

Luxury

Jessica Ruston

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Extract

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1

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*We are the music-makers,
And we are the dreamers of dreams,
Wandering by lone sea-breakers,
And sitting by desolate streams;
World-losers and world-forsakers,
On whom the pale moon gleams:
Yet we are the movers and shakers
Of the world for ever, it seems.*

*With wonderful deathless ditties
We build up the world's great cities,
And out of a fabulous story
We fashion an empire's glory:
One man with a dream, at pleasure,
Shall go forth and conquer a crown;
And three with a new song's measure
Can trample an empire down.*

Ode, Arthur O'Shaughnessy (1844–1881)

Prologue

1981

From somewhere behind the hazy, green-blue blur of the horizon, a solidity began to form itself into the shape of a shore, a gently curving bay, a steeply peaked hill. As the boat drew closer, tacking round to approach from the west, it was as if an unseen hand was sketching in the details of the island – the deeper blue patches in the water indicating a reef off one side; then a spike of pale sand snaking its way into the sea; then a fuzz of flickering green – palm trees sprinkled down the slopes of the hill.

Logan exhaled. ‘Oh, man. It’s just like she said. Look – the jetty’s still there. Take it round to that side.’

He pointed to the narrow structure of greying wood, its spindly legs rising up from the water, and motioned to his friends at the helm to head for it. The three young men were all tanned and relaxed from their summer in the sun – their ‘last summer of freedom’, as they had named it. They wore nothing but shorts and had let their hair grow long, in the knowledge that come the fall they would be in suits and short haircuts as they went off to begin their lives as adults, as Harvard graduates. This summer was a stolen slip of time between their student years and things ‘getting serious’, as they put it.

As Johnny leaned forward to bring the boat round, the muscles in his shoulders undulated under his skin. 'Looks pretty rickety,' he commented.

'How long is it since anyone was here?' Nicolo called from the far side of the deck.

'Not a clue,' Logan replied. 'Twenty years? More?'

They edged closer to the jetty.

'Let's stop alongside,' he told them. 'I want to see if it's sound.'

They slowly manoeuvred the boat so that it bobbed alongside the jetty. Logan hooked a leg over the handrail that ran round the boat's deck, and hanging on to it with one hand, he stretched forward and stamped on the jetty, testing its strength.

'Seems OK. I guess the worst that can happen is I get to go for a swim sooner rather than later.'

He swung his other leg over the side and hopped down on to the landing stage. There was a rustle of a breeze through the trees that lined the beach, and the faint swishing of the sea all around them. Otherwise, all was silent.

Johnny and Nicolo watched from the boat. The wood creaked as it absorbed Logan's weight, but it stood firm, and he spun round to face his friends, arms aloft and a wide grin on his face.

'Come ashore, my friends, my brothers. Welcome to L'île des Violettes!'

Putting his thumb and forefinger between his lips, Nicolo let out a long, high-pitched whistle. Johnny whooped with excitement and quickly secured the boat, then the two young men leaped off it to join him. The noise they made as they ran down the jetty and on to the hot sand startled the birds in the palm trees, who rose into the sky like a cloud of smoke, clacking and squawking.

They raced into the undergrowth, not caring that their legs were getting scratched. The air was cool and dry, and felt refreshing after hours spent on the boat.

‘It’s like a secret world,’ shouted Nicolo.

‘*Treasure Island*,’ Johnny called back.

‘*Lord of the Flies*?’ responded Nicolo.

‘Ha. Turning on each other?’ Johnny chased after Logan. ‘Not us, my friend, never us.’

Logan had stopped running and bent over to catch his breath. Johnny and Nicolo caught up with him.

‘I feel like Robinson Crusoe – with two Man Fridays!’ He was panting, his face a big grin, challenging his friends. Nicolo and Johnny looked at each other and shook their heads.

‘Asking for it, don’t you think?’

‘Begging, I’d say, man.’

Logan chuckled, and before they could catch him he took off again, weaving through the trees. Whooping like savages, Johnny and Nicolo gave chase, until all three of them burst out of the glade of trees on to a rocky promontory. The view stopped them in their tracks.

‘Wow.’

Without realising it, they had made their way to the highest point of the island, and from here they could see the shape of the whole mass. It was picture perfect. Blue skies, turquoise sea, leafy trees and sandy beaches. And as the three young men stood staring down at it, all of them felt a secret, powerful tug in their chests. All of them wanted it to be theirs.

