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## Prologue

She doesn't hear the footsteps approaching, but she wouldn't, she has ear buds in, is submerged in the heady beats of the Black Eyed Peas, 'I Gotta Feeling'. She is so focused on singing along, chair dancing and the work at hand that even a fire alarm might not have disturbed her.

She is alone in a meeting room, a glassed-in space tucked away from the main office and close to the lifts. The walls are cluttered with shelves containing books of all genres and sizes, and brightly coloured posters, most of them promoting an upcoming TV series. There's a large blank screen at one end of the room and a coffee station at the other.

She hasn't made herself a drink yet, but she might when she's finished. Or more likely, she'll head home as it's close to seven thirty and everyone else has already left for the day.

No one popped in to say goodnight on their way past; this didn't surprise her, but it upset her. It's awful being ostracised.

She only has herself to blame, she knows that, but it doesn't make it any easier. She shouldn't have given in to him, should have steered well clear, but he'd been so very hard to resist. He'd made her feel breathless every time she saw him, caused wild and greedy flutterings in every part

of her; his eyes when they met hers seemed to set her on fire.

He said she did the same to him.

He couldn't resist her either.

She'd stopped it now, told him they couldn't continue, but it's too late to repair the damage she's caused.

He'd taken their break-up hard and his wife had gone to pieces.

His wonderful, beautiful, talented wife who, some were saying, had already met someone else. So maybe she hadn't been that broken-hearted after all.

Her task this evening is to pack up the props that were used for a promo shoot yesterday. It's for a book soon to hit the screens in a major new horror series. The props had been returned from location earlier, all bundled up in a sheet like dozens of little corpses. Apparently they'd been on loan from a doll's hospital. Who even knew there was such a thing? Do people really take their broken dolls to have limbs repaired and faces remodelled? It seems so . . . weird.

For two hours yesterday, the dolls had been positioned around a deserted, cobwebby house in the countryside, perched ghoulishly on shelves and chairs, laid out on the floor and twisted into odd shapes to suggest violence and thwarted escape. Some had been placed face down, or up, in a bath and one – blonde-haired, ruby-lipped and nude – was hung by its neck from a dusty chandelier. All those miniature bodies; the grisly suggestion, the turbulence of grotesque innuendo. It had been as spooky as hell. She'd been very glad when the camera stopped and it was time to get out of there.

This evening she's carefully wrapping each of the dolls

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in tissue before laying them gently into a large padded box. Even in this brightly lit and benign setting, they somehow seem disturbingly real. It's as though they're in their own doll-world, looking back at her through hard, unblinking eyes, grimacing and grinning, pouting, coy, startled, menacing. A few even have teeth. They're thin and brittle, fat and rubbery. Some are made of porcelain or china, others are moulded from plastic, even from wood. She senses them watching and listening, breathing silently and knowing everything.

She doesn't hear the door open behind her, has no idea anyone is there until they're standing right beside her. She starts to look up, to say, 'Aren't they creepy?' or, 'I thought you'd already gone home,' but – before any words can form on her lips – something hard and solid slams into her head. The thud is more of a crunch, the sound of exertion is exhaled in soft, ragged grunts.

Moments later the door closes as quietly as it had opened. The dolls stare lifelessly from their wide eyes, faces splattered in blood and brain, the only witnesses to a scene as appalling as their silence.

On the floor '*. . . I gotta feeling . . .*' plays tinnily, over and over, from a fallen ear bud.



## CHAPTER ONE

‘I think it might work for you,’ Noel Hadigan is saying, seeming both certain and curious as he assesses the landing of his proposition. His eyes are mischievous, and then less so, as he gives a quick wave to someone he knows – bad choice of restaurant, he can never come to the Ivy in Covent Garden without being recognized and he’d much rather be focusing on the woman seated opposite him.

Marina Forster treats him to one of her famously wry smiles as he turns back to her. She’s always happy to spend time with this man, especially when he’s up to something, and he clearly is, so it’s easy to allow her turquoise blue eyes to show interest in spite of having heard him start a pitch this way many times before. She’s a tall, strikingly lovely woman in her mid-forties, with thick dark hair usually wound into a single French plait, delicately pale skin, lusciously defined features and an air of confidence that’s easily matched by her natural warmth. Her reputation for being a great boss and insightful publisher is, according to most, entirely deserved for, over the past eleven years – since returning from the hiatus of becoming a mother – she’s steadily built up the dedicated fiction division of Hawksley Maine, an international publishing house. It is now an award-winning, widely respected and highly profitable arm of the business. She’d even named



the imprint Janus, after the god of beginnings, transitions and endings.

‘Can’t wait to hear what it is,’ she teases, and pops a forkful of deliciously baked salmon into her mouth before raising a glass of sparkling water. He knows, as do most literary agents in town, that she, as an executive publishing director, rarely takes on a new work. She has a superbly talented and mostly independent team for that – however, there are exceptions. Usually they come in the shape of celebrities or politicians whose egos – and agents – insist on being handled by the person at the top, even if the actual editing is carried out by a senior member of the team.

‘It’s coming from an unknown,’ he tells her, ‘unless the name is a pseudonym, and I guess that’s likely. All I have right now are initials and a surname.’

‘Don’t tell me, J.K. Rowling.’

