

Prologue

‘Don’t you *dare* leave me,’ I hiss into the dim room, which pulses with colour and chaos.

‘But this is my song.’

‘The last seven songs have been your song.’

I put my hands to my hips as my line-manager Amanda starts to shake hers in time to the monotonous bassline of the music. She’s so much cooler than me it hurts.

‘Come on, Kate. This is a *party*, not a prison.’

‘At least in prison I’d get three square meals.’

I look down at the minuscule canapé in my hand with disdain and Amanda laughs. No wonder most of my colleagues here are paper-thin. I study the narrow slice of meat laid atop an open lettuce leaf that is trying to pass itself off as some sort of burger. I opt for another glug of wine. I know you shouldn’t drink on an empty stomach but believe me, I’ve been trying to fill it ever since I scurried into the office summer party four hours ago.

‘This is Poster. What did you expect?’

She grins, reaching for my rejected slider and gulping it

down in one. The truth is, I'm not sure. Ever since I got my job as a data analyst here, it's been both everything and nothing like I expected. On the one hand, there are the creatives and fashionistas who have occupied the tenth floor for over a decade now, ever since this superior office with its outrageous views became available and the then-directors decided that, though it was floors apart from the company's existing office downstairs, at least *some* of the Poster staff should level up somehow. These are the ones whose scarily symmetrical faces I found on the company's website as soon as the recruitment agent told me there might be a suitable role for me at the 'luxury e-tailer that professes to give Net-A-Porter a run for its money'. Then, there are the rest of us. The ones left downstairs in the basement, who make the dreams of the 'creative' types become a reality: the website developers, the financial forecasters, the technological support staff, the data analysts. The people like me.

'Come on, Kate. I thought you wanted to see what tenth-floor life was all about.'

Amanda stumbles slightly as she thrusts her arms wide and spins around. The tenth floor would be decadent even without the forest of fresh flowers and temporary dance floor they've brought in for the annual summer bash, the one where everyone from the office is invited to drink more than is advisable with people responsible for their future promotions. I try to remind myself that Amanda is technically my boss, that three months is probably not enough time to be this playful or pugnacious towards her. And yet, her natural ease in who she is seems to have enticed her entire team into becoming scarily unfiltered around her.

‘No, *you* told me it was mandatory,’ I argue back. See: scarily unfiltered.

‘And it is . . .’

‘Everyone else from downstairs has left already.’

‘. . . for you.’

‘Why just for me?’

‘Because you’re the newbie. Everyone else has done their time at one of these.’

‘It’s sounding a lot like prison again.’

Amanda smiles, bridging the gap between us and the tenth floor in the way I’ve seen her do ever since I’ve been working here. ‘The people upstairs are honestly not as bad as the guys downstairs make out.’

‘One of the women made Toby cry last time he came to deliver reports up here.’

‘In her defence, he did offer to show her his latest aquascape.’

‘Is that so bad?’

‘I think she thought it was some sort of manscaping situation.’

‘Poor Toby.’ I can’t help but smile, the expletives he relayed to us just last week finally starting to make sense.

‘But we digress . . .’ Amanda says, shaking away the thought. ‘All this to say, this is your first time to really mingle between departments. Get to know some people.’

She’s your boss, Kate. Your *boss*. I try to bite my tongue, to muster some professionalism. But then Amanda’s swinging hips shake it away, at least for this evening.

‘So, you can come dance to *my* song,’ she says. ‘Or you can stand in the corner and—’

‘Stand in the corner! Sold to the woman with two left feet.’

‘Kate!’

‘Well, you gave me the option.’

‘I know,’ she groans, trademark cheeky glint in her eye. ‘And I would order you to dance with me . . .’

‘You *are* the boss.’

‘But I think that could be outside my powers as your manager.’

‘Enforced dancing.’ I grin over my glass. ‘I could report you to HR.’

‘Oh, babe. They’re probably too busy processing Toby’s manscaping accusation.’

It’s only as I watch Amanda disappear onto the crowded dance floor that I realise how drunk I am. I wish I could tell you how many glasses I’ve had but it’s the kind of party where as soon as you get to a glass-half-empty situation, someone is already topping you up. There was the one as soon as I walked into the decked-out tenth floor, where my hands were shaking from the sight of no less than a hundred people who could have just climbed out of a catalogue. Then there was the drink fifteen minutes later when the company’s new CEO, Gareth Grey, waved across at me, only for me to realise as I raised my hand that he was signalling to someone else. And was it one or two glasses of champagne I grabbed from a passing waitress when my first attempt at interdepartmental small talk led to a five-foot-eight cold-hard stunner telling me she’d worn the exact same blouse I’m wearing to a family funeral fifteen years ago. I’m not usually a fan of work drinks. Of being overly chummy with ‘contacts’. But in this crowd, with this number of drinks flowing, there is no semblance of sensibleness left to hold on to.

I try to count the glasses and soon find that I need to use the fingers on *both* hands.

‘Working out when you can clock off?’

I look up to see a man standing in front of me, his square jaw set, his lips pursed into a nonchalant grin as the pulsing lights from the dance floor illuminate him more for a moment before fading once again.

‘Eh?’ I shout above the music.

‘The counting on your hands. Thought you were trying to work out when your shift ends. Either that, or you prefer children’s nursery rhymes to Jason bloody Derulo.’

‘Nursery rhymes?’

‘You know. One, two, three, four, five. Once I caught a fish alive . . .’

Is this beautiful man really standing in front of me singing nursery rhymes to a backdrop of *Want to Want Me* right now?

I look behind him to try and catch Amanda’s eye, to send her a silent SOS – *Is this guy a model or a mirage?* – but it’s futile; she’s already getting down and dirty to Derulo. I look back to the guy, tipsy and tantalising; I’m not entirely sure how a self-respecting twenty-four-year-old is supposed to reply to a midnight nursery rhyme.

‘My shift?’