‘What’s over there?’ Johnny said suddenly, breaking the silence, pointing to a building. Even from a distance they could see that it was tumbledown, decrepit.

‘Don’t know,’ said Logan. ‘Why don’t we find out?’

Later, the three of them lay on the sandy floor of the ruined building, a bonfire burning nearby, and the empty bottles of beer that they’d fetched from the boat discarded on the ground next to their sleeping bags. They gazed up at the sky. Tomorrow they would return to the mainland, give the boat back to its

owner and catch their flight home. Back to real life, where Johnny would go to law school, Logan would begin his MBA as one of the youngest students ever to get a place on the prestigious Harvard course, and Nicolo would start work at a construction company in New York, learning the real nuts and bolts of the business. They'd got First, their fledgling hotel company, up and running, and it was doing well. They were raring to go. Their lives as men were beginning.

'So what do you think, Father Flores? Does she live up to your expectations?'

Nicolo leaned over and flicked the side of Logan's head with his thumb and forefinger. 'Don't call me that. And yes, she certainly does.'

'Why "she"?' asked Johnny.

'Fuck's sake, J. This place is a woman. A beautiful, uncharted, wild woman, just waiting to be tamed.'

'Ha. By you?'

'Yes, by me. No – by us.' Logan's voice was confident. He didn't doubt his words, and neither did his friends.

'We'll come back here, yes?' Johnny's words were stretched out, long with tiredness and alcohol.

'Yes. This is our future, guys. One day, we'll be back here – not as kids, but as men. As the men who own this place. And everyone will see that we made it.'

Logan raised his fist into the air. '*One man with a dream, at pleasure, Shall go forth and conquer a crown ...*'

Johnny followed suit. '*And three with a new song's measure ...*'

And finally Nicolo: '*Can trample an empire down.*'

Chapter One

2008

Logan Barnes stood on the edge of the building's asphalt roof, high above the Upper East Side of Manhattan. It was a clear, bright day, and the Hudson River was twinkling, sparks of white light glinting off its graphite surface. He moved closer to the edge and felt a flicker of fear as he looked down and saw the vehicles moving slowly through the streets beneath him. He pressed the feeling down, but not too far. A bit of fear was good – kept you focused on your goal. He looked up. Above him there was only sky. Below – everything. The city that he loved so much was spread at his feet.

He took another step, which brought him right up to the roof's edge – and then he jumped.

Seconds spent flying through the air seemed to last for ever. Time stretched and became luxuriously elastic. Logan felt absolute clarity. The world was in sharp focus as his body swooped down towards the uncompromising pavements of New York.

Four hundred and fifty feet below, a second man was scanning the roof for signs of movement. He had positioned himself so that he would have a clear view of what was about to happen. He checked the tiny video camera and then resumed watching

the skyline. After a second he saw him, a tiny figure standing on the roof. He looked intensely vulnerable – exposed.

Johnny raised the camera and began filming as the figure tumbled from the roof, rolling like a hamster in a wheel through the air, falling into a somersault and then straightening and stretching his arms out like a bird. A few people noticed and pointed, or stopped dead in their tracks, but most people just carried on walking – too busy hurrying to lunch dates or back to the office to look up and see the falling man.

And then, just as Johnny was sure it was all over and was holding his breath in readiness for the inevitable, the parachute mushroomed upwards and caught the breeze, and Johnny exhaled with a relieved cry. A harried-looking businessman walked past, glancing at Logan briefly before hurrying on.

As he floated slowly down towards the ground, Logan used his body to steer himself towards a safe landing spot. The building he had jumped from faced Central Park, and as he glided over the grass, tourists in horse-driven coaches, and runners stopped and stared. He always enjoyed the look of surprise that spread over their faces as they registered the shape in the sky and realised it was a man, appearing as if from the heavens. It wasn't until he had drawn level with a tiny cluster of trees that he heard a terrible shrieking sound. He jerked his head over his shoulder, and a horse rearing up just behind him filled his vision, its rider fighting to rein him in and stay mounted as the animal's body bucked in fright. Pulling hard on the steering lines, Logan turned sharply, narrowly avoiding the horse's hooves as he landed. The rider eventually calmed the horse down enough to dismount, and stormed over to Logan, who had landed awkwardly due to the angle and was picking himself up. Shocked onlookers stared at the scene.

