

PROLOGUE

He is fighting. He is fighting for his life—but so is she. She is neck-deep in the water; there is salt in her eyes, water in her lungs, and she is gasping, choking, unable to breath.

His body is hard and muscled and stronger than she had ever imagined possible, thrashing like a pinned beast beneath the water.

And as she struggles against him, she knows two things, knows them to be piercingly, desperately true—one, it is him or her, and if she lets go, she will be the one drowning under the waves.

And two, to kill someone this way, you have to want them to die with every ounce of your being.

The question is: Does she? Does she want him to die?

PART ONE

THE CALM

02/15—02:13 a.m.

Hello. Hello?

CHAPTER 1

“I cannot, repeat cannot, go to a desert island,” I said. I didn’t look up at Nico, who was hovering behind my chair. Instead, I continued to stare at the computer screen, trying to make sense of the spreadsheet in front of me. One thing was for sure, the data definitely didn’t show the kind of correlation Professor Bianchi had been hoping for when he hired me. This was my third attempt, and I could no longer ignore the sinking feeling in my stomach. Something was very wrong.

“But Lyla, I’m telling you, it’s the opportunity of a lifetime. Reality TV. *Reality TV*.”

“It could be the opportunity of the millennium, Nic. I can’t go with you. How am I going to get the time off?” Was there a pattern I wasn’t seeing? Maybe if I tried adding in the previous results? “But don’t let me hold you back; you go. I’ll cheer you on from here.”

“Were you not listening?” Nico asked, the pleading in his voice now tinged with a touch of testiness. “I can’t go on my own. It’s a *cou-
ples* TV show. Lyla, I don’t ask for much, but Ari thinks this is make-or-break for my career. I won’t get a chance like this again. You know how long I’ve been banging my head against the wall, auditioning for God knows what— This could be it. This could be my big break.”

I pulled up the spreadsheet of the last batch of samples, clicked to plot the data again, and as the graph filled out, Nico exploded.

“Lyla! For fuck’s sake, are you even listening to me? This is the turning point of my career and you can’t turn off your laptop for thirty seconds?”

I took a deep breath. My mother's voice sounded in my ear: *Get your head out of your phone, Lyla. . .*

I saved the file and swung my chair round to face my boyfriend.

"I'm sorry. You're right. I wasn't listening. Tell me about it properly."

"It's a new reality show. Not much of a prize, because it's being done on a shoestring budget for a brand-new streaming channel, but it's going to be their flagship launch original, and if it takes off, the exposure could be through the roof. And Ari knows the producer, Baz. They went to uni together. Ari says he can get me in through the back door. Us, I mean."

"And, sorry, what's the concept?"

"Five couples on a desert island. Elimination format, counting down over ten weeks. I'm not sure where, Ari was saying something about Indonesia? It's kind of *Love Island* meets *Survivor*—you have to stay coupled up to stay in. Sun, sand, sea . . . come on, Lyl! It's just what we both need. A proper holiday."

"But it's not a holiday, is it? And how long did you say this would take? Ten *weeks*? Starting when?"

Nico shrugged.

"No idea, but it sounded like they're in a hurry. Ari was asking about my calendar over the next couple of months. I told him there was nothing I couldn't move."

I sighed.

"I'm really sorry, Nico, maybe *your* calendar is empty, but mine isn't. There's no way I can just take off for the remainder of my contract, you know I can't. Professor Bianchi would sack me, and then how would we pay the rent?"

Not with Nico's meager snippets of income as an aspiring actor and part-time barista, was the unspoken coda, though I didn't say it. But Nico was shaking his head.

"But Lyla, that's the point. If I got this, it'd be real exposure. I could be a household name by the end of the series, we'd be talk-

ing TV roles, film, ads—you name it. It'd be proper money—regular money. *House-buying* money. I could take some of the pressure off you. Come on, Lyl, think about it. Please?"

He pushed my laptop out of the way and moved to sit on the desk in front of me, holding out his arms, and I leaned into his embrace, resting my forehead on his chest, feeling the familiar mix of exasperation and love.

I loved Nico, I really did. And not just because he was funny, charming, and extremely hot—definitely an eight or nine to my six. But he was also an incurable optimist, whereas I was a very firm rationalist. His habit of convincing himself that every rainbow ended in a pot of gold just for him—a habit that had seemed so endearing when we first met—had started to grate after two years together. Two years of me footing the bills and doing the admin and generally acting the grown-up, while Nico chased opportunities that somehow never *quite* materialized.