‘Yeah, clearly you don’t want to be here.’

‘Of course I do!’

‘Which part of sitting in the corner and counting hours on your hands is meant to convince me of that?’

‘I wasn’t counting hours, I was counting . . .’

The stranger has taken a step closer, leaning on the wall beside me. He’s wearing a t-shirt, one of those strong, simple cuts that you can tell is expensive without needing to look at the price tag. Everyone else is wearing lightweight shirts, something a little smarter; like me in my family-funeral blouse.

‘Yes?’ He cocks an eyebrow, folding his thick, toned arms, intrigue suitably piqued.

‘I was counting drinks.’

‘Drinks?’

‘Yeah, I don’t like to drink too many and . . .’

I hate feeling out of control. Not that I’m going to tell nonchalant t-shirt guy that. Or the fact that this conversation, him approaching me from across the room, is making me feel like a fish out of water too. He could chat to any person at this party he wants to. So why me?

‘You’ve been drinking on the job?’

What is it with this guy and shifts and jobs?

‘Hasn’t everybody?’

‘Well, yeah, *we* have, but I didn’t think the . . .’

His unfinished sentence fades into the sultry sounds of Sisqó and I have a horrible suspicion he’s about to insinuate that the drinks budget doesn’t stretch to those from the basement, that he’s coming over to tell me that I’ve had more than my fair share.

‘Didn’t think the *what*?’

‘No, no, don’t worry, forget about it.’

He shakes his pretty head, struggling to hold my eye, and it’s at this moment that a waitress walks past us carrying a tray of drinks and wearing precisely the same outfit as I am: skinny black jeans, loose black blouse. The family-funeral favourites of circa fifteen years ago. Both of us see her. Both of us realise . . .

‘You thought I was a waitress?’

‘No, I . . .’ His confusion is palpable. ‘You’re erm . . . you’re not, are you?’

‘Do I *look* like a waitress?’

His eyes dart to the doppelganger-dressed woman who has just passed us.

‘Do you really want me to answer that?’

‘Your dick—’

‘Bit forward.’ Another cocked eyebrow, a cheeky smile.

‘I was going to say, “You’re a dickhead.”’ I struggle to be heard over *Thong Song*.

‘Bit *forceful*, then. What’s wrong with being a waitress?’

‘Absolutely nothing apart from the fact that I’m not one,’ I say, becoming hyperaware of my Northern twang clashing with his Southern accent. ‘I work here, for Poster.’

I gaze into his grey-blue eyes as he neatens his perfectly groomed hair. Toby and the others downstairs were right about the tenth-floor fashionistas. Clearly, if you aren’t wearing this season’s latest threads, you can forget about fitting in with them. I look around the room at the heels and the bags and the effortless way people are swanning around the space. It makes me feel precisely how I used to around the mean girls at secondary school. Except, years have passed since then and I don’t have to put up with it now.

‘Look, it’s okay. I’m going to get another drink. Have a nice night.’

‘Now, if only you knew someone who was serving them.’

I can tell from his tone that this is meant to be funny and maybe if I didn’t feel like such a joke, I could take it as one. Instead, I move past him, cheeks burning, biting my lip.

‘Wait—’

He reaches for my hand, electricity running through me as his fingertips touch mine.

‘It’s not my job to *wait* on anyone.’

‘I know, I made a mistake. It’s just someone . . . Please, can we start over?’

For a moment, he looks genuinely mortified. So much so, that against all my better judgement, I find myself nodding.

‘Let me buy you a drink to make up for it?’ He’s still holding his hand on mine.

‘It’s a free bar.’

‘You would know.’

‘You wanker,’ I mutter back to him, but between his hand on mine and his full and unreserved smile and the alcohol in my system, I can’t help but feel any anger in me bow to something like affection.

‘So, what do you *actually* do for Poster?’ he slurs over a freshly opened beer as soon as we’ve found a vacant desk to perch on, a little away from the drama of the dance floor. Amanda is a slave to it now; my other colleagues from the downstairs office are long gone.

‘I’m a data analyst.’

‘Working in the basement?’

‘Would you not have noticed me before now if I wasn’t?’ I flirt, regretting it instantly. This is why I don’t drink wine. Why I rarely go to parties. Especially parties like this one.

‘Oh, I definitely would have noticed you.’ He shuffles a little closer to me, until the sides of our thighs are almost touching. ‘It’s my second week. Still finding my way around. Hey, the basement office is pretty big too. How did you know I’d be working up here?’

‘Because you’re stun—’

I stop the rest of my sentence; I *cannot* tell a man I’ve just

met that he's stunning, especially one that has managed to get under my skin already.

'Because I'm stun?'

'I was going to say stunted . . .'

'I'm six foot two.'

I get up from the desk to stand before him, all five foot three of me.

' . . . emotionally,' I add, for want of anything better to say.

'That's not very nice.'

'You managed to insult me within three minutes of me meeting you.'

'I know,' he says. 'And that's the last thing I wanted to do.'

He reaches for my hand again, and I take a step closer toward him.

'Oh yeah?' I whisper.

'Yeah,' he echoes, taking a slightly stumbly step to close the sliver of space between us, my breath catching in my mouth; I can't believe this is the turn tonight is taking.

'Why?' I cast my blurry eyes to his, which are set firmly on my own.

'Because the first thing I wanted to do was . . .'

He allows the rest of his sentence to fade away as he leans in closer, reaching a hand to my face and gently pulling me towards him. I linger there, my lips inches from him, the model or mirage who has managed to approach me, serenade me with nursery rhymes, mistake me for a waitress and somehow still make me want to kiss him, all before telling me his name. Of course, I blame the booze but, in this moment, I'm not mad about it. In this moment, I want to be out of control, to lose myself in kissing someone I don't know for the first time in

my carefully calculated life. I move to close the remaining gap between us, his lips grazing mine ever so softly as my mind drifts away from my body completely.