He laughs. ‘Hardly unknown, but certainly Rowling set a trend and it isn’t such a bad one if you don’t want your identity to influence early judgement.’

‘So, are you thinking someone famous could be behind it?’

He shrugs. ‘Too soon to say, but the author is definitely going for gender-neutral right now and the first chapter is . . .’ He searches for the right word and is clearly disappointed in himself when all he can muster is, ‘interesting.’

She smiles. It is unlikely they’d be discussing it if it weren’t.

He meets her eyes and smiles too. He actually looks more like a surfer than a leading literary agent – curly russet hair, ripped and tanned; unsurprising since he hails from Sydney where, in his earlier years, he was a regular champion of the waves. He’d moved into publishing during

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his late twenties and had left his homeland for London just over eight years ago. Since setting up his agency in Chelsea, he's acquired an impressive client list and plenty of friends – Marina and her husband, Maxim, being two of the closest.

'OK,' she says, helping herself to one of his French fries, 'if I'm going to bite, and no promises that I will, let's start with genre.'

He's about to reply when they're interrupted for the fourth time since their arrival.

To Marina's dismay it's Rosie Shell, the deputy managing director of a rival publishing house. Back in the early days of Janus, Rosie had been a senior editor with more chips on her shoulder than hairs on her head so, when Marina returned from her maternity leave, she had wasted little time in moving her on. The woman was – and is – a renowned gossip, unpleasantly competitive and not always honest. She'd also been a part of Hawksley Maine's old regime, so she'd been around during the height of the scandal that had almost forced the company's new owners to lay off everyone in the division and close it down completely. Fortunately it hadn't come to that, but it had been a terrible time that, all these years later, Marina tries not to dwell on. It serves no one, least of all her, to get caught up in the past when the future has so much to offer. She was appointed exec publishing director at the beginning of 2012, and since then she's done everything in her power to purge what went before. This has been helped enormously by the company moving from its old premises to a brand-new office block in South Kensington. There are no reminders there to stumble over at any given moment, and these days there are very few staff who were around back then.

In spite of Rosie's sunny smiles and gushing warmth,



Marina knows very well that this woman still, to this day, will tell anyone who'll listen that Marina Forster is only in position because she's married to Hawksley Maine's CEO. Rosie detests Marina with a passion, and probably prays – even plots – daily for her downfall.

Hard, fast and fabulously humiliating would do it for Rosie.

'So, what are you two cooking up here?' Rosie's tone is at once playful and arch and sets Marina's teeth on edge.

Noel says, 'Well, Rosie, it's possible I've just discovered the new Stephen King, and I'm trying to persuade Marina here to give me a second opinion.'

Rosie's smile tightens around the edges as she glances at Marina. 'Not quite your thing, is it, horror? There again, maybe it is.'

Marina stares at her icily. She knows what Rosie is referring to, but there's no way she's going to bite.

Belatedly realizing Noel isn't serious about his new discovery, Rosie says, waspishly, 'How's your *wife*, these days, Noel? Do you ever hear from her?' Noel had briefly been married a couple of years ago to a historical fiction editor at Penguin who'd run off to the States with one of his top crime-thriller writers.

He says, quite affably, 'Sherry's good, thanks. I'll be sure to tell her you asked after her.'

As Rosie moves on, in a rush suddenly to get to her table before one of her *celebrity* authors arrives (Rosie loves nothing more than to be seen with a famous face), Marina says, 'You never fail to impress me with how nice you are to her.'

He shrugs. 'It wouldn't do me, or my clients, any good if I spoke my mind, but she's not entirely stupid – on the spectrum, yes, but not all the way there – so she knows I

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have nothing but contempt for her. Lucky she has some good people around her, or Ashwells could be in serious trouble with her at the helm. Now, back to my *actual* discovery and why I'm here with you and not one of your crack team.'

Marina waits for her glass to be refilled and treats him to her best expectant expression.

With a self-mocking grimace, he says, 'Actually, I've only got a prologue and opening chapter so far, and I get that a good opening is no guarantee the book will go anywhere, but why not take a look? I can email it over by the end of the day.'

Because it's him and she likes him so much, she says, 'You still haven't told me the genre?'

'Well, it's hard to be specific about that from what I've seen so far, but it's not literary. Modern day, stylistically easy, and as I said, an interesting start.'

'Tell me about the author.'

'The name is E.L. Stalwood.'

She shrugs; it means nothing to her and presumably not to him either. 'Have you actually met or spoken to him/her/it/them?' she asks.

'Not yet. The opening arrived by email a few weeks ago. It was sent out to a reader who contacted Jaz, my assistant, yesterday morning with feedback on everything he'd recently been sent. This was amongst it and Jaz forwarded it on to me.'

'So you were impressed by it, got in touch with the author . . .?'

'Jaz did, by email, to ask if there was more. Apparently there is, but Stalwood isn't prepared to send it unless you, personally, are on board with it.'

Marina treats him to her best impression of amused exasperation. This sort of thing happened a lot. Many wannabes did their research ahead of time in the hope of exercising some authority over their precious new work and who handled it. They invariably chose someone at the top, and Marina's definitely there. 'And you think it's good enough for me to give it some time?' she says, sitting back as she finishes her meal.

'Let's just say we haven't done a book together for a while, so why not see how this one runs? I can always redirect or reject if you end up deciding it's not for you.'