This sounded like another one of his pie-in-the-sky dreams, just like the West End musical of *Twilight* that no one had cleared the rights to, and just like his plan to become a YouTube acting coach. There had been so many schemes that had come to nothing, so many shows canceled before their first episode and pilots that never got off the ground. But if I pointed any of that out, *I* would be the bad guy. I'd be the person who had denied Nico his chance.

"Can I at least tell Ari you'll meet with the producers?" Nico said, his breath warm against the top of my head. I shut my eyes, knowing that if I looked at him, at his brown puppy-dog eyes and pleading expression, I'd be lost. What I *wanted* to say was that there seemed precious little chance of this getting past the first meeting, when the producers would presumably meet me and realize I wasn't the big-boobed hottie they were looking for. Reality TV wasn't exactly my usual entertainment fare, but I'd watched enough to know there was a certain physical type for female contestants, and that I didn't fit it. Nico—with his gym-toned body and salon-tanned skin—he

was different. He'd have fitted in fine on *The Bachelorette* or *Perfect Match*. But me? Were they really going to look at a thirtysomething scientist with fingers stained purple from protein gels and a permanent frown line from squinting into a microscope, and think, *We want to see her jogging down the beach in a skimpy bikini?* Unlikely.

On the other hand . . . if it was never going to happen . . . would it really matter if I strung Nico along for a bit longer? Then, when I got rejected, or the whole thing finally stalled in development, this Baz guy could be the baddie, and I'd get to be the supportive girlfriend. Until the next hopelessly naive scheme materialized, anyway.

I opened my eyes, trying to think what to say, but instead I found my gaze straying to the glowing screen of my laptop. I couldn't read the figures because Nico had shoved the computer to the far side of my desk. But that didn't matter. They were there, and I knew it. Inconvenient. Incontrovertible. Unignorable.

"Please?" Nico said, breaking into my thoughts, and I realized that he was still waiting on my answer. I looked up at him. At his big brown eyes fringed with impossibly long lashes—like a young George Michael. I felt something inside me giving way . . . melting. Oh God, I was going to say yes, and we both knew it.

"Okay," I said at last, feeling my face crack into a reluctant smile. For a moment Nico just stared at me, then he gave a whooping holler and lifted me off my feet, crushing me in a giant bear hug.

"Thank you, thank you, oh my God, *thank you*. I love you, Lyla Santiago!"

"I love you too," I said, laughing down at him. "But you have to get on the show first, okay? So don't count your chickens! I don't want you to be disappointed if you don't get in."

"I'll get in," Nico said, setting me down and kissing me firmly on the lips, one hand on either side of my face, his smile so wide it crinkled up his tanned cheeks. "Don't you worry about that, Lyl. I'll get in. We both will. How could they resist?"

I looked up at him, at his broad grin, his white teeth, his sparkling

dark eyes, and I thought how, indeed, could they resist? No one could say no to Nico. I just had to hope Professor Bianchi would feel the same way.

02/15—02:13 a.m.

Hello? I'm not sure how this thing works, but this is Lyla, to the *Over Easy*, over.

02/15—02:14 a.m.

Hello, is anyone receiving this? This is Lyla to the *Over Easy*, please come in. Over.

CHAPTER 2

“Oh dear.” Professor Bianchi’s face had gone from cheerful to depressed as I talked him through the latest batch of data. The findings left by Tony, my predecessor, had been—well, *exciting* was an understatement. If they’d proven reproducible, they would have represented a major breakthrough in chikungunya, my specialist area. But they weren’t proving reproducible, and that was a problem.

The annoying thing was that Tony was long gone. He’d published his thesis to ripping excitement and had promptly been headhunted by a private lab for a permanent position. I’d been hired by the university on a one-year contract to tie up the loose ends. In theory, my task was simple: repeat Tony’s experiments with a wider range of samples and prove that the results held up. The problem was, they didn’t. I’d repeated and repeated and repeated until I was blue in the face, but after the third attempt, I’d had to admit it. The effect Tony had found wasn’t just weaker, it wasn’t there at all.

