could appreciate the humor in the situation.

“It was Paul, actually,” Tom began.

“What’s he done *now*?” Lacey asked, recalling the time Tom’s trainee had accidentally used baking soda instead of flour in a batch of dough rendering the entirety of it unusable.

Tom held up two almost identical-looking white packages. On the left, the faded printed label read: sugar. On the right: salt.

“Ah,” Lacey said.

Tom nodded. “Yup. It’s the batch for tomorrow morning’s breakfast pastries. I’m going to have to remake the whole lot, or risk the angry wrath of the locals when they arrive for breakfast and discover I have nothing to sell them.”

“Does that mean you’re cancelling our plans tonight?” Lacey asked. The humor she’d felt moments earlier was suddenly dashed, and now in its place she felt heavy disappointment.

Tom flashed her an apologetic look. “I’m so sorry. Let’s reschedule. Tomorrow? I’ll come over and cook for you.”

“I can’t,” Lacey replied. “I’m having that meeting with Ivan tomorrow.”

“The Crag Cottage sale meeting,” Tom said, snapping his fingers. “Of course. I remember. How about Wednesday evening?”

“Aren’t you heading off for that focaccia course Wednesday?”

Tom looked perturbed. He checked the calendar hanging up, then let out a sigh. “Okay, that’s *next* Wednesday.” He chuckled. “You gave me a fright. Oh, but I am busy Wednesday evening after all. And Thursday—”

“—is badminton practice,” Lacey finished for him.

“Which means I’m next free on Friday. Is Friday good?”

His tone was just as happy-go-lucky as usual, Lacey noted, but his blasé attitude over cancelling their plans together stung her. He didn’t seem to mind at all that they may not be able to see one another in a romantic capacity until the end of the week.

Though Lacey knew full well she had no plans on Friday, she still heard herself saying, “I’ll have to check my diary and get back to you.”

And no sooner had the words left her lips than a new emotion crept into her stomach, mixing with the disappointment. To Lacey’s surprise, the emotion was relief.

Relief that she wouldn’t be able to have a romantic date with Tom for a week? She couldn’t quite comprehend where the relief was coming from, and it made her feel suddenly guilty.

“Sure,” Tom said, seemingly oblivious. “We can put a pin in it for now and arrange to do something extra special next time, when we’re both less busy?” He paused for her response, and

when it didn't come, added, "Lacey?"

She snapped back to the moment. "Yes... Right. Sounds good."

Tom came over and leaned his elbows onto the counter, so their faces were level. "Now. Serious question. Are you going to be alright for food tonight? Because obviously you were expecting a tasty, nutritious meal. I have some meat pies that didn't sell today, if you want to take one home with you?"

Lacey chuckled and smacked his arm. "I don't need your handouts, thank you very much! I'll have you know I can actually cook!"

"Oh really?" Tom teased.

"I've been known to make a dish or two in my time," Lacey told him. "Mushroom risotto. Seafood paella." She racked her brains for at least one other thing to add, because everyone knew you needed at least three for a list! "Um... um..."

Tom raised his eyebrows. "Go on...?"

"Macaroni and cheese!" Lacey exclaimed.

Tom laughed heartily. "That's quite an impressive repertoire. And yet I've never seen any evidence to support your claims."

He was right about that. So far, Tom had made all the meals for them. It made sense. He loved cooking, and he had the skills to pull it off. Lacey's culinary skills weren't much above piercing the film of a microwavable dish.

She folded her arms. "I haven't exactly had the chance to yet," she replied, using the same jokingly argumentative tone as Tom

in the hopes it would mask the genuine irritation his comment had roused in her. “Mr. Michelin Star pastry chef doesn’t trust me near the stove.”

“Should I take that as an offer?” Tom asked, wiggling his eyebrows.

Damn pride, Lacey thought. She’d walked right into that one. *Way to set yourself up.*

“You bet,” she said, feigning confidence. She held her hand out to him to shake. “Challenge accepted.”

Tom looked at her hand without moving, twisting his lips to the side. “There’s one condition, though.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“It has to be something traditional. Something native to New York.”

“In that case, you’ve just made my job ten times easier,” Lacey exclaimed. “Because that means I’ll be making pizza and cheesecake.”

“Nothing can be store bought,” Tom added. “The whole thing has to be made from scratch. And no getting any sneaky help. No asking Paul for the pastry.”

“Oh please,” Lacey said, pointing at the discarded salt bag on the counter. “Paul is the last person I’d enlist to help me cheat.”

Tom laughed. Lacey nudged her extended hand closer to him. He nodded to indicate he was satisfied that she’d meet the conditions, then took her hand. But instead of shaking it he gave it a small tug, bringing her closer toward him, and kissed her over

the counter.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Lacey murmured, the tingle from his lips echoing on hers. “Through the window, I mean. Unless you have time to come to the auction?”