'You fucking lunatic! What in God's name do you think

you're doing? You nearly killed me, and my horse! Where the fuck did you come from?' she yelled at Logan, her face puce.

'I'm so sorry.' Logan got to his feet and brushed the greyish dust of Central Park off his clothes. 'Are you hurt? Here, let me help you.'

'No – get your fucking hands off me, you prick.' The woman swiped angrily at Logan, but her hands were trembling, and he backed away, his face conciliatory.

A few yards away, Johnny was jogging easily towards them. The woman had turned pale now underneath her dark skin, and had begun to cry.

'I'm sorry,' she said, 'that was rude, I just . . .' She was looking at him strangely. 'Do I know you?'

He smiled. 'No, we haven't met. Look – you've had a bad fright. Here, sit down.'

Johnny neared them and took the bridle of the horse as Logan led the woman to a nearby bench. She was starting to feel calmer, and man, if anyone was going to almost crush her by falling out of the sky, Thandy was glad it was this one. He may not have been particularly tall, but the man had stature. His shoulders were broad and strong looking under the thin sky-diving outfit he was wearing, and his eyes were crinkled a little with concern. Dark eyes, kind, but with a steel in them, a strength. She shook herself. For goodness' sake, she was getting carried away like someone out of one of those romance novels her mama read. She definitely recognised him, though.

'Do you work in the city?' she asked.

'Mm – yes.'

She narrowed her eyes. 'Do you work with – no.'

She started again. 'Oh, are you Jeannie's boss? At Bloomingdales? Homewares?'

'I'm afraid not.'

She looked at him suspiciously. ‘You sure? You look a lot like ...’

Logan smiled and jerked his head at Johnny, who nodded in understanding and took out his mobile phone. Thandy listened as he spoke.

‘Johnny Stokes here. We need a room, straight away.’

‘What do you mean a room? I’m not going anywhere with you, you mighta killed me. I may recognise you from somewhere but that doesn’t mean I’m gonna ...’

She trailed off. Oh. Johnny Stokes. She looked up at the other man, sitting next to her, her eyes wide. ‘Oh my. You’re ...’

Logan nodded. She had realised. It wasn’t the first time it had happened – people often mistook him for someone they knew, waved at him in the street assuming they’d been introduced at a drinks party or that he was a neighbour or some-such. He held out his hand. ‘Logan Barnes. Pleased to meet you.’

The trio walked through the glass doors of the Royal Hotel, Johnny and Logan on either side of the bemused woman, whose horse had been led away by the owner of the stables after another phone call from Johnny. He knew someone almost everywhere in Manhattan, it seemed. There was little he couldn’t arrange or get hold of within the city’s parameters with a quick flick through his contacts list and a phone call, a handshake, or nod. They entered the building. A matching pair of uniformed porters wearing ivory gloves and deferential smiles greeted them. They swept open the glass doors in unison and their pale grey top hats nodded in synchronised greeting.

As soon as they entered the lobby, the concierge was moving towards them with a smile.

‘Good morning, Mr Barnes,’ the man murmured, awaiting further instructions.

‘Morning, Matthew. Beautiful day, isn’t it?’

‘Indeed it is, sir. I have a suite ready for your guest as requested.’ He looked over at the young woman on whom Logan had almost landed. ‘If you’d like to accompany me, madam?’

Logan put a hand on her arm, and it was as warm as the smile in his dark eyes. She softened a little. He was an extremely charming man, and she had been annoyed to find her anger dissipating rather quickly in the park, when he had solicitously sat her down then whisked her to the hotel (one of the very best in the city, she knew by reputation) in the back of a chauffeur-driven car.

‘I’m so sorry about earlier, really. Some fresh clothes will be delivered to your suite shortly. Your room has been reserved for you until the end of the week. Please don’t hesitate to order whatever you’d like from room service. Matthew here is the concierge, and he will look after you – any reservations, or other help that you might need. Mr Stokes and I have somewhere we have to be.’

The concierge nodded at her and Thandy’s smile widened. Well, look here. She, Thandy Stine, a secretary from Queens who saved up to ride in Central Park once a fortnight, in a suite in the Royal! Not only that, but as the guest of Mr Logan Barnes, from the TV. *And* Johnny Stokes, the one that all the girls in the office were in love with. She was going to phone her friends straight away.