Then, someone turns the office lights on, and the room is filled with a collective groan as it dawns on people that this midsummer night's party is about to be murdered. His eyes are still on mine, my face held in his hands, until a voice hurtles through our moment.

'Hey, H. After-party at mine.'

Suddenly, he stiffens, inches from my face, jolting back so that my already puckered lips are kissing the canyon of air between us. I follow his unsteady gaze to the gaggle of women behind me, some looking down at me, others giggling to one another, some simply confused by my presence and particularly my proximity to *him*. Behind them, Amanda is standing there, staring in our direction, expression caught somewhere between shock and concern. And though I can't work out why exactly, the sinking stone in my stomach tells me that this is one of those rare occasions where the employer-employee strand of our dynamic is straining to be heard. Sadly, the young woman who has just caught his attention – who *must* be a model – is stepping forward from the fashionable fray to drown any silent warnings out.

'Come on, H. You coming with us, or have you got better things to do?'

I watch as his cheeks turn the colour of her plunging red dress, her blazing green eyes fixed on him as he stands, stepping forward, stalling for a second even though we all know her question is rhetorical. I sit there next to his discarded beer can, my stomach flipping over as the back of my neck starts to prickle with sweat.

If I thought being mistaken for a waitress or a funeral attendee was bad, this is a thousand times worse. Because this time I'm unmistakably me and I'm unmistakably hearing that I really don't belong here. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Amanda walking towards me, but then she is cornered by Poster's CEO, his broad frame eclipsing her from my gaze.

'There's taxis downstairs for the eight of us,' the woman in the red dress continues.

I don't need to count on my fingers to see that I'm unlucky number nine, that any after-party invites are clearly not for me. I look at my mystery man, morphing into a little boy right before my eyes. One that doesn't want to miss the after-party, and especially not for me. He holds my gaze for a moment longer, the same intensity I felt when he touched me still seeming to spark between us, but it's no power for the seven perfect Poster People who are laughing a little louder behind him now.

'Told you he wouldn't go through with it.'

I hear a whisper somewhere from the crowd of colleagues. Wouldn't go through with what? With kissing me? Like it was some sort of bet?

I force my legs to leave, to head towards the lifts, all the while hating the fact that tears are starting to prickle in my eyes and make their way down my burning hot cheeks. I don't even know him, I don't even know them, but they are looking at me like they've got my number down and it turns out, it's not a number worth knowing.

One, two, three, four, five. I rush towards the lifts, hitting the down button at least ten times in quick succession. *Once I caught a fish alive.* Stumbling inside, head still hazy from drink, I see

the shape of someone approaching and from where I'm standing, it looks a whole lot like him. But if he thinks I'm going to give him another chance to embarrass me, he's got another think coming. I hit the button again, his broad frame gaining ground, his grey-blue eyes catching mine for the briefest of moments as the tall, silver doors close in front of me, the lift mirrors reflecting the shame on my face. *Six, seven, eight, nine, ten.* I watch the floor numbers descend, trying to forget the faces of the women looking back at me as the stranger left me suspended mid-kiss.

Then I let it go again. The doors open into the lobby, and I run out of Poster House, circling the grandiose building until I come to the shabby-looking stone stairs down to the back door into the basement office, all the while vowing never to go swimming with the tenth-floor sharks again.

Chapter One

Five Years Later

My stomach sinks as soon as I see Poster House coming into view. Well, the back of it. I've made a point of walking the extra twelve minutes from Tottenham Court Road, even on a cool March morning like this one, just to avoid the melee of models flocking into the glamorous front entrance. But then I remind myself of what lies at the bottom of it: a job I love, with colleagues I adore who are physically ten floors and ideologically *worlds* apart from our upstairs counterparts. Sure, after five years of working here some might say I've overstayed my welcome, but my time here feels a bit like running a large report: I've waited too long for the outcome to refresh the page now.

'Kate. Kate. Kate!'

I hear my name getting increasingly louder, cutting through the husky sound of Meatloaf telling me that he would do anything for love that is blasting through my headphones. I fumble to find my phone, longing to switch the track to something

more age-appropriate and, well, cooler than the classic rock that me and my dad used to sing in the car together when I was young, but then I look up to see Blair beaming back at me.

‘Meatloaf again?’ She grins. The tinny music is still echoing through my earpieces, now hanging around my neck. If only I could justify buying AirPods.

‘I’m going through a phase.’

‘Two decades and counting.’

‘I didn’t say it was a *short* phase.’

Blair throws an arm around my shoulder, which at several inches below her own causes her hand to hit my backpack and almost knock my battered KeepCup out of my clutches. Even so, we manage to fall into step beside each other, one hand on our coffees, the others stashed in coat pockets and both of us chatting about the sheer number of reports we need to produce for the senior management team upstairs by the ‘end of play’ today.

‘I hate that phrase,’ she says, as we descend the spiral stone steps down to the basement office entrance, the ‘Enter at your own risk’ sign a semi-ironic relic of a departmental pirate-themed party we held shortly after the annual office mixer; we should probably begin planning the next one for in a few months’ time.

‘Which phrase?’

Blair loves the word *hate*, adding a good dose of dramatics to absolutely everything. Deep down, under the long, black hair and dark, gothic trench coat, she’s a complete softie.

‘End of play. Like, what part of work feels like a game to them?’

‘As someone who has seen their monthly expenses, I can assure you they’re winning.’

‘But all work and no play for us?’

‘Speak for yourself,’ I grin as she rolls her eyes. Poster might personify everything I hate about the corporate world, capitalising on the latest ‘trends’ of cultural angst and social media induced comparison. But my actual job, the thing I do down here every day, taking seemingly random data and turning it into something useful, something that makes sense? That part I love; that part is play for me.