In theory, I'd done my job. Pat on the back. Great work, Lyla. And in theory, disproving a false lead was as valuable and important as finding something new. The problem was that in practice, we all knew that wasn't how it worked. Grant funding didn't go to the scientists who found out something *didn't* work. It went to the groups with sexy new discoveries and results that got everyone talking. No one wanted to publish a paper meticulously outlining the anatomy of a damp squib, no matter how good the research.

In my darker moments, sleepless, at 3 a.m., I'd blamed Tony. Perhaps he'd written his method up wrong. Maybe he'd even faked his results? But in my heart of hearts, and with my scientist's head on, looking at the data, I knew it wasn't Tony's fault. He'd thrown a dozen dice and they'd all returned sixes. Just one of those things, and when I tried again on a much bigger scale, the pattern hadn't held. But I was the one having to break the bad news, and deal with the fallout.

Up until a few weeks ago, I hadn't been worried about the fact that my contract at the university was about to expire—Professor Bianchi had more or less assured me that obtaining further funding was a formality. Now . . . well, now I could tell from his expression that I should be polishing up my CV. And I wasn't looking forward to explaining at interviews the fact that I'd spent a full twelve months working on a highly exciting project and had absolutely fuck all to show for it.

"You'd better write it up," Professor Bianchi said a little wearily. "And then we'll have to see whether there's anything that can be salvaged from it. Maybe something will come out of Gregor's animal modeling."

I bit my lip and nodded.

"I'm sorry," I said again, and Professor Bianchi shrugged, the philosophical shrug of a man with tenure who'd wanted this to work out but hadn't hung his career on it.

"Not your fault, Lyla."

"What do you think it means for the funding renewal?"

“Ah. Good point. Your contract’s up next month, isn’t it?”

“March, in fact,” I said quietly. “Ten weeks.”

Professor Bianchi nodded.

“I’ll speak to the grant committee. But . . .” he trailed off. *Don’t make any big purchases in the meantime*, was the strong implication.

I forced a smile.

“Sure. Thanks. Listen, I . . .” I swallowed. Now wasn’t the time I’d have chosen to ask for time off, but in a way it didn’t matter. I could write up the paper just as well on Nico’s desert island as I could here, and I might as well take my holiday entitlement before the contract ended. “Would now be a bad time for me to take some leave? Nico, my boyfriend, he’s been invited on this—” I stopped. I wasn’t 100 percent sure Professor Bianchi knew what a reality TV show was. The one time I’d referred to *Big Brother* he’d assumed I was talking about George Orwell. And it didn’t exactly fit with the responsible in-demand professional image I was trying to project. “On a work trip,” I finished. “He’s asked me to come along. I can write the paper there; it’s probably easier than trying to fit it in around lab work.”

“Sure,” Professor Bianchi said, and his face . . . did I imagine a flicker of relief? “Of course. And hopefully by the time you come back I’ll have heard from the grant committee. Thanks again, Lyla, for all your work on this. I know it’s never easy coming in with disappointing results.”

“You’re welcome,” I said. And then, since the interview was plainly over, I showed myself out of his office.

I SPENT THE BUS RIDE back to east London watching the winter rain trickle down the steamed-up windows and considering my choices. I was thirty-two. All around me friends from university were buying up houses, settling down, having kids. My mum’s jokes about grandbabies had started to become slightly pointed. But here I was, stuck in a cycle of short-term post-docs that didn’t seem to be going

anywhere. Once, I'd dreamed of heading up my own team, my own *lab*, even. Talks about the dearth of women in STEM had made it all seem so possible—funding committees were crying out for driven female scientists, we were told.

In truth though, there'd been a healthy proportion of women in my cohort, at least when I started out. My first two bosses in the lab had been women. But the funding committees didn't look any more kindly on us than they did on the men, and as the years ground on, more and more of my colleagues had been forced out by the reality of life in academic research. Maternity leave didn't mesh well with funding deadlines and the pressurized race to results. Babies didn't mix with tissue cultures that needed constant tending, cell lines that had to be split at ten o'clock at night, five in the morning, endless round-the-clock work, or else they'd wither and die. And mortgage providers didn't like the uncertainty of short-term contracts. Every time I started a new job there was a narrow window of security when I was out of the probation period, but not yet under statutory notice of redundancy—and it never seemed to be long enough to get a foot on the ladder. Combined with Nico's feast-or-famine line of work (and there'd been precious little feasting over the two years we'd been together), it made for a stressful existence. And the longer I'd been in the field, the more I realized that there was a ticking clock, and not just one relating to babies. The career pyramid for science was shallow—many researchers, very few lab heads—and the competition was astonishingly fierce. If you didn't tick certain boxes by the time you were in your thirties, you just weren't going to make it.