As the concierge led her across the mink-coloured marble floors of reception, the cool stone inlaid with elegantly curving patterns of what looked like, but surely could not be, mother-of-pearl, she was already mentally planning the meal she would order on room service. A huge Porterhouse steak, bloodily rare, with mustard and fries. A plate of oysters to start, because she’d never tried them before. Some of those tiny pastel-coloured macaroons that looked so pretty and ladylike.

Turning round, she gave Logan a wink. If this was what came of people falling out of the sky and nearly killing you, then she didn't mind one bit.

Johnny and Logan left the overexcited Thandy in the capable hands of the Royal's well-trained staff, and headed over to the West Side, Logan Barnes International's hotel and club in the Meatpacking District of Manhattan. It was a totally different animal from his flagship property near Central Park, but no less successful in its own way. Where the Royal exemplified everything that was chi-chi and slick about Manhattan, with its pale marble floors and its opulent drapes, the West Side was its younger, trendier sibling. Black Perspex floors reflected neon spotlights that hung in clusters from the bare plaster ceiling, and the open-plan lobby was dotted with low seating covered in black suede. Black goldfish swam around square-cut glass bowls placed on black Perspex tables that rose up almost seamlessly from the floor, their frilled fins wafting through the water. A Damien Hirst sculpture of a sheep's heart pierced by a silver dagger was displayed in the centre of the room.

On the way, Logan checked his emails on his iPhone, while Johnny called to let the director know they were on their way.

'Yep, we'll meet you outside. No, that's fine, we'll do the tour as usual, and then the Check Out is at – four?' Johnny raised a hand to attract Logan's attention and raised his eyebrows questioningly. Logan nodded.

'Uh huh, four, then we head to London this evening. Yes, the three of us, plus Rachel and Kirsten. Come on, Chris, you know you can't. The plane's out of bounds. No way. Nice try, though.' Johnny laughed. 'See ya.'

The plane was Logan's sanctuary, out of bounds to everyone apart from his board of directors, his personal assistant, Rachel and his family. It was where he recharged, regrouped, held

confidential meetings and made the phone calls that he didn't want to be overheard. There was no way the camera crew were ever getting through those particular doors.

'Always pushing the boundaries, that guy,' Johnny said.

'Don't they all?'

'True. He wanted to come in the plane.'

'Ha.'

'I know.'

Johnny tutted, and picked up his phone again. He spent so much time on it, he tended to get through a new one every few months. Also, he got bored quickly. He was pretty bored with his girlfriend, Melissa, but he couldn't see an easy way to get rid of her, given her involvement in their TV series, *General Manager*. They had met at the 'Revolution'-themed party held to launch the Contemporary Museum of Art's retrospective of twentieth-century revolutionary art. He had gone as Che Guevara – who else? She had done a perfect Marie Antoinette – too perfect, he should have noted – and it was a sign of her social clout that she was the only one. No one would have dared tread on Melissa's brocade-clad toes.

The party was one of the major events of Manhattan's fall social calendar. The Metropolitan Museum balls were the grande dame, a long-established fixture that everyone made sure they were in town for, but the COMA had recently got in on the act. Realising how much publicity and cash clout the city's socialite clan had, they had started creating their own fabulous, themed balls timed to slot in with their big fall exhibitions. Tables went for \$100,000 and upwards, costumes were minutely planned months in advance and the seating plan was of military detail and importance. Already this year Bunny Shawcross had left in a fury, her Romanov cloak dramatically gathered around her throat in a display of haughty disgust because her sight-line was obscured by a floral guillotine. The balls provided

projects for scores of stylists, chauffeurs, doormen, florists, caterers, waitresses – the legions of men and women who staffed these events (and made a very nice living themselves out of them) were sought after and fought over for their skills. Aurelie Lezard, the organiser, was a willowy blonde whose fey looks belied her hard-nosed work ethic. She saw it as a matter of personal pride to make the ball the one that everyone was talking about. Johnny watched her work the room as he stood next to a vodka luge, an ice sculpture in the shape of a hammer and sickle which dispensed shots of the spirit from an opening in its base, spending her allotted thirty seconds with someone, giving them her full attention and the benefit of her large blue eyes and cloud of blond hair, then efficiently moving on.

