

PROLOGUE

*The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.
For nothing now can ever come to any good.*

—WH Auden

‘YOU’VE GOT THE Prime Minister calling in ten minutes.’

Jack nods, showing not a flicker of response at the prospect of this. Then again, nothing about Jack Grant is what you’d expect. For a self-made billionaire-investor-cum-philanthropist-cum-sex-god he is wild, disrespectful of authority and the establishment, and rough around the edges. Deliciously so.

Take this situation: Jack, in his bed, naked as the day he was born, uncaring that he should have been at his desk an hour ago. That I can see most of his beautiful back and backside. That my insides are clenching with hot, steamy lust.

‘About...?’

It’s a lazy drawl as he flips over and pierces me with those intelligent green eyes. His accent is pure Irish brogue. Like Colin Farrell after a night of cigarettes and booze: deep, hoarse and throaty.

‘The latest episode of *The Great British Bake-Off*.’

I roll my eyes. We’ve been negotiating to buy a huge swathe of Crown land for the last six months; it’s at the highest level of negotiation and, given the media interest, the Prime Minister has become involved.

‘What do you *think*?’

His laugh is a rumble that barrels out of his chest.

‘Well, every man needs a good scone recipe.’

‘And you’ve got one?’

‘Sure.’

He grins. It’s a grin that is at once devilish and charming, and I know how easy it must be for him to get women into bed. And that’s before you factor in the body, the money, the power.

‘Nine minutes,’ I snap.

His grin unfurls like a ribbon on his face. My heart *kerthunks*. I ignore it. Stupid heart.

‘Did you book Sydney?’

‘Yes.’

He arches a brow at my impatient tone and, as if to contradict it, stretches in the bed, his arms high over his head, his body gloriously on display for me.

‘And Amber?’

I don’t mean to sigh but when the Prime Minister’s office is calling I feel there should be some air of responsiveness. Jack, apparently, doesn’t agree.

‘All arranged.’

Lucy’s sister is taking a year’s sabbatical from her job as an executive at a bank to manage the foundation’s start-up year. She’s insanely qualified and personally motivated.

‘Salary agreed; she’ll be based out of Edinburgh, as we discussed.’

He nods, but makes no effort to move.

‘Seriously, Jack. Eight minutes. Get the hell up, already.’

‘Ouch. Did you get out of the wrong side of bed this morning?’

He runs his fingers down his chest, drawing my attention the ridges of his abdomen, the flesh so perfectly smooth and sculpted. My mouth is bone-dry.

‘No.’

‘You’re even crosser than usual,’ he teases, and my lips tighten impatiently.

As it happens, he’s right. I got The Invitation this morning. The one that arrives every year, beckoning me to come and pay homage to my parents’ marriage.

Ugh.

It’s my least favourite social event—and the one time I’m forced to remember who I really am. The one time a year my parents recall me to the mother ship, reminding me that no matter what I do, professionally or personally, I’ll always be Gemma Picton. *Lady Gemma Picton.*

Ugh.

‘Sit down. Tell me all about it.’

He pats the bed beside him and I roll my eyes again, hoping he won’t know how sorely I’m tempted. Just once I imagine giving in to *this*—the electrical current that is arcing between us. I never would...never could. He is as off-limits as hell is hot—the stuff of fantasies and nightmares.

‘No, thanks.’

‘What is it?’

‘Nothing. Personal stuff,’ I say, and he shrugs.

But there’s curiosity in his eyes. A curiosity I have to ignore. Along with desire. Lust. Want. Need.

We have our boundaries and we definitely know better than to cross them.

Jack pushes the sheet off, exposing the tattoo that curls across his lower back and snakes around his hips to the tops of his legs. It must have hurt like hell to get it done—especially on the skin of his thighs, right near his cock.

I asked him once why he'd got it. His answer? *'Seemed like a good idea at the time.'*

He doesn't care that I see him naked. It's not the first time and undoubtedly won't be the last. Sometimes I wonder if he's goading me, waiting for me to react. After all, it's classic workplace sexual harassment.

Except it isn't. Because I'm not harassed.

I'm amused. And more than a little turned on.

In the two years since I started working for Jack I've probably seen him naked on average once per week. That's over a hundred stare-fests and he is *totally* worth staring at. I don't think he used to be like this. Before *this* there was *her*.

Lucy.

His wife.

But she got sick and died, and two months later I came to work for him and he was like this. Dark and brooding and desirable and sexy and messed up and mourning and fascinating.

This sleeping with anything in a skirt is post-Lucy. Same as the copious Scotch-drinking afterwards. It's sensual self-flagellation but he won't see it that way.

So, no matter how much I want to stare at his naked arse, I know he's for looking at—not touching. Like when Grandma used to take me shopping at her favourite Portmeirion boutique and I was allowed to

stare at the intricate floral and botanical artwork for hours on end, but never, ever to touch.

Because touching might lead to breaking—and, yes, touching Jack would, I fear, break me.

‘See something you like?’

Another drawl—he’s so good at that. He lets words slide out of his mouth like liquid chocolate.

‘Nope.’ My smile is saccharine. ‘Seven minutes.’

I spin on my heel and leave, a smile playing around my lips as desire pools between my legs.

*

Gemma is staring at me, and the mood I’m in I feel about two steps away from going all ‘Me Tarzan, You Jane’ on her. I want to grab her round the waist and pull her down on my length. No foreplay. No teasing. Just her...taking me deep.

In my fantasy she’s not wearing panties and she’s left her brain at the door—because real-life Gemma would quote me a thousand reasons not to have sex even as she was moaning in my arms.

Last night was fun. At least, it started off as fun. But the woman I brought here...Rebecca? Rowena?...talked too much.

She’d wanted to be romanced.

I wanted to screw.

So I gave her cab fare and showed her the door.

And now I have a raging hard-on and an assistant—she hates it when I call her that, so I do it often, even though she’s technically my in-house counsel—who seems to have moved into my sexual fantasies permanently. When did *that* happen?

I rack my brain, trying to pinpoint the moment I went from observing her to obsessing over her. From looking dispassionately at her in those suits she wears

one day, and the next imagining how long it would take me to strip her out of one.

I don't think it was one *day*, though, because that implies some switch was flicked. No, I think it was a look as she got into my helicopter in Spain. A laugh over dinner. Hearing her hum as she stared out of a window, her mind obviously running at a million miles an hour.

Then there was that blackout we were once caught in at the city office. The fire alarm shut the place down, closing us inside an elevator for close on an hour, with just the dim flicker of emergency lights that made her legs look so long and smooth. By the time they cranked the doors I was about ready to pin her to the carpeted floor and screw her senseless.

Yeah, that was probably the moment I realised how much trouble I was in.

I'm not interested in a relationship. But I do want to fuck her. And I think she wants it too. I've seen the way her caramel eyes drop to my arse when she thinks I'm not looking.

But I'm always looking lately.

For as long as we both shall live.

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