Maybe it was time to throw in the towel, admit once and for all that the dreams I'd held when I left uni were never going to happen. That I was never going to be able to fund my own lab. That Professor Lyra Santiago was never going to exist, would never give the keynote address at a prestigious academic conference, or be interviewed on *This Week in Virology*. With every year that ticked by, it was looking increasingly likely that I'd be forever a lowly post-doc, scrabbling

around for my next short-term contract. And maybe it was time to face up to that and figure out what to do.

It didn't help that Nico was only twenty-eight and decidedly not ready to settle down in any way. He'd barely changed from the cute, wannabe actor I'd met almost three years ago at a friend's "Valentine's Day Massacre" horror-themed party for pissed-off singletons. He'd been a disturbingly sexy Freddie Kruger, I'd cheated and borrowed a lab coat from work, spattered it with some fake blood. We'd mixed Bloody Marys in the kitchen, watched *Friday the 13th* on my friend's couch, shrieking and hugging each other during the jump scares, and ended up snogging in the bathroom. The next day my friend had ribbed me about pulling out of my league.

For six months I'd almost forgotten his existence, the only reminder the occasional thirst-trap photos he posted on Instagram. They were . . . I mean, they were easy on the eye, I had to admit it, and they made a nice break to my workday. I'd be flicking through my phone on coffee break, and there would be Nico, sweatily tousled at the gym, all crunched abs and tangled dark hair. On the bus back from the university, there he'd be again, sprawled on a beach in the Algarve, tiny swim shorts stretched across his hips, smirking up at the camera from behind mirrored shades.

For half a year that was it—me single, bored, head down at work, barely thinking about the handsome actor I'd groped in my friend's bathroom. And then one day, out of the blue, I posted an Instagram photo of myself. It was uncharacteristic. My normal feed was dinners I'd cooked and funny memes about the hell of working in academia. But I'd ordered a dress online and when it turned up it was almost comically undersized, the skirt just skimming my thighs, my boobs spilling out of the top. I posted it as a funny "what I ordered / what I got" pic, but I was aware that, while I wasn't going to keep the dress, it also wasn't exactly unflattering. It was about as un-me as it was possible to get, but it also squeezed me in the right places, and my tits did look pretty awesome.

The first comment was from Nico—just a string of chili peppers that made me laugh.

And the second was a reply from him to his own comment. It just said “Drink?”

A drink turned into drinks, which turned into dancing, which turned into tequila slammers and drunken snogging and, eventually, a shared Uber (which Nico promised to split, but never did). Nico, it turned out, lived around the corner from me in a house share in Dalston, but that night we ended up at my place—and, well, somehow he never quite moved out.

Two and a half years later, I was older, wiser, and considerably more jaded—facing up to the realities of living in one of the most expensive cities in the world on a researcher’s salary. My rent had gone up. My pay had not. I had started to think about plan B. Maybe even plan C. But Nico was still dreaming of Tinseltown, still refusing to sell his dinner jacket in case he one day needed to attend the BAFTAs or the Grammys. Nico was still fighting, still hustling for his dreams, and most days that was part of what I liked about him—his relentless optimism, his faith that one day his ship would come in.

But on a day like today, the grayest kind of gray London day, when even the sun seemed to have given up and gone back to bed, that optimism was a little hard to take.

When I got off the bus at Hackney Wick, the rain had turned to a stinging sleet, and I realized I’d left my umbrella at the lab. I half jogged the twenty minutes from the bus stop, trying to shield my laptop from the worst of it, then stumped wearily up the three flights to our little flat in the rafters of a Victorian terrace house. When I had first brought Nico here, we’d run up, laughing, only stopping to kiss on the landing turns. Now I was chilled to the bone, and each flight felt steeper than the last. I had to will myself up the last set to my front door, and when I finally reached the top, it took me three tries for my numb fingers to get the key in the lock.