Johnny and Melissa's eyes had hardly met across a crowded ballroom; he had trodden on the extensive train of her gown, which Melissa had purposely draped so that it was in his way. She'd had her eye on him for a while, having seen him at various parties and openings around Manhattan, and had asked about him. What Melissa wanted, Melissa usually got. They'd moved on to the Maotini bar, where he had asked if he could take her out for dinner, adding, 'I'd like to see what you look like without a birdcage attached to your head.'

He'd seen what every bit of her looked like after their date, as she lay diagonally across his emperor-sized bed after they'd made love (Melissa might have been New York royalty, but she was certainly no prudish princess) and then sat watching cartoons and eating mint-choc-chip ice cream.

Johnny was enchanted, although he might not have been quite so charmed had he heard her throwing it all up half an hour later.

It was Melissa who had come to Johnny and Logan with the idea for *General Manager*, a hotel reality show. She worked as an associate producer for her media mogul father, who had been

looking for a new TV concept to rival *The Apprentice* and *Top Chef* and the various other prime-time shows that had proved so successful. Johnny had immediately loved the idea – he was always up for a challenge, for a new experience. Johnny believed that you only really regretted the things you didn't do in life. He'd taken it to Logan, unsure how his old friend would react; had talked up the potential benefits for the business as a whole, emphasised the wider customer base they would reach – but none of it had been necessary. Logan's eyes had lit up straight away. 'I love it,' he'd said, standing up and beginning to pace. That was when Johnny knew he was getting into the idea; Logan always paced when he was excited. 'Free advertising – who could say no? It could open up all sorts of avenues. Tell her yes.'

Johnny should have known he'd be up for it; Logan had always had a need for recognition, ever since they were kids. Doing things quietly was not in his nature. He'd always be the one badgering the teacher, pointing out his contribution to a class project, bouncing up and down on his toes while waiting to be picked for baseball teams, keen to make sure he wasn't forgotten about. His report cards all tended to say the same thing. *Logan's enthusiasm is clear. Logan is always eager to contribute his thoughts in class. Logan certainly has no problems sharing his opinions.*

It was Logan who had come up with the catchphrase. He'd approached his preparation for the project systematically, calling in DVDs of all the comparable recent shows and watching them, one by one, on his plane during flights, or at home late at night, or on his laptop in the back of the car. Figuring out what worked about them, what didn't, what could be improved upon. There was no way he'd just hand over the reins to the production company and show up for filming – in fact, Johnny wasn't sure that the producers had quite known what they were getting into when they got Logan involved.

‘See here,’ he’d suddenly announce, pressing Pause on the remote and pointing it at the plasma screen in front of him to illustrate his point. ‘The contestants are called back in two groups – winners first, then the bottom three, who have to face the panel and explain where things went wrong. But in this one,’ he pressed another button and switched to a different show, ‘contestants go before the panel individually, and then are told the results as a group.’ His brow would furrow as he considered the differing approaches, and scribbled notes on the pad at his elbow.

One morning, Johnny had been on a conference call with a lawyer in Tokyo and a real-estate developer in Beijing, when Logan had burst into his office and announced, ‘Johnny Stokes, It’s Time for You to Check Out!’ And had stood in the doorway looking inordinately pleased with himself. There had been a conspicuous silence from Tokyo and Beijing, before one of them said, ‘Um, Mr Stokes? Is everything all right?’ Logan had clapped a hand over his mouth and gone away laughing.

The production company had loved it straight away and, when the show aired, so had the viewers. It was partly to do with Logan’s delivery – masterful, without being melodramatic. Soon the phrase was popping up everywhere, in puns and jokes in media stories, spreading in the way that these things tend to do. People shouted it at Johnny when they saw him in the street, groups of students said it to each other in bars at the end of the night; it entered the everyday parlance of millions of people and helped make Logan, Johnny and Mark – who made up the third member of the judging panel – household names.

Which was all great. Apart from the fact that, now she had managed to assign herself solely to *General Manager* (being the boss’s little princess had all sorts of advantages), Johnny found himself seeing rather more of Melissa than he might have chosen to and, consequently, was becoming rather tired of her. There

was always someone blonder, darker, curvier, slimmer, attracting his attention. But if he dumped her, it would be bad; he'd have to see her on set all the time, and she was definitely the type to bear a grudge. She was talking about moving in now, and he was definitely going to have to discourage *that*. The last thing he wanted was her in his apartment all the time. He was going to have to deal with it soon. But not yet.

