



‘This one looks promising.’

Jack Thornfield would have given a lot to avoid taking the application form out of his PA’s hand. Not that there was anything wrong with his PA, unless you counted a caustic tongue and telepathic powers. He didn’t want to look up because he didn’t want the woman to see his eyes and just *know* . . .

‘Thanks, Martha, but I’ve already seen it.’

‘Yes, Jack, I know you’ve seen it, but have you actually looked at it?’

Keeping his eyes on the computer screen, Jack reached out a hand. The form by-passed his fingers and flopped on top of his keyboard: three neatly typed sheets of paper with a passport photo attached.

‘She ticks all the right boxes,’ said Martha.

He pushed the pages off the keyboard and frowned. A line of redundant Fs now marched across his email to the head of marketing.

‘Maybe. Maybe not.’

2

‘Why don’t you take a look at her CV? It’s pretty impressive.’

He flashed Martha a smile he knew she knew was part of his best little-boy act. ‘You just want me to get a new product manager to get the operations division off your back. You know, I think you’d let me hire your cat, if you thought it could cope with the Tube in the mornings,’ he said.

He also knew that Martha was right. He really did need someone to head up the European sector of his specialist travel company, Big Outdoors, like yesterday. The previous one had met, and married, a crocodile wrangler from Brisbane, all within the space of a month.

‘Jack, I have media budgets to finalise by close of play today. Shall I get this Beth Allen in for interview?’

He cradled his palm around the mouse again. ‘Why not? You’ll never leave me alone unless I do.’

She shook her head at him in disbelief and he wondered, for the umpteenth time, why he put up with a PA who treated him, mostly, with indulgent disdain. Then he noticed the flawlessly prepared presentation, espresso and king-size Mars bar Martha had laid on the table in his office. That must be three reasons at least, he told himself.

However, chocolate and Powerpoint skills apart, he still didn’t trust Martha absolutely. He didn’t think it wise to trust anyone absolutely, not even himself, so he waited a few seconds after she’d left the office, just to be

safe. As the door closed with a click, he pressed the ‘in conference’ button on his desk-top telephone and smiled to himself. Let Martha ‘Sherlock’ Symington deduce what she would from *that*. With a glance at the door, he snatched up the application form and pulled off the clip holding the photo.

Jack blew out a long slow breath. He was holding the girl’s face between his fingertips and she was staring back at him out of hesitant eyes. It was a face he would have known not just by sight, but by touch alone. Put him in a pitch-dark cave and he’d remember every last millimetre of it. The contours of that determined chin, the soft fringe of her lashes, that mouth like moist velvet . . . She also looked pale but maybe that was the artificial light of the photo booth. He hoped so. The last time he’d seen her, her cheeks had been burnished a soft gold from the Mediterranean sun, just like the rest of her.

As for the oh-so-serious expression, he told himself not to be too surprised. Everyone knew that ‘no smiling’ was compulsory now in a UK passport photo. If your mouth so much as twitched at the corners, they slammed your application back, marked ‘unreadable’.

He ran a thumb over the picture again and then turned to Beth Allen’s CV. It said she had a first-class degree in modern languages, a masters in business administration and a gold survival swimming badge. The first two took him by surprise – the Beth he knew

was struggling to stay the course, this woman had it in the bag *and* her MBA.

As for the swimming badge . . . how he'd teased her about that as they'd sat round the fire, drinking beers and eating lamb off skewers, almost too hot to bear in your mouth. 'A *gold* award? I'm impressed. Hey, Beth, maybe I should knock myself out on a rock and fall in a pool, just for you.'

'Maybe you should,' she'd teased back. 'So I can ignore you.' But he'd seen her eyes and known she'd have dived right in, even if her hands had been tied. Now, as he stretched back in his chair, the image slid into his head as easily as cleaving through water. Beth skinny-dipping in a mountain pool, her body shimmering out of focus beneath the surface. Her wet footprints on the rocks, drying out even as he followed them, into the *maquis*, the heathland that bordered the coast.