“I’m home!” I called as I peeled off my wet coat, though the flat

was so small—just a bedroom, a bathroom, and an everything-else room—that I didn't really need to raise my voice.

The words had hardly left my lips when Nico appeared, mobile pressed to his ear, motioning me to keep quiet.

"Of course," he was saying, in what I thought of as his *actor* voice, deeper, smoother, and more assured than he would have sounded on the phone to his mum or a mate. "Sure. Absolutely. Absolutely." There was a long pause, with the person on the other side evidently saying something, and Nico nodding with an attentive expression on his tanned, handsome face that was totally wasted on the person on the other end. At last, after a short back-and-forth of goodbyes, he hung up and danced down the hallway to throw his arms around me, lifting me up and whirling me around.

"Nico!" I managed. His grip was suffocatingly strong, and in the narrow hallway my foot caught the mirror as he swung me round, making it swing dangerously against the wall. "Nico, for God's sake, put me *down!*"

He set me on my feet, but I could see that my reaction hadn't dented his mood. He was grinning all over his face, his dark eyes quite literally sparkling with excitement. That expression had always seemed like the worst kind of cliché to me—from a scientific point of view, it's not possible for eyes to change their reflective properties because something fun has happened—but I had to admit it was the only apt description for Nico right now.

"That was Baz," he said. "The producer of *One Perfect Couple*."

"The producer of what?"

"That's its name." Nico flicked his fringe out of his eyes. "The show. I told you."

"You didn't, but okay."

"I *did*. But anyway, that's not the point. The point is I sent him some pics and he *loves* both of us—"

"Wait, you sent over photos of me?" I was taken aback, but Nico was barely listening.

“—and he definitely wants to set up a meeting. He said we’re exactly the kind of couple they’re looking for. They want real authenticity, not the usual *Love Island* types.”

“Real authenticity?” I looked down at myself—crumpled T-shirt, wet jeans, old Converse for working in the lab. “Is that code for *needs a wax and to lose five pounds off her arse?*”

“Actually, he said you reminded him of Zooey Deschanel,” Nico said. “And by the way, your arse is perfect.”

“I notice you didn’t comment on the wax.”

“Look, stop taking the piss. *You’re* perfect, okay? I think so, and Baz agrees. He really likes that you’re a scientist. He said having an egghead on the show would be good for ratings, and as far as your arse goes, he said you were g—” he stopped, stumbled over whatever he’d been about to say, and then finished, “very good-looking.”

“Okay, clearly that’s not what he actually said, Nico. Spit it out.”

“I, um . . . I can’t remember his exact words,” Nico said, but his ears were reddening, his invariable tell whenever he was lying, and I began to tickle him, digging my fingers into his ribs and the soft skin beneath his collar.

“Nico, what did he say?”

“Stop it!” he ordered, ducking away from me and trying not to laugh. “Lyla! I’m warning you—”

“So tell me what he said! If I’m going on this show—”

“If?”

“*If*. I have a right to know what the producer thinks of me. Or should I ask him?”

“Stop tickling me!”

“I’ll stop when you tell me what he said!”

“All right, all right! He said you were . . . *girl-next-door fuckable*.” He spoke the words slightly shamefacedly, acknowledging my reaction even before my expression of disgust had formed.

“What? That’s gross!”

“He didn’t mean it that way,” Nico added hastily, aware that he’d

made a faux pas and anxious that I didn't turn against the idea of going on the show. "He said I'm *fantasy first boyfriend*, if it makes you feel better."

"What? No! It doesn't make me feel better! That's gross too, you're twenty-eight. You shouldn't be anyone's first boyfriend!"

"Fantasy, Lyl! That's the point. You know, when you're thirteen and you want a kissable poster on your bedroom wall—someone sexy but not too threatening. Zac Efron. Jacob Elordi. Personally, I think I'm a bit too old as well." He threw a glance at what I knew was his own reflection in the mirror over my shoulder, appraising the laugh lines that were just starting to form at the corners of his eyes. "But you know, he's just talking *types*, not saying that's how *he* thinks of us."

"Still." I was barely mollified. *Girl-next-door* fuckable. *Girl-next-door fuckable?* Was it a compliment? No matter which word I put the stress on, it didn't feel like one. "What else did he say? Any news on dates?"

Nico nodded.

"They want to move fast. It's for a new reality TV network that's launching later this year, so they've got a really tight deadline to get everything filmed and tied up."