When their car pulled up outside the hotel, the crew and director were waiting for them, cameras already rolling as Logan and Johnny got out and headed towards the glass doors. Passers-by paused, their attention attracted by the cameras and booms and the growing buzz of anticipation that surrounded Logan as he crossed the sidewalk and entered the hotel.

'Look, it's—'

'Logan Barnes.'

'It's the other one I like – Mark, the English one. Isn't he here? I just lurve that accent.'

'Oh Mom, hey, there he is – Johnny – you know, from . . .'

'Get your camera out, Marjorie – hurry up, they're going inside!'

'*General Manager.*'

'You *have* seen it. I watch it every week – yes, on Bravo. Yes, that one!'

'Alicia, please hand your room key into reception – It's Time for You to Check Out.'

The camera panned from the pretty yet stricken face of the blond-haired girl dressed in a white shirt and dark suit, to the panel of three men sitting behind a long wooden desk, one of whom had been the one to issue the verdict. Their faces were set firm, their minds made up. Silence.

The camera then moved to show the rest of the room. It was

a large, square room, formal yet modern, situated high up in the building. The view from the large windows was one of neighbouring skyscrapers. The whole atmosphere was one of high-flying success. A group of four young women and three men sat in a line against the far wall of the room, their faces betraying varying degrees of relief, pleasure and smugness.

Alicia stood and smoothed down her skirt before heading towards the three men in front of her, her arm outstretched.

‘Thank you for the opportunity, Mr Stokes.’

She shook the hand of the man on the left. He grinned at her – and was that a wink? She blushed. Johnny Stokes, always with a ready smile and a kind word, was known for being a ladies’ man. As she had found out for herself one night not so long ago . . . She put that firmly to the back of her mind, and moved on.

‘Mr Barnes. It’s been an honour, sir.’

He nodded, his face unsmiling but not unkind. Finally, she took the hand of the third man, Mark Mallory – the Englishman with the pale blue eyes, the slender hands and long fingers. He was distant, cool, polite.

‘Mr Mallory. Thank you.’

He smiled briefly, but there was no real warmth to it. The Brit contestants had all got on better with him than the Yanks, since he always seemed to be looking down on them, somehow. Mark Mallory, in his pale grey tailored suit and rose-pink shirt, his still thick hair with only a little grey combed back in a gentle wave, was LBI’s Managing Director of Hotel Operations. It was his job to ensure that the group’s properties were running smoothly, hiring and firing managing directors and individual hotel managers, resolving problems within the hotels’ management structures with professionalism and a light touch. He had joined LBI years ago, when his aristocratic family had fallen on hard times. Their stately home in Dorset, Sternley, had been in

a serious state of disrepair and about to be given to the National Trust in order to keep it going, when Logan had swept in, bought it up and transformed it into a luxury country-house hotel.

On *General Manager* it was Mark who set the hotel-management tasks, or who had the contestants racing to make hundreds of beds as they struggled to complete housekeeping challenges, or who got them to play bellboy and lug tons of heavy and fragile luggage up and down the stairs. Alicia had always felt that he enjoyed watching them suffer rather more than was seemly – there was something of the sadist in his eyes, she thought.

The girl's goodbyes completed, she turned to the line of other contestants now. 'Good luck,' she mouthed at Dominic, the big, camp man who was the only friend she had made during her three weeks in New York, and the one she would be rooting for to win. The rest of them could go fuck themselves. He blew her a kiss.

Picking up the handle of the suitcase on wheels that all the contestants were required to use, she walked to the back of the room and blinked away a tear. She didn't want to start crying now, since in a few months this episode would be shown on national television – well, international television actually, as it was very much a transatlantic production. *General Manager* was filmed in both New York and London, the contestants came from both countries, and the series was screened on the same day in both territories. It was an expensive way of doing things, and it meant a lot of to-ing and fro-ing, as well as headaches for the production company and editors, but it was all part of the show's ethos, which was to reflect the lifestyle of Logan Barnes and his right-hand men as accurately as possible. Part reality show, part fierce competition for a position working for LBI, the first series had been an instant hit,

and this second series looked set to achieve an even greater success when it aired.

Taking a deep breath, Alicia prepared to leave through the big red doors that had become the symbol of the show in what she knew would be the final image of the episode. Every week someone was told to Check Out, and had to walk through those doors. Now it was her turn.