Even with the hum of the air-conditioning in his office, he could still hear the water cascading down the gully, smell the scent of wild herbs and her warm skin as he pulled her against him and she arched against his body. It almost snatched his breath away, seeming like yesterday not years ago. He suddenly found himself hauled back to reality by a dull throb in his pocket. Jumping to his feet, he dragged his mobile phone from his trousers, pressed the call button and barked into it: 'Jack Thornfield.'

'No need to shout. It's only me,' said Martha coolly.

‘I wasn’t shouting,’ he said patiently as she waited for his answer. ‘When I shout, believe me, the entire floor will know about it, not just you. Didn’t you see my phone was on conference?’

Martha sounded unimpressed. ‘It’s Miss Allen. I thought you’d want to know.’

‘What about her?’

‘She’s available for interview on Monday afternoon. In view of the urgency of the situation, I took the liberty of booking her into a hotel for the night after the interview.’

He held the phone away from his mouth so his PA wouldn’t hear him suck in a breath. ‘Yeah. Fine.’

‘Shall I schedule a meeting for her with the operations director?’

He paused, gripping the phone tightly, wondering which way to jump.

*‘Jack?’*

‘I’ll handle it.’

Flicking off the mobile, he stared at Beth’s CV, then pressed a thumb to the desk-top phone. ‘Martha?’

‘Yes?’

‘It’s probably best if you don’t tell Ms Allen I’m interviewing her. My appointment hasn’t been announced officially yet. I wouldn’t like it to get out ahead of the press release. Please tell her that Allegra Arnold will be seeing her.’

‘Of course.’

6

He paused, debating whether he should betray weakness at this early stage of his acquaintance with Martha. He'd been in charge for a few weeks now, even if his appointment wasn't 'official' yet.

'Is there anything else?' she asked, as the silence on the end of the line lengthened.

'No, that will be all for now.'

Sitting back in his seat, he looked at Beth's CV again. He really needed fresh blood in the company, new ideas, and Beth did, as Martha had pointed out, tick all the boxes. It was shame that, once upon a time, she'd also marked his with a thick black line that he'd never quite erased. Jack sighed at his own weakness. The company needed dynamic new staff, sure, but he was kidding himself if he didn't admit he was keen to see her again.

Rolling up his sleeves, he vowed to get the maintenance team to overhaul the air-conditioning system. Then he turned to the report from his sales director. He hadn't got more than a few lines into it when he started shaking his head. Barely two pages long and reeking of cigarette smoke, the project hadn't even been given lip service. It also didn't contain any concrete revenue-producing ideas for new tours. If that was the guy's idea of a 'comprehensive report', Jack wondered how many other corners had been cut.

Still, he told himself, it was typical. When he'd accepted the job, he'd known Big Outdoors had a good

reputation and was one of the longest-established adventure travel companies in Europe. He'd also known it was going nowhere slowly. New owners had taken over and they recognised it was no longer enough to drift along while competitors were pulling for all they were worth. Their rivals had been busy adding exciting new tours and activities that had chomped into Big Outdoors's market share – which is why Jack had been head-hunted from his Californian role to be CEO. He needed staff who were just as enthusiastic as he was about developing new tours and activities. Who could come up with – and make a success of – exciting new packages that would not only be profitable but also set Big Outdoors apart from its rivals again.

He scrunched up the sales report and threw it in the bin. He'd never been much of a diplomat and six years of climbing the corporate ladder in the States had knocked any verbal shilly-shallying out of him. Deciding that the element of surprise might work well with his errant sales director, he pressed the desk phone.

'Martha.'

'Yes, Jack?'

'Can you tell Darius Sanford I want to see him?'

'I think he's in a meeting.'

'Internal or external?'

'Internal, I think.'

'Then tell him to cut it short,' he said firmly.

8

‘I’ll do my best,’ replied Martha. ‘And while I’ve got your attention, you’ve had seven calls.’

‘Anything I should worry about?’

‘I don’t think so. Most were people wanting you to buy advertising space or from management consultancies.’

‘Thanks, Martha.’