"Which means?" I followed him into the room that doubled as our living room and kitchen and watched as he put on the kettle.

"Your guess is as good as mine, but it sounded like they want to start filming in a matter of weeks. He kept saying the word *asap*." He pronounced it as two syllables, *ay-sap*. "*I'll get my assistant onto you asap. The researchers will be in touch asap.* That kind of thing."

"Oh." I was calculating in my head. "I mean . . . from my perspective that's probably a good thing. I can get the time off now, but in a couple of months, who knows. Where are they filming?"

"Well, that's the best bit—they're aiming for the *Love Island* audience, so it's being filmed on this exclusive boutique resort in the Indian Ocean, which sounds pretty sweet."

“Wow.” I was impressed in spite of myself. “I thought Ari said they didn’t have much budget?”

“I don’t think they do. Baz let slip that the resort’s owned by an old school pal of his. It sounds like it’s kind of a new venture—I’m actually not sure it’s open to the public yet—and I got the distinct impression Baz is getting it for free . . . like, PR? You know, if people see the show they’re going to want to travel to the island, that kind of thing.”

“Are we going to turn up and find they’re still building it?”

“Baz’s assistant sent me some pictures of the island,” Nico said, not quite answering my question, but not quite evading it either. He turned off the kettle and opened his phone, passing it to me. While he put tea bags in mugs and poured the water, I clicked on the WhatsApp link—to a site dubiously named “Effing Productions”—and a gallery opened up, the screen turning an almost unbelievable shade of blue that seemed so out of place in our dark little attic that I blinked.

“Wow! Sorry, that has to be a filter.”

“Right? Wait until you get to the coral.”

As I flicked through the pictures, even I had to admit it was not just a filter making this place look good. White sand. Palm trees. Water so clear you could see the fish swimming through it. A scattering of little straw-roofed huts . . . four or five? Maybe six. It was hard to tell, as they were mostly similar and were cleverly situated among the palms so that each looked completely private. Only one stood out—a villa like ones I’d seen in pictures of the Maldives, out over the shimmering water on wooden stilts. Hammocks swung from porches, and inside were white beds scattered with rose petals and immaculate pebble-tiled bathrooms with rainforest showerheads. It was a stark contrast from bleak, rainy east London.

“Holy fuck, Nico. It looks incredible.”

“Doesn’t it?” Nico was smirking. He knew he’d scored a hit with the pictures. “It’s elimination, so we have to commit to minimum two weeks, maximum ten, plus the winner has to agree to do PR on return to the UK. I don’t totally understand the format, but from

what I could make out, each week there's some kind of challenge, and I think the loser is out, and the winner can pick who they couple up with, so the couples shake up every week."

If there had been a soundtrack to our conversation, this would have been followed by a record scratch.

"I'm sorry, *what?* You very much did not mention the recoupling part."

"Didn't I?" Nico looked a little uncomfortable, and more than a little guilty. Judging by his expression, Baz absolutely *had* mentioned it, and he'd deliberately failed to tell me. "I mean, it's not a big deal. It's just for the cameras."

"Are you telling me this is *Love Island*, only the twist is wife swapping?"

"I mean, I don't think anyone taking part is married, so technically—" Nico began, and then saw from my expression that this particular argument was not the one that was going to win me over, and hastily changed tack. "But the point is, it's just to mix things up. You don't *actually* have to shag the person you're coupled up with. It just means you're a couple within the show's format. You could choose to stay coupled with the person you enter the show with, but obviously they're not going to want everyone to do that. I imagine couples who stick together too closely are going to find themselves eliminated in the tasks."

"You mean they'll rig the outcome to get rid of faithful couples?" I knew my voice sounded shocked, and I could hear the primness, but somehow I couldn't stop myself. Nico rolled his eyes.

"Lyl, these things are *always* rigged. It's not *Jeopardy*—nobody's watching this to see how good your general knowledge is. They want drama. They want big characters. They want screaming arguments and people shagging in the jacuzzi for the cameras. Anyone boring is going to get the axe."

"So is that what you'll be doing after I'm gone? Shagging in the jacuzzi?"

“What? No! Stop twisting my words. I didn’t *say* that. I said it has to *look* like that. I’m not going to be shagging anyone. But yeah, maybe I’ll shed a few tears after you’ve gone, talk about how you were my soulmate, cry on some girl’s shoulder while she strokes my hair. I’m a fantasy first boyfriend, remember? That’s what they’ll want from me.”