Blair pushes the door into the basement open and no fewer than ten faces glance at us from computer screens scattered around the back entrance, colleagues further afield already sat behind their monitors, headphones on and plugged into the task at hand. Some will have been here since seven this morning. Charlie lifts his messy, blond mop to look up to us with dark circles around his eyes that make me wonder whether he even went home last night. Still, he waves a hand, eyes reorienting to his screen before him as he does.

‘Good morning, ladies!’ He beams.

‘Good morning, Charlie,’ we echo back in perfect *Charlie’s Angels* unison. It’s the same greeting we’ve given each other almost every day for the three years since he started working here. Like everything else down in the basement, it’s routine, orderly, comfortable, like a pair of worn slippers waiting for you to sink your feet into as soon as you arrive home.

‘Whatsauppppp?’ Toby asks as soon as I sit down at my usual desk next to him, ditching my phone face-up on the tabletop and proceeding to pull my laptop out of my bag. I feel his comfortable presence next to me; the bold orange hue of his shirt seeming even brighter next to his dark-chocolate skin.

‘Hello. The nineties called. They want their greeting back.’

‘That’s a coincidence. The seventies called for you. They’re really missing Meatloaf.’

I look down at my phone, my Spotify page still trying its best to expose me. Somehow being exposed here doesn’t lead to embarrassment like it does upstairs.

‘Good weekend?’

‘*Great* weekend. I discovered fly fishing . . .’ Toby hums with enthusiasm; he always does. Only, his enthusiasm flits between different hobbies quicker than his callused fingertips are writing code on his laptop keyboard as he speaks right now.

‘Yeah?’ I say, only half-listening, firing up the wizard I was working on before the weekend. ‘Didn’t have you down as the outdoors type.’

‘I’m not.’

‘But you said—’

‘Fishing Sim World. It’s a game on the Xbox.’

He says this as if I know nothing, when before this weekend he wouldn’t have known the game existed. And once he moves on to the next thing, he’ll forget that it does.

I smile back at my screen, reading over my latest report, still open from the last time I looked at it: the one that is meant to show the conversion rates between social media click-throughs and real-life purchases. I’ve tried not to work over the weekends ever since I realised, early on in my London life, that this city will never slow down for you, so you have to pace things yourself. Still, with my housemate Lucy working remotely for a digital start-up, it’s hard for the hustle mentality not to spill out at home; especially when she’s working for the employer I want, the very employer I foolishly turned down just over five years ago.

‘Got much on this week?’ Toby asks absent-mindedly. He’s probably googling expansion packs or fan memorabilia for his latest fad.

‘The usual. Need to get my annual review in the diary with Amanda though.’

‘Has it been four years since you started here already?’

‘Try five.’

When I first turned down the next-to-unpaid start-up position alongside Lucy in favour of the well-paid graduate package at Poster, I promised myself I’d stick it out for a year, hone those all-important ‘transferable skills’, and then move on to something more meaningful. And, despite the two years between graduation and *finally* securing my first salaried position seeming to unfold in a slow-motion montage of zero-hour contracts, unpaid internships and mounting insecurity, the years I have spent at Poster have racked up far quicker than I would have liked. But every time I’ve tried to leave, they’ve found another way to make me stay. It’s a bit like trying to switch from EE: you only get the good deals once you start flirting with Vodafone.

‘Surely due another promotion?’

‘Toby, I’ve been due another promotion ever since I became a senior analyst two years ago. It’s the carrot they’ve been dangling that never quite comes.’

This time last year I swore I’d leave Poster if I hadn’t become a director by my next annual review. After all, I wanted to get into data to help people, not just help them become better dressed. And yet, here I am, twenty-nine, stuck in the same role and too cowardly to remind Amanda that my review was due two weeks ago, because then I’ll have to finally admit to myself that I’ve failed to stick to my own director-or-new-direction

ultimatum. There was once a time when the goal of becoming a director before turning thirty was unheard of, but now the idea of achieving something monumental before that milestone feels like an expectation, sometimes even an entitlement. And I know it's my next strategic step.

'Anyway, I think Amanda may have forgotten about it,' I say, mentally trying to work out my next ten-point plan. Then the sound of my name beckons me from my scheming.

'Kate?'

Amanda pops her head out of her office; she's cornered off from the open-plan space now that she's running with the big dogs upstairs. Thankfully her feet are still firmly on the ground – metaphorically and physically, after she turned down the offer of a room on tenth.

'She knows everything,' Toby whispers under his breath before swinging around to look at her, as we all do.

'Can I see you in my office for a sec?'

The same collective 'Ooo' you might hear when a teacher asks a student to stay after class echoes around the basement floor. I might cringe if it wasn't laced with comradeship, and might even feel fearful, if Amanda wasn't still one of the best things about being here.

'Reel that role in, tiger,' Toby whispers as I get to my feet. I'm pretty sure it's a fly-fishing pun and I do *not* feel good about Toby calling me *tiger* but I'm too excited right now to care. Surely this is about my annual review, my overdue promotion, taking on the Data Analytics Director role I've pretty much been doing for over a year now. Sure, if I get it, it'll mean staying at Poster that little bit longer, maybe just another year, but then I'll be able to make that all-important sideways step

into a director role at another company, maybe even a charity or start-up like Lucy's now that I won't have to live off their slim entry-level salaries.

'Kate. How are you doing? Take a seat.'

Amanda beams, swivelling around in her chair. She suits this office; she suits this role. I knew that once she had set her sights on Operations Director, she was going to get it. It's part of the reason we get on so well. Not that I've held up my side of the bargain. Yet.

'Good, thanks. Lovely weekend. Board games with Lucy, gym, walks in the park.'

'Sounds wild.'

'Shut up.'

Probably shouldn't be saying that to someone about to give me a promotion, but Amanda has no qualms about being my friend as well as my boss. She's a chameleon like that, always has been, flipping between roles effortlessly. As opposed to someone like me, who knows what they're good at, what environments bring out their best, and who actively enjoys staying in their lane.

'So, there's something I need to talk to you about.'