‘The only one I couldn’t deal with was from a Camilla Reed, who says she’s a journalist. She insisted it was personal so I said you’d call her back.’

He felt a smile tilt the corners of his mouth. Camilla was the chief feature writer on a travel magazine called *Voyages*. An uber-groomed blonde as glossy and upmarket as the publication she worked on. He could just imagine her demanding to speak to him in her cut-glass accent. He’d met her once in the US and she’d been calling to try and do a ‘profile’ on him ever since he’d taken over at Big Outdoors.

‘OK, thanks. I’ll speak to her myself. By the way, Martha. Thanks for the Mars bar. Sweet.’



‘Aren’t you going to have any breakfast, lass?’ Biscuit in one hand, bag in the other, Beth Allen brushed her lips over her father’s cheek. ‘Sorry – no time,’ she mumbled, shoving half a chocolate chip cookie into her mouth while trying to scoop a carrier bag of files from the floor. ‘And I wish you wouldn’t call me “lass”, you make me sound like some hard-done-by girl in a Catherine Cookson novel or *Coronation Street*.’

She suspected he only called her ‘lass’ to annoy her – and truth be told, she *almost* half-liked it. In a retro-ironic way, that is, and as long as there was no one around to hear.

‘It doesn’t do, going without proper food at this hour,’ grumbled Steve Allen, ignoring her and doing his best to open the door with one hand. Early morning light filtered into the hall as he managed to get it half open. The light only seemed to make his face look greyer than ever. He looked like the old men who played dominoes in the local pub, yet he was at least thirty years younger

than them. Beth was sure he'd aged inside as well as outside in the past few months.

'You should at least have a bit of toast or something . . .' his voice trailed off but she knew what he was thinking. That he should have got up and prepared something, and felt guilty that he hadn't or couldn't. She shook her head and chewed furiously at the same time, spilling crumbs on to the carpet.

'Dad, I won't starve, and besides, it's too early for black pudding and fried egg. I'll get something later on the train,' she said, swallowing the last of her cookie. Her father looked on disapprovingly as she pushed the door fully open with her bottom. Outside in the yard, racks of bicycles packed the space between the old stone walls. The spring sun was glinting pinkly off the skylights of a lean-to workshop shoehorned in at the far end of the yard – the place that had been home and livelihood for her family for as long as she could remember. Not that she'd spent much time there since leaving for uni. She felt a squeeze on her arm and glanced round. Not until recently.

'You will mind how you're going, won't you?'

'Dad, nothing will happen. It's London, not the Sahara or Antarctica. No mountains, no scorpions, no sharks . . .'

Her father looked doubtful. 'I wouldn't be too sure. Honor's nephew got mugged on the underground last week.'

‘I promise I’ll be on my guard constantly. No mugger, scammer, pervert or Jehovah’s Witness will get within ten feet without me noticing.’

‘There’s no need for sarcasm,’ said her dad, frowning. ‘Your mum’s second cousin is a Witness and he’s a qualified civil engineer.’

‘He could still be a pervert,’ she said, making her dad shake his head in despair. ‘Stop fretting, I’ll be fine – and now I have to go.’

As she stepped into the cobbled yard, she hoisted her bags high to avoid a rack of trailer bikes whose flags were fluttering in the breeze. ‘See you on Friday,’ she called at the gate. Her father was leaning against the door frame, almost smiling but not quite.

A horn hooted in the street.

‘Don’t forget to phone when you get there, madam,’ he shouted.

‘I promise! Sorry, Dad, I have to go. That’s Honor’s van – I don’t want to make her late for her customers. And don’t call me madam either.’

She walked briskly down the path towards a van whose engine rumbled through the morning silence. It was, her mum would have said, a sight for sore eyes. No other van in the Lake District, or the world, as far as she knew – and she’d been around – had a Friesian cow paint-job. Its driver had one arm resting on the open window, the clutch of silver bracelets on her wrist jangling against the metal.

‘Morning, Honor,’ she called, still tasting cookie crumbs on her lips.

‘Good morning indeed!’