“Of course I’m coming to the auction,” Tom told her. “I missed the last one. I need to be there to support you.”

She smiled. “Great.”

She turned and headed for the exit, leaving Tom to his mess of pastry.

As soon as the patisserie’s door shut behind her, she looked down at Chester.

“I’ve really landed myself in it now,” she said to her perceptive-looking dog. “Really, you should’ve stopped me. Tugged on my sleeve. Nudged me with your nose. Anything. But now I’ve got to make pizza from scratch. And a cheesecake! Shoot.” She scuffed her shoe on the sidewalk with faux frustration. “Come on, we’ll have to go grocery shopping before we go home.”

Lacey turned the opposite direction to home, and hurried down the high street toward the grocery store (or *corner shop* as Gina insisted on calling it). As she went, she put a message on the *Doyle Girlz* thread.

Anyone know how to make cheesecake?

Surely it was the sort of thing her mom would just know how to do, right?

It wasn’t long before she heard her cell ping in reply, and she

checked to see who had responded. Unfortunately, it was her infamously sarcastic little sister, Naomi.

You don't, her sister quipped. *You buy it premade and save the hassle.*

Lacey quickly tapped out a reply. *Not helpful, sis.*

Naomi's response came in lightning-quick speed. *If you ask stupid questions, expect stupid answers.*

Lacey rolled her eyes and hurried on.

Luckily, by the time Lacey reached the store, her mom messaged back with a recipe.

It's Martha Stewart's, she wrote. *You can trust her.*

Trust her? Naomi tapped in response. *Didn't she go to jail?*

Yes, their Mom replied. *But that had nothing to do with her cheesecake recipe.*

Touché, Naomi replied.

Lacey laughed. Mom had actually outdone Naomi!

She put her phone away, tied Chester's leash around the lamppost, then headed inside the brightly lit store. She whizzed about as quickly as she could, filing her basket with everything Martha Stewart told her she needed, then grabbed herself a precooked bag of linguine pasta and a small tub of premade sauce (which was conveniently placed in the fridge right beside it), and some pre-shaven parmesan cheese (located beside the sauce), before finally grabbing the bottle of wine beneath that proclaimed; *goes great with linguine!*

No wonder I never really learned to cook, Lacey thought. *Look*

how easy they make it.

She went to the till, paid for her goods, then left, collecting Chester on the way out. They went back past her store—she noticed Tom was right where she'd left him—and collected the car from the side street where Lacey had parked.

It was a short drive to Crag Cottage, along the seafront then up the cliffside. Chester sat alert in the passenger seat beside her, and as the car crested over the hill, Crag Cottage came into view. A feeling of delight swelled inside Lacey. The cottage really felt like home. And after tomorrow's meeting with Ivan, she'd possibly be one step closer to becoming its official owner.

Just then, she noticed the warm glow of a bonfire coming from the direction of Gina's cottage, and decided to head past her house and along the bumpy, single-track path to her neighbor.

As she pulled to a halt, she could see the woman standing in her wellies beside the fire, which she was adding foliage to. The fire looked very pretty in the dusky spring evening light.

Lacey tooted the car horn and wound down the stiff window.

Gina turned and waved. "Hey-ho Lacey. Do you need to burn something?"

Lacey leaned out the window on her elbows. "Nope. Just wondering if you wanted some help?"

"I thought you had a date with Tom tonight?" Gina asked.

"I did," Lacey told her, feeling that odd mixture of disappointment and relief stirring in her gut again. "But he cancelled. Pastry-related emergency."

“Ah,” Gina said. She dumped another tree branch onto the bonfire, making sparks of red, orange and yellow fly into the air. “Well, I’ve got everything here covered, thanks. Unless you’ve got some marshmallows you want to toast?”

“Darn, no, I don’t. That sounds nice! And I just went grocery shopping!”

She decided to blame her lack of marshmallows on Martha Stewart and her extremely sensible vanilla cheesecake recipe.

Lacey was about to wish Gina a good night and reverse her car back the way she’d come, when she felt Chester nudging her with his nose. She turned and looked over at him. The shopping bags that she’d placed in the passenger footwell had spilled open, and some of the items she’d brought had fallen out.

“That’s an idea…” Lacey said. She looked back out the window. “Hey, Gina. How about we have dinner together? I have wine and pasta. And all the ingredients to make Martha Stewart’s authentic New York City style cheesecake if we get bored and need an activity.”

Gina looked thrilled. “You had me at wine!” she exclaimed.

Lacey laughed. She reached down to fetch the grocery bags from the footwell, and earned herself another nudge from Chester’s wet nose.

“What is it now?” she asked him.

He tipped his head to the side, his fluffy tufts of eyebrow flitting upward.