I sit straighter in my seat, feeling the shift from sarcasm to seriousness, the one she always makes when she's going to talk about something completely work-related. My promotion. To director. I smile back at her, willing her to give me a knowing wink.

'Is this about my annual review?' I can't take her silence any longer.

'Oh, crap. We need to book that in, don't we?'

So, not about the promotion then. Unless it's mine already, no need for debate?

‘Yes . . . my work anniversary was actually a fortnight ago . . .’

‘Congratulations,’ she says, failing to look me in the eye.

‘No, that’s not what I was . . .’

It’s only then that I realise how tired she looks. And Amanda never looks tired. She’s thirty-six with the skin of a twenty-six-year-old and though she refuses to get Botox out of principle, she does claim her skincare bill is twice what a little nip-tuck would cost her.

‘Amanda, is everything okay?’

‘Yes and no.’

‘Okay . . .’ I say slowly, my heart picking up pace.

‘Do you want the good news or the bad news first?’

I gulp. What does she mean? What is she on about? From the way she’s looking at me, I’d think I’m about to get fired. But of all the things I know about myself – the good, the bad and the downright ugly – I know I’m good at my job. I’ve made sure of it.

‘The bad news, always the bad news.’

That way you can control the situation, prepare for the worst.

‘Poster is losing money.’

‘How? We charge three thousand pounds for a cardigan.’

‘Not *all* our cardigans.’

‘My nan could knit them.’

‘Okay, but your nan can’t market them to fancy people with disposable incomes.’

‘I’ve heard her friend Margery is minted.’

She smiles, but then her face falls again, worry knitting her brows together. ‘But in all seriousness, our key clients buy clothes for status, not just for style. And there were only so many

cashmere sweatsuits one could justify in a global pandemic. Zoom meant people only had to impress from the waist up.'

I bite my lip; now doesn't feel like the time to joke.

'Anyway, I know it's a good while now but the lockdowns obviously had an adverse impact and as a company, we need to tighten our belts.'

'What are you saying? Are people going to lose their jobs again?'

There was a company-wide reshuffle shortly after Gareth Grey became CEO that I'm pretty confident saw our downstairs team reduced by half, the internship scheme scrapped, new recruitments halted and anyone over ten stone axed from the tenth floor.

'No, not if I can help it, not yet. But we've had to think outside of the box in terms of cost-cutting and in developing new revenue streams for the company.'

'Okay,' I say slowly, not sure where she's going with this, why she'd need my help.

'And that leads me to the good news,' she beams.

'My promotion?' I ask, ashamedly hopeful.

Amanda shakes her head slowly. 'There's a companywide freeze on promotions for the next six months.'

'How is that *good* news?'

'Look, we both know you're performing at the level of director, but the other members of the management team don't . . . well . . . they don't really know who you are.'

'How can they not know who I am?' I allow myself this one Mariah Carey moment. 'My name is on every report that is sent to the tenth floor.'

'That's the thing. They know your *name*, but they don't know your face.'

‘Why should that matter? I’m good at my job.’

‘It shouldn’t matter, but this is Poster, so it does.’

‘So, what are you saying?’ I force the question; not sure I want to hear the answer.

‘I’m saying there is a new opportunity for you to work on a high-profile project, one that will secure your promotion to director the moment the freeze is lifted. And if that’s not good news at a time when many of our colleagues could have lost their jobs then I’m not sure what is.’ She breathes, begging for me to not make this more stressful than it already is.

‘So, I work on this new cost-cutting project and then I get my—’

‘Who said it was a cost-cutting project?’

‘You said that there was cost-cutting and—’

‘No, the project is a new revenue stream thing. The cost-cutting has been sorted.’

‘You’ve not actually hired my nan to make the cardigans, have you? Because—’

‘We’re moving upstairs.’

‘... she’s dead.’

My words cut across Amanda’s.

‘Sorry, what did you say?’ My heart is now galloping in my chest.

‘Now don’t freak out ...’ She holds her hands up like I’m a horse about to bolt. ‘But the senior management team have decided to merge the two offices.’

‘WHAT?!’

‘I said don’t freak out.’

‘I know, but back-office has been in the basement for ages.’

‘Not anymore.’ She looks deadly serious. ‘They’re getting rid of it.’

‘But we don’t have anything to do with upstairs. It’s like two different companies.’

‘They think it will be a good time to develop a more integrated approach.’

‘But we’re like chalk and cheese,’ I argue.

‘Yes, but chalk and cheese both cost money and we can only afford one pantry.’

‘Who keeps chalk in a pantry?’

‘You know what I mean.’ Amanda sighs, shaking her head. ‘Look, Kate, I’ve spent weeks trying to work out whether there’s another way, but this is happening. This is it.’

‘But there’s people down here that wouldn’t *want* to work for Poster if we didn’t sit separately. The people, the ethos . . . that’s as much a part of our jobs as anything nowadays.’

‘Either we merge offices and lose some people who don’t think they can stomach working up there, or we don’t and lose even more. There’s been more than enough room to merge the teams since Gareth’s initial reshuffle and that was *years* ago.’

I want to ask why he didn’t merge the offices back then and put us out of our misery sooner, but I already know that Gareth takes great pride in the tenth floor being used for the ‘outward facing roles’ of Poster only: aka the employees he wants external people to see. Clearly, he’s held on to this dream for as long as physically – and financially – possible.

‘Why can’t they move back into *our* office, then?’

‘The tenth floor is bigger.’

‘Not by much.’

‘The tenth floor is *nicer*.’

‘Beauty is in the eye and all that,’ I argue lamely.

‘Okay, they heard about the mouse problem.’

‘Maurice is not a mouse problem. He’s *one* mouse.’

‘Kate . . . ’ She says my name like a mother might to her child. ‘This is happening.’

‘When?’

‘Two weeks today.’