Honor Matthews was scarily cheerful for 6 a.m. In fact, she was scarily cheerful a lot of the time. Beth bent her head to the open window. ‘Thanks for picking me up so early. It’s a bit of a cheek, me cadging a lift.’

Honor pushed a hand through long blonde hair, streaked with silvery grey. ‘Pepper-and-salt,’ thought Beth suddenly, recalling one of her mum’s favourite phrases. Telling herself getting maudlin twice in one morning wouldn’t help anyone, she bit her lip and grinned. ‘Daisy’s looking well.’

Honor pulled a face and patted the steering wheel. ‘Daisy may look well but she does have a slight clutch problem which means a visit to Frayle’s next week, I fear, and a rather large invoice.’ She sighed, then smiled again. ‘But don’t worry about cadging a lift because I’d have been up and about whatever. I’m serving breakfast to a bunch of fabulously hunky firefighters doing the Three Peaks Challenge.’

‘Hmm . . . I agree that’s not a bad way to start the day,’ said Beth, stowing her bag in the back, careful not to squash the bread rolls. ‘Still, it’s really good of you to drop me off at the station. It’s a bit out of your way.’

‘Can’t have you getting a taxi. We want you fighting fit and ready for the fray. I’m sure you’ll knock ’em dead in London.’

‘I hope so. Fingers crossed.’

With a rattle of the clutch, Honor pulled away. Beth glanced up at her little sister, Louisa’s window. The curtains were still tightly shut, of course – it was horrendously early. It had been Louisa’s eighteenth birthday the night before and they’d all had a family dinner. Beth should have had an early night but they’d stayed up late, sharing a bottle of bubbly. Maybe she’d text Lou later, she thought, as Honor turned on the Radio Cumbria news. Gazing out of the car window as they skirted the lakeside road, she watched the sun rippling along the surface of the water as the mist rose.

Beth knew that Honor would have given her a lift whether she had a catering ‘gig’ to go to or not. An old schoolpal of her mum’s, Honor had been a very good friend to the family, since Diane Allen had died suddenly when Beth was a teenager. Honor had never tried to replace her mum; none of them would have wanted that. Yet she was invariably there when needed, like a well-loved, if rather eccentric, fixture.

With very little traffic about, they had soon reached the signals at the bottom of the hill to the station. A red light forced them to stop and her eyes inevitably rested on the ranks of shiny BMWs and Audis standing guard on a garage forecourt.

‘Frayles,’ said Honor.

‘Of course,’ said Beth.

Nothing disturbed the tranquil imposing façade of

Frayle & Son. There was no little man polishing the windscreens of the cars, no suited and booted salesman trying to persuade a well-heeled couple to part with their cash for the latest model. No Porsche with personalised plate, parked in the space marked: 'Reserved: Sales & Marketing Director Only' and no Marcus, standing in the showroom, shaking hands on another deal.

A pang of guilt struck her. Marcus hadn't found out yet that she was running away to London. If he had, he'd definitely have offered her a ride and in something even flashier than a cow-patterned van. He might have tried to persuade her not to leave. Beth was almost sure he might have offered to step in and help out her family financially, too. No chance of that, she thought as 'Daisy' chugged up the hill to the little station. She respected herself, and Marcus, way too much to take hand-outs, however well-meaning.

Marcus was a nice, solid guy. As far as she knew, he never wasted his hard-earned cash on online poker, drank more than the government-recommended limit or wore a tie that clashed with his Hugo Boss shirt. Plus, on the odd occasion when she'd stayed over at the Grange with him, he'd made sure the burglar alarm was set and always flossed before coming to bed. They'd been seeing each other, on and off, for a few months now. In fact, Marcus was probably the most serious relationship she'd had since Jack Thornfield.

Now where had he sprung from, today, of all days, when her mind needed to be cool and businesslike? It must have been . . . no, she *knew* it was eight years, almost to the day, since she'd last seen him. He'd waved her off on a minibus to the airport in Corsica, wiping away her tears with his thumb, before saying gruffly, 'I'll call you as soon as I get back home.'