“Oh. I get it,” Lacey said. “I told you off before for not

stopping me from putting my foot in it earlier with Tom. You're proving a point, aren't you, that it all worked out nonetheless? Well, I'll give you that."

He whinnied.

She chuckled and petted his head. "Clever boy."

She got out the car, Chester leaping out after her, and headed up Gina's path, maneuvering around the sheep and chickens that were dotted about the place.

They headed inside.

"So what happened with Tom?" Gina asked as they walked the length of the low-ceilinged corridor toward her rustic country-cottage kitchen.

"It was Paul actually," Lacey explained. "He mixed up the flours or something."

They entered the brightly lit kitchen, and Lacey placed the shopping bags on the work surface.

"It's about time he fired that Paul lad," Gina said with a *tsk*.

"He's an apprentice," Lacey told her. "He's supposed to make mistakes!"

"Sure. But then he's meant to *learn* from them. How many batches of pastry has he ruined now? And for it to impact on *your* plans really does take the biscuit."

Lacey smirked at Gina's amusing phrase.

"Honestly, it's fine," she said, taking all the items out of the bag. "I'm an independent woman. I don't need to see Tom every day."

Gina grabbed some wine glasses and poured them each a glass, then they got on with making the dinner.

“You’ll never believe who came into my store before closing time today,” Lacey said, as she gave the pasta a cursory stir in its pot of simmering water. The instructions said no stirring was required during the four minutes it took to boil, but that just felt too lazy, even for Lacey!

“Not the Americans?” Gina asked, in a tone of distaste as she popped the tomato sauce in the microwave for the whole two minutes it required to heat.

“Yes. The Americans.”

Gina shuddered. “Oh dear. What did they want? Let me guess, Daisy wanted Buck to buy her an overpriced piece of jewelry?”

Lacey strained the pasta in a sieve, then shared it out between two bowls. “That’s the thing. Daisy *did* want Buck to buy her something. The sextant.”

“The sextant?” Gina asked, as she dumped the tomato sauce on top of the pasta, inelegantly. “As in the naval instrument? What would a woman like Daisy want a sextant for?”

“Right? That’s exactly what I thought!” Lacey sprinkled parmesan shavings on top of her pasta mound.

“Maybe she just picked it at random,” Gina mused, handing Lacey one of the two forks she’d retrieved from the cutlery drawer.

“She was very specific about it,” Lacey continued. She carried her food and wine toward the table. “She wanted to buy it and

of course I told her she'd have to come to the auction. I thought she'd drop it, but nope. She said she'd be there. So now I have to put up with the two of them again tomorrow. If only I'd put the damn thing away rather than leaving it out in plain view of the window over lunch!"

She looked up as Gina took her seat opposite, to see that her neighbor was looking quite flustered all of a sudden. She didn't seem to have anything to add to what Lacey had said, either, which was extremely uncharacteristic for the usually chatty woman.

"What is it?" Lacey asked. "What's wrong?"

"Well, I was the one who convinced you that closing up shop for lunch wouldn't hurt," Gina mumbled. "But it did. Because it gave Daisy the chance to see the sextant! It's my fault."

Lacey laughed. "Don't be silly. Come on, let's eat before this goes cold and all our effort goes to waste."

"Wait. We need one more thing." Gina went over to her herb pots lined up on the window ledge and picked some leaves off one. "Fresh basil!" She placed a sprig on each of their bowls of badly presented, gloopy pasta. "Et voila!"

For all its cheap cheerfulness, it was actually a very tasty meal. But then again, most convenience foods are filled with fat and sugar, so it would have to be!

"Am I a decent enough substitute for Tom?" Gina asked as they ate and drank wine.

"Tom who?" Lacey joked. "Oh, you just reminded me!"

Tom sort of challenged me to cook him a meal from scratch. Something native to New York. So I'm doing a cheesecake for dessert. My mom sent me a Marth Stewart recipe. Want to help me make it?"

"Martha Stewart," Gina said, shaking her head. "I have a much better recipe."

She went over to the cupboard and began rummaging around. Then she pulled out a battered cookbook.

"This was my mother's pride and joy," she said, putting it on the table in front of Lacey. "She collected recipes for years. I have clippings in here going all the way back to the war."

"Amazing," Lacey exclaimed. "But how come you never learned to cook, if you had an expert at home?"

"*Because*," Gina said, "I was far too busy helping my dad grow veggies in the garden. I was a proper tomboy. A daddy's girl. One of those girls that liked to get my hands dirty."

"Well, baking can certainly do that," Lacey said. "You should've seen Tom earlier. He was covered head to toe in flour."

Gina laughed. "I meant I liked to get muddy! To play with bugs. Climb trees. Fish. Cooking always seemed too feminine for my tastes."

"Better not tell Tom that," Lacey chuckled. She looked down at the recipe book. "So do you want to help me make the cheesecake, or aren't there enough worms to keep you interested?"