‘Okay, and I’m supposed to just go back to my desk and pretend that it isn’t?’ I ask, feeling sick to my stomach. Toby will lose his shit. So will Blair.

I’ve tried to give the Poster People a chance. We all have. So many times. And each time we’ve been met with the same cold, judgemental, arrogant responses.

‘No, there’ll be a company-wide announcement that goes around this afternoon.’

‘Okay.’

‘And no, you’re not going back to your desk right now.’

‘Okay?’

‘You’re coming up to tenth with me.’

‘Okay,’ I echo, though right now, *nothing* about this feels okay.

Chapter Two

‘You ready?’ Amanda turns around to face me as models and wannabe models swarm into the front entrance of Poster House.

No, I’m not ready, I silently reply with narrowed eyes, my heart racing in time to the hurried click-clack of Manolos and Moschinos surrounding me on all sides. I imagine this is what it feels like to be a mouse trapped within a herd of giraffes.

‘Kate?’

She repeats my name again, reaching to pull the scrunchy holding her red hair high on her head so that it cascades down one side effortlessly, her chameleon-like tendencies transforming her into front-of-house material in an instant. It would take a lot more than a hair-flick for me to transform the boxy, black M&S pant suit and six-year-old ballet pumps that I decided to wear today. I pull my coat further around myself. Looking about me, I take in the open jackets of the Poster People passing by, the ones that clearly don’t feel the cold; underneath them, I catch flashes of fuchsia blouses and simple white t-shirts tucked into jeans so ripped that they should be sold half-price and wonder why I still feel like

the one who hasn't made any effort. Dressing smart helps me think smart.

'Are you sure this is necessary?' I ask, as a bony elbow juts into my side. The woman who has just bumped into me doesn't even look up from her phone, her cortado-sized take-away coffee cup managing to make her look even more like a giant blessed by the gods.

'As necessary as keeping your job?'

Amanda makes a persuasive point.

'No, I mean . . . me coming upstairs now . . . Can't it wait until . . . ?'

I look down at my outfit, hating the fact that just standing outside the front of the ornate ten-storey building is making me feel like I need to level up somehow. It has been ages since I've been up there, always managing to avoid trips to the tenth floor like the plague, sending reports via email or simply sending Blair or Toby or someone else. Each time they return to the basement, the reviews are the same. *Treated like a foreigner or overlooked completely. Hostile environment. Would not recommend to a friend.*

'I really had to stick my neck out,' Amanda begins, as another gorgeous, giraffe-like creature strides past us, 'to get you onto this new project. And Georgina wanted to meet you today, just to make sure you're the right fit.'

'Unlikely,' I mutter, feeling more childlike with every passing moment.

'Come on, Kate. You know someone up there has seen something in you before.'

The guy from my first summer mixer flashes through my mind for the first time in ages, as if after all this time the embarrassment

of that moment is entrapped on the tenth floor, refusing to be released. And the conversation Amanda had with me shortly afterwards? The memory of it has become a bit like a bruise: something you forget about until someone gives it a poke. How was I supposed to know that my mystery man was an intern? That romance in the office is not forbidden, but it is frowned upon? And yet, for some reason, telling Amanda that the kiss she *thinks* she drunkenly saw didn't actually happen, in that particularly awkward moment, felt more embarrassing than her warning not to get romantically entangled with anyone from work in the first place. Either way, any entanglements had come undone.

'Who? Who saw something in me?' I push the memory to the basement of my mind.

'Well, they gave you the job in the first place, didn't they?'

'You gave me the job,' I laugh, forcing my legs towards the entrance.

'No,' she smiles, buoyed by the fact I'm finally moving forwards. 'I convinced them to give you the job, but you needed four yeses to make the cut.'

'Like *X Factor*.'

'You had it, baby,' she laughs, pressing both hands to the revolving door, which I know spins incessantly throughout the day as we can hear the heel-clacks downstairs. I step into the same compartment as her, feeling like my whole world is spinning as we head inside.

'Floor three?' A man in the lift takes one look at me. I scan the logos printed against each floor number, highlighting the external offices that exist between the two sides of Poster: three is a kitchenware marketing firm. First time I've been typecast for that role.

‘Ten, please,’ Amanda corrects him, as I notice that the Poster logo isn’t even listed next to the basement floor, our offices simply afforded a big non-descript ‘B’. I guess the days of being out of sight and out of mind are soon to become a thing of the past.

One, two, three, four, five. I watch the floor numbers ascend, trying my best not to think about that mixer, that guy, the way the laughter of the staff upstairs had played on my mind all weekend before Lucy finally convinced me it was no big deal. The only good thing about Amanda’s warning – *I’ve seen countless colleagues held back from rising through the ranks by getting down and dirty in the office* – was learning that his internship had come to an end. Not that he was ever the issue. The issue is that I’m still here, still not a director, simply ‘earning my keep’, when I’m part of the team keeping this place in business.

‘You ready?’

I wish Amanda would stop asking me that. Even so, the lift doors are opening and I’m stepping out onto the tenth floor of Poster House for the first time in weeks, maybe even months. The ceiling-to-floor windows flood the open space with light, the hubbub of Oxford Street down below mirrored by the goings-on inside the room: long legs striding the length of the office with purpose, other people gathering in groups, laughing into freshly bought lattes. Every time I come up here, I’m surprised to see it set out as a proper office. Long gone are the flower arches and dance floor of the summer party, but the room feels no less decadent for it, with long glass tables spanning from window to wall, state-of-the-art MacBook Pros lined up along them for as far as the eye can see. Each time I begrudgingly visit it manages to be both exactly as I remember it and yet

completely different, like an ageing woman who is constantly modifying herself to look precisely as she always has. I recall it instantly, but every time it feels fresh and shiny and new.

‘Told you this floor is nicer,’ she whispers.

‘Nicer looking, at least.’

‘Now, *you* be nice. It’s been ages since you were up here. Things change.’

Following Amanda across the open-plan space in the direction of the cornered-off offices and meeting rooms at the back of the floor, I find myself subconsciously holding my breath, waiting to work out whether today is an imposter or invisible day. Not one person looks up from their newly delivered avocado on toast or freshly baked pastries.

‘Mandy!’ A young woman pops her head out of a meeting-room door as soon as we come into her sight through the tall glass windows. *Mandy?* I crinkle my nose in Amanda’s direction and she narrows her eyes in response, as if to say, *Don’t you start.*

‘George.’ Amanda smiles in return, opening her arms for a half-hearted hug.

‘Now, Mandy, you know I prefer Georgina,’ she says playfully. Amanda stiffens at my side, making me think that she’s said the same thing about her own full name a time or two. ‘I’m so glad you could make it; this office merger is going to be really . . . something.’

Something sounds about right.

‘Come in.’ She beckons Amanda into the room, where four velvet office chairs, each a different shade of green, are pulled around a mahogany table. ‘And where is Catherine?’

Amanda and I look at each other. Clearly, today I am invisible.

‘Oh, *this* is Catherine.’ Georgina beams, pulling a chair out

for me with arms so slim that I am surprised she's able to move the office furniture at all. Who did she think I was? Amanda's shadow? 'I'm Georgina, I'm the Managing Director here.'

I know exactly who she is. For starters, I sit next to the person who uploads the directors' photos and bios to the website downstairs (updated regularly lest anyone changes a hairstyle), and then there's the fact that she's met me before, more than once in the past two years she's been working here. Amanda may want me to be more visible, but at this rate I'm not quite sure what that's going to take: twenty meetings, a candle-lit dinner, a full-on snog?

'I'm *Kate*, Senior Data Analyst.' I re-introduce myself.

'Kate is the best data analyst we have working downstairs,' Amanda chips in. I'm not sure whether to feel pleased or patronised; she's looking at me like she's one step away from sticking my latest report on her fridge.

'Wow,' Georgina replies, without an ounce of *wow* in her voice, before sitting down in a chair across from us, her loose-fitting silk dress revealing more of her fashionably flat chest. She looks young: really young, younger than me. And yet, here she is, Managing Director at Poster, when I can't manage to get promoted or leave or even upgrade my M&S suit.

'I'm so pleased that you were able to make it up here today.'

Georgina makes it sound as if ascending to the tenth floor is akin to climbing Everest. Right now, I think I'd rather be sweating it out in the snow.

'We're really excited by the prospect of working alongside our support staff . . .' Her sentence trails off and for a moment I think she's self-correcting, that she's realising just how preposterous calling the people who build and maintain our website

‘support staff’ is, when selling products via our site is what we do. Then, I see what she’s looking at. Gareth Grey, CEO, walking towards us, his oversized suit jacket billowing behind him and layered over a tight black polo neck tucked into perfectly tailored trousers. He looks like Poster personified, as does the woman walking behind him: curly blonde hair tied up into a bouncy ponytail that falls down her exposed, bronzed back, her backless blouse paired down with dark, ripped jeans. Is she not *freezing*? She’s so vivacious that she makes Georgina look like a fuddy-duddy grandma.

‘Georgina?’ Amanda pulls her attention back into the room. If Georgina is perturbed by the gorgeous creature that has just swanned past us with the CEO, there’s no hope for the rest of us. I may as well pack up and go home. I *want* to pack up and go home.

‘Yes, yes.’ Georgina is flustered and yet still manages to look flawless. ‘What was I saying? That’s right – we’re really excited to have you all on board.’

We’ve always been on board. We’re keeping the ship afloat.

‘And we can’t wait to use the office merger as an opportunity to really mix things up around here, to develop a more integrated and interdepartmental approach to our work.’

This sounds like a spiel, one that wasn’t written by her.

‘Kate . . .’ She turns her full attention to me, bony elbows pressed into the wooden tabletop. ‘We’d love for you to help develop a new microsite.’

‘A new microsite? But that’s not what I do.’

Amanda crosses her legs, kicking me under the table. I suspect it’s intentional.

‘Oh, I know what you *do*.’

Does she, though? Ten minutes ago, she didn't even know who I was.

'But we want real user data to feed into every decision we make, from how the site looks to the items that are listed. We've been working in silos for far too long.'

Sure, what she's saying makes sense, but our silos are comfortable, cosy, safe.

'Amanda and I have joined together to highlight small inter-departmental groups that can work closely together to really create something . . .'

What is it with Georgina and her nondescript *somethings*? Then I see what she's looking at: Gareth Grey closing the automatic blinds around his office, seeking privacy.

' . . . something magical.' She finally forces the words out.

'So, who will I be working with?' It feels like I'm asking on someone else's behalf, like my body is here but my brain has already left the building.

'Our new Innovation Executive,' Georgina explains, eyes oscillating between me, Amanda, and the CEO's closed office blinds.

'Innovation Executive?' I echo back to her. Is that even a job?

'It's a new role.'

'I thought you said there was a freeze on new roles?' I turn to Amanda, a pained smile pinned to my face.

'Gareth Grey can make exceptions,' she replies, her own teeth gritted into a grin. I can tell that she doesn't agree with Gareth's 'one rule for them and one rule for me' way of doing things around here and it momentarily makes me hate this place even more.

'So, me and this innovation person develop a new microsite?'

‘Along with one of our creative managers,’ she nods. ‘And if it is successful—’

‘*When* it is successful,’ Amanda corrects, always having my back.

‘We’ll set the website live and you can really make your mark on Poster.’ Georgina smiles. ‘And if it doesn’t work—’

‘Which it *will*,’ Amanda chips in again.

‘... we’ll have to make some more cuts.’

No pressure, then.

‘I’ll brief you fully on the project when the office merger is complete, but for now I’d love to introduce you to the colleagues you’ll be working more closely with.’