‘OK, cut! Sorry, Alicia, dear, come back, come back – we’re going to have to take that from the top. Can we have a bit more in the way of visible regret, please – you’ve just lost the opportunity of a lifetime! Really make us *feel* it. And Dominic, less of the kissy-kissy stuff in the background, please. You’re not here to make friends, people. All right? Rolling . . .’

Alicia sighed, and put her case back on the floor next to her. She supposed this was what they meant by ‘the magic of TV’.

Logan let the chatter of the crowd that was waiting excitedly outside the building by the time he, Johnny and Mark left fade into the background. He’d learned to turn the volume of it down in his head. At first it had bothered him that everywhere he went someone did a double take, or nudged their companion, or openly stared and pointed. He hardly noticed it these days. Even the camera crews, who were his almost constant companions for days on end, shadowing him in meetings and at dinners and in his office, he paid little attention to any more. It was surprising how quickly you adjusted, how fast you got used to even the most surreal of situations, and began to see them as perfectly normal. Being filmed while he viewed a potential new acquisition? Just another day. Turning on the TV at home to catch the news and seeing yourself negotiating with a contractor? His finger didn’t falter on the remote control. Driving through Manhattan from JFK and seeing scores of billboards advertising the second series of *General Manager*, with

his, Johnny's and Mark Mallory's faces blown up to the size of houses, their arms crossed, staring down at the camera with Logan's slogan, *It's Time for You to Check Out*, emblazoned across the bottom? He didn't even blink any more.

As Logan stepped out into the heat that characterised August in Manhattan, the air hung heavily around him, thick and soupy, making his skin feel damp almost immediately. Office workers rushed between appointments, briefcases under one arm and a large skinny macchiato wedged under the other as they juggled phone and belongings in the scrum; a tiny, size-zero woman in her eighties, still in her floor-length fur despite the weather and a hairdo bigger than her bird-like skull, walked a miniature white Chihuahua; a black stretch Hummer limo drew up alongside a Foot Locker, music pumping, and let out a group of impossibly wide-shouldered black men, all in matching white suits, their hands shimmering with diamonds as they gestured, the jewels catching the sunlight. New York City. There was nowhere quite like it.

He reached the two limos that were idling in front of the hotel, one for him and his PA, one for Johnny, Mark and Kirsten Devizes-Brown. Kirsten was a tall, rangy brunette, and Logan's Head of Communications, Sales and Marketing. The eldest daughter of an old and notoriously eccentric English family, she was a PR genius, who could make anything and everything seem utterly, irresistibly desirable. Before joining LBI she had worked on her own, masterminding the comebacks of pop stars who'd been busted doing drugs, or rappers caught carrying guns, running damage limitation for the reputation of young royals caught with their pants down somewhere they shouldn't have been, and babysitting a children's TV presenter through his drink-driving trial. She had a reputation for being tough, hard-working, knowing everyone, and also being great fun. Logan knew he was lucky to have her on his side. Apart from anything

else, if she was working *for* him, he knew she couldn't be working *against* him.

Rachel was already inside the car, her ultra-thin laptop open on her knee, no doubt with a list of tasks and instructions and queries at the ready. She was an excellent assistant, he couldn't manage without her. She had been one of the contestants on the first series of *General Manager* – had been kicked off in one of the early rounds, mainly because she wasn't pushy enough for the show's producers. But he had spotted her efficiency, her calmness in the face of any kind of chaos, and had hired her straight away. It had proved to be a good decision, but then, his decisions usually did. He sat back. In a few hours he'd be home in London. Meet with Maryanne, give her a chance to go over the social arrangements for the next few weeks. See the kids if they were there – that was a good point. He turned to Rachel.

'Do I have a slot scheduled with Charlie and Lucia?'

She clicked the mouse to bring up Logan's digital calendar on her screen.

'Lucia, yes, tomorrow at eleven a.m., then lunch. I've booked you in at the Ivy Club. Charlie's not in London at the moment. In the evening you're hosting a dinner party at home.'

He nodded his approval. He could spend the morning with Maryanne, then check in with Lucia, see what she was occupying her time with (and hopefully be told that she had taken up the place at St Martin's College that she had been offered to study fashion design), maybe see if she had any news of what progress Charlie had made with his music recording (and hopefully discover that he was nearing completion and had got it out of his system), and then have a pleasant lunch with her before getting back on with things in his West End office. Good. The car sped them towards the airport.

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