"I'll help," Gina said. "We can use fresh eggs. Daphne and

Delilah both laid this morning.”

They cleaned up their dinner and got to work on the cheesecake, following Gina’s Mom’s recipe rather than Martha’s.

“So, other than the Americans, are you excited about the auction tomorrow?” Gina asked as she crushed up biscuits in a bowl with a potato masher.

“Excited. Nervous.” Lacey swilled the wine in her glass. “Mostly nervous. Knowing me, I won’t sleep a wink tonight worrying about it all.”

“I have an idea,” Gina said then. “Once we’re done here, we should go and walk the dogs on the seafront. We can take the east route. You’ve not gone that way yet, have you? The sea air will tire you out and you’ll sleep like a baby, mark my words.”

“That’s a good idea,” Lacey agreed. If she went home now, she’d only fret.

As Lacey put the messy cheesecake in the fridge to chill, Gina hurried into the utility room to fetch them both rain macs. It was still quite chilly in the evenings, especially by the sea where it was more blustery.

The huge waterproof, fisherman’s coat swamped Lacey. But she was glad for it when they stepped outside. It was a cool, clear, evening.

They headed down the cliff steps. The beach was deserted and quite dark. It was kind of exhilarating being down here when it was so empty, Lacey thought. It felt like they were the only people in the world.

They headed toward the sea, then turned to follow the easterly direction that Lacey hadn't had a chance yet to explore. It was fun to explore somewhere new. Being in a small town like Wilfordshire sometimes felt a little stifling.

"Hey, what's that?" Lacey asked, peering across the water at what appeared to be the silhouette of a building on an island.

"Medieval ruins," Gina said. "At low tide there's a sandbar you can walk along to reach them. Definitely worth a poke around if you can be bothered to get up that early."

"What time is low tide?" Lacey asked.

"Five a.m."

"Ouch. That's probably a bit too early for me."

"You can also get there by boat, of course," Gina explained. "If you know someone who actually owns one. But if you get stuck over there, you have to call out the volunteer lifeboat and those lads don't appreciate using their resources on clueless folk, mark my words! I've done it before and got quite a stern talking to. Luckily my gift of the gab had them all chuckling by the time we reached shore, and we're all on good terms now."

Chester began to strain on his leash, as if trying to get to the island.

"I think he knows it," Lacey said.

"Maybe his old owners used to walk him over there?" Gina suggested.

Chester barked as if in confirmation.

Lacey bent down and ruffled his fur. It had been a while

since she'd really thought about Chester's old owners, and how unsettling it must have been for him to lose them so suddenly.

"How about I take you there one day?" she asked him. "I'll wake up early, just for you."

With an excited wag of the tail, Chester tipped his head back and barked at the sky.

*

Just as she'd predicted, Lacey struggled to sleep that night. So much for the sea air tiring her out. There was just too much swirling around her mind for her to switch off; from the Crag Cottage sale meeting with Ivan, to the auction, there was just too much to think about. And while she was excited about the auction tomorrow, she was also nervous. Not just because it was only her second time doing it, but because of the unwelcome attendees she'd have to deal with in the form of Buck and Daisy Stringer.

Maybe they won't come, she thought as she stared at the shadows on her ceiling. *Daisy will probably have found something else to demand Buck buy for her.*

But no, the woman had seemed intent on buying the sextant specifically. It obviously held some kind of personal significance for her. They would be there, Lacey was certain of it, even if just to prove a point.

Lacey listened to the sound of Chester's breathing and the waves crashing against the cliffs, letting the gentle rhythms lull

her into relaxation. She'd just started dropping off when her cell phone suddenly started vibrating loudly on the wooden dresser beside her head. Its eerie green light filled the room with flashes. She was usually careful to put it on night mode but it had obviously slipped her mind tonight with everything else she was thinking about.

With a fatigued groan, Lacey flailed out with her arm and grasped the cell. She brought it close to her face, squinting to see who had decided to disturb her at this ungodly hour. The name *Mom* flashed insistently on the screen at her.

Of course, Lacey thought, sighing. Her mother must have forgotten the rule about not calling her after 6 p.m. New York time.

With a sigh, Lacey answered the call. "Mom? Is everything okay?"

From the other end of the line, there was a moment's silence. "Why do you always answer my calls like that? Why does there have to be something wrong for me to call my daughter?"

Lacey rolled her eyes and sank back against the pillow. "Because it's two in the morning in the U.K. right now, and you only ever call me when you're in a panic about something. So? What is it?"

The following silence was enough of a confirmation to Lacey that she'd hit the nail on the head.

"Mom?" she prompted.

"I was just at David's—" her mom began.

“What?” Lacey exclaimed. “*Why?*”

“To meet Eda.”

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