“And I’m girl-next-door fuckable,” I said with a touch of bitterness. “So what does that leave me doing? Fucking the guy in the next villa?”

“Over my dead body,” Nico said, and now he gripped me by the waist, kissing the side of my neck. “Seriously, Lyl, this is an acting job. That’s why they’re contacting acting agents. You’re not an actor and they know it—they’ll be fine with you failing the first task, maybe the second—you’ll be on a plane home within a fortnight. And I’ll melt everyone’s hearts with how broken I am after you’ve gone, make a strategic friend-zone alliance with some heart-of-gold influencer, and lose with a good grace in the final. And then I’ll come home as the abs that launched a thousand TikToks.”

“Ugh.” I pulled myself out of his grip and picked up the tea he’d left on the side, nursing it as I walked to the window, more to give myself time to think than because I really wanted it. “Nico, I don’t know. I really wish you’d explained all this before I spoke to Professor Bianchi.”

“Wait, you spoke to him?” Nico’s face lit up. I nodded, almost reluctantly.

“I did.”

“And what did he say?”

“He said I could have two weeks, if I wrote up the chikungunya results while I was there.”

“You’re kidding?” Nico’s face had split into a wide, exuberant grin, and now he advanced towards me, his arms held out, and an expression that made me hold out my brimming cup of hot tea.

“Do not even think about bear-hugging me again. I don’t want third-degree burns!”

“But you’ve got the time off? We’re really doing this?”

“Wife swapping?”

“Going on the trip of a lifetime, you idiot!” Nico said. I tried not to smile, but it was impossible not to—Nico’s excitement was so transparent and so infectious that I felt the corners of my mouth twitch despite myself.

“Lyla?”

“I don’t know. I need time to think.”

“Think about what? About an all-expenses-paid trip to paradise?” He fished his phone out of his back pocket and held it up in front of me; the tiny island, white and green, glowing like a pearl-crusted emerald in a sea of blue. “Are you *really* going to turn this down, Lyl?”

I turned my head away from the screen, away from Nico’s pleading face, but it was a mistake—what faced me instead was the soot-streaked skylight lashed with rain.

Why was I holding out on this? What did I really have here other than a shitty job and a shitty commute and absolutely fuck all to look forward to? I couldn’t even hold up Christmas as a carrot to myself—it was January, and the gray London winter stretched out in front of me like a prison sentence—a prison sentence with the unemployment queue waiting at the far end.

Could this really solve everything? If it actually got made—and I was doubtful about that, Nico had been in enough “sure things” for me to know how shaky these promises were—then Nico was right, this really could transform his prospects. And if it didn’t . . . well, it would be two weeks in one of those adorable little huts.

“At least let Ari set up a meeting with Baz,” Nico begged, and I turned my gaze away from the skylight and looked at him, really looked, for the first time in what felt like a long time. I’d been expecting Nico’s trademark knee-weakening smile, but what I got was something far more devastating. He looked . . . worried. And I realized, maybe for the first time, that Nico’s eternal optimism wasn’t as effortless as it looked. That maybe he was facing the same crunch point that

I was, the same realization that if the next roll of the dice didn't come good, he might be out of the game. Maybe this was a last chance for both of us.

I felt myself giving way.

"Okay. I'll talk to Baz."

"Yes!" Nico punched the air. "I fucking love you, Lyla!"

"It's just a meeting! They might not even want me."

"Of course they'll want you. How could anyone not want you? You're a fucking scientific genius *and* you're hot. What more could anyone want?"

A scientific genius wouldn't have ended up in a research dead end with a publication record that had holes in it the size of the Grand Canyon, I thought a little wearily. But Nico was still speaking.

". . . and you know what—I know you can only take two weeks off, but I don't care. *We're* the perfect couple, no matter who takes that prize."

"We are," I said. I put down the cup, stood on tiptoe, and kissed Nico on the lips, feeling his wide smile against my mouth, irresistible even as he kissed me back.

"This is going to change everything." He spoke the words close to my ear as he gathered me into him, squeezing me tight. "I can feel it in my bones."

I could only hope he was right.

02/15—02:14 a.m.

Over Easy, can