‘It’s okay, I can wait,’ I begin, mentally planning my exit strategy from this place, from this organisation, for the umpteenth time since I first started working here. But almost immediately the logical side of my brain begins to pipe up: *You’ve worked too hard for too long to give up on the plan now.*

Amanda coughs loudly.

‘I mean, I *can’t* wait,’ I correct.

‘Good, because here’s one of them now.’

Together, Amanda and I follow Georgina’s gaze behind us and out through the sheets of glass into the open-plan space to see a statuesque figure striding towards us.

No, no, no. I double-take, my pulse starting to race. It *can’t* be. I look from his broad shoulders to his glossy brown hair, higher on the top, shorter at the sides, and then to his strong, square jaw; he looks an awful lot like the intern from the summer mixer all those years ago. I force my eyes to focus, praying with every step he takes towards us that he morphs into someone other than the once-mystery man who rejected

me in the most public of ways. But he's looking more and more like him . . . devastatingly gorgeous, like *him*.

A stupidly handsome half-smile turns up the corners of his mouth as he nods at a triplet of pretty women gathered around a computer and then turns back to a now-standing Georgina as he raises a large open palm in her direction, following her signal to step into her office. The office that I am in. The office that I now desperately want to get out of.

'Are you okay?' Amanda whispers, eyeing up my shaking hand as it tries its best to smooth down my suit, as if the laying of hands will miraculously turn me into a model. The fact she doesn't twig that this is the man from the mixer shows just how long ago it was, perhaps how tipsy we all were as well.

'I'm actually not feeling so good,' I say, forcing myself to stand precariously on my now-shaking legs, the room spinning around me. This shouldn't matter; he shouldn't matter. But the way he looked at me back then, the way *they* looked at me, like I would never measure up, like I would never make the cut, makes me really want to prove him wrong. And I've never known anyone show someone up whilst wearing a tired, ill-fitting suit, worn black ballet pumps and not a scrap of makeup on their face.

'You look awful,' she goes on, as if I need the confirmation. 'Georgina, can we leave the introductions to another day?'

'Sure thing, but . . .'

I turn to race out of the office but instead hit something hard, strong.

'Oh crap, sorry . . .'

 He begins to mumble as my cheek accidentally makes contact with his chest. 'I didn't see you

there . . .' He pulls away to look down at me, my now exposed cheeks burning bright red.

'It's okay, I . . .' I begin, daring to look into his big blue-grey eyes.

I see them widen in recognition, his dimples deepening as he looks me up and down, only inches away from him.

'You've *got* to be kidding me.' My whisper escapes between us.

His smile vanishes instantly and he stalls for a moment before taking a decisive step back, as if the Poster People were sniggering at him for fraternising with the 'help' all over again.

'Catherine, allow me to introduce you to . . .'

Georgina's voice trails into silence as she clocks the intensity of our stand-off.

'Sorry, do, erm . . . do you guys know each other?'

'No—'

'Yes.' My answer cuts over his. Great, so he doesn't even remember me? 'Well, erm . . . not really.' I continue, his eyes widening even further at the awkwardness of it all.

'But you have met?' She tries to understand the increasing frostiness between us.

'Once,' he says.

'Briefly,' I add.

'Okay, well, in that case, perhaps a refresher would be helpful.' Georgina's already relentless positivity shoots into overdrive as she tries to steer our introduction back on track. She probably thinks we've brushed shoulders in the lifts or something. She has no idea that this isn't the first time that my mystery man has looked at me like a stranger, or an alien, like the way he seems to be sizing me up and finding me wanting now.

But I don't want him. I can't, I *won't*.

‘This is Harry, one of our leading creative managers.’ She’s practically singing the words over the quiet hum of hate seemingly searing between us now. I look him up and down, his body still squared up to mine like we’re in some unspoken staring match. He’s wearing dark jeans, turned up at the cuffs, his exposed too-white socks signalling that he’s the kind of man who wears and disposes of a new pack every day rather than bother himself with looking after them; I don’t need to imagine that he’ll be the same way with women.

‘And this is Catherine; she’s a data analyst from the basement.’

Catherine? Mandy? Is taking it upon herself to lengthen and shorten people’s names at will some sort of Poster People power move?

‘*Senior* data analyst.’ I make a lame power play of my own.

‘Nice to meet you.’ He thrusts his hand into the space between us. Nice to meet me? So, now he’s backtracking on his admission that we’ve met before?

‘Charmed,’ I force through my clenched jaw. I reach my hand out and he takes my fingers in his, shaking them in a firm handshake that manages to send shivers up my spine, transporting me to the moment when he first drunkenly laced his fingers through mine.

‘Sure,’ he shrugs, reclaiming his hand and any electricity that sparks between us.

‘You guys will be working closely together after the merger,’ Georgina goes on.

‘Excellent,’ Harry says, deadpan.

‘Can’t wait.’ I force a smile, my words dripping with sarcasm.

Amanda’s head jolts between us like she’s watching the Wimbledon finals.

‘This isn’t going to . . . erm . . .’ Georgina struggles to retain her shininess as I shuffle from foot to foot and Harry stares into my soul. ‘. . . be a problem? This will be fun, right?’

‘No.’

‘Yes.’ Harry’s answer cuts over mine this time as he folds his arms in front of him.

‘No, this isn’t going to be a problem,’ I correct, my feist finally consuming my carefully crafted career plans. I repeat it to myself: this is *not* going to be a problem. Because in two weeks’ time, when the office merger happens, I’m going to be long gone. Working somewhere else, for something that matters. Working a long way away from people like him.

‘Yes.’ Harry looks to Georgina, dismissing me again. ‘This is going to be fun.’

His blazing eyes turn back to me, narrowed in suspicion, lingering over the clenched fist that is pressed against my slightly popped hip. Then, they turn away. They’re looking past me, gazing out of the room to the bouncy-haired backless-blouse-wearing blonde who has just emerged from Gareth Grey’s office. And I find myself invisible all over again.