At least, that's what she'd always thought he'd said. After all this time, the memory was beginning to shift and become hazy around the edges, a bit like the masts shimmering tantalisingly through the mist on the lake.

'Are you feeling OK?' asked Honor, as Beth wound down the window.

'Fine,' she said brightly. 'Well, maybe a *bit* nervous . . . it's a big day.'

'Understandable but no need. This Big Outdoors place will be begging you to stay as soon as they meet you. You're staying overnight, aren't you?'

'Yes. They said I could have a night in a hotel before the interview but they can't see me until after lunch and I wanted to be here for Lou's birthday dinner last night. So it seemed a good idea to stay on afterwards instead.'

'Especially if it's free.'

'I didn't like to say no. The woman who arranged it seemed really insistent. I didn't want to make a fuss before they've even met me.'

She turned her face to catch the fresh morning breeze blowing down from the fells. Jack Thornfield's

name had thrust its way into her mind most unwelcomely. She'd stopped Googling his name on the Internet years ago, which was a big step along the road to recovering from being swept off her feet then dumped by him all in the space of three weeks. When he'd left her, he'd taken something with him – her ability to trust, and for a long time afterwards, she'd been as wary of men as a pool she couldn't see the bottom of.

'Um . . . we're here.'

Honor was gazing at her in amusement and she found they were parked in the lay-by outside the station.

'Oh, sorry. I was on another planet there,' she said.

'I could see that.' She patted Beth's arm. 'They'll be OK, you know, your dad and Louisa. I'll see to that.'

She felt a stab of guilt, realising Honor was referring to her family. Yet she hadn't been thinking about them at all but about some guy from years ago who should have been long forgotten. Cursing herself, she decided to shove any thoughts of Jack Thornfield into the mental bin marked 'tip'.

'I know you'll take care of them. I really appreciate your help. Thanks, Honor, you're a star.'

'Nothing starry about it. Like I said, it's a pleasure. Now, shall I get your bag out?'

'No, I'll do it. Thanks again.'

Impulsively, she leaned over and kissed Honor on the cheek, then mumbled goodbye and was gone, not

looking behind again until she was safely in the station. After her short journey from Windermere to the main-line station outside Kendal, she found herself tottering down the aisle of the swaying train in her new heels, a Styrofoam cappuccino in one hand and a breakfast panini in the other. As she mumbled her apologies after lurching into a man in an aisle seat, she wondered how she was going to last the day in the heels. She'd got them in a Faith sale and they'd seemed the kind of 'serious' shoes that she ought to wear for a London interview. Her little toe was already telling her she'd have been better off in her trusty O'Neill wedges. Preferably with sand under her soles and a few palm trees waving nearby.

She slid back into her seat as the train whizzed through countryside and urban sprawl on its way to London. Balancing her coffee on the table, she peeled off the top to let the steam escape and resumed her study of the file on Big Outdoors. Ever since she'd sent her letter, on spec, to their operations director, she'd spent every spare moment on the Internet, swotting up on the company's market strengths and weaknesses. Not that she'd expected to get a reply, let alone an interview. Offering her services as a product manager had been a stab in the dark but, she reminded herself, she was desperate. Her stint with a small tour operator company had been going very well until it was cut short by her father's accident.

She tried to memorise the key points in her notes again. They were starred and marked with one of Louisa's fluorescent highlighters. Sisters were useful for some things, she thought, as the first sip of coffee scalded her tongue. She'd noted three main criteria that were considered essential for the role she hoped to get:

- 1 *Recent, extensive, independent travel in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa* – 'Tick to that box,' she thought with a wry smile, although the 'recent' part was a bit debatable.
- 2 *Commitment, energy and drive* – Hmm. Her energy levels were sapping slightly, again due to the events of the past six months. But a big tick to commitment and drive.
- 3 *Ability to forge unique client relationships and deliver outstanding customer service* – She sighed. 'Unique' and 'outstanding'? They were typical industry buzz words but they still sounded daunting. All those months at home must have knocked her confidence. She wasn't sure she could be unique and outstanding, but if that's what it took to get this job, she had no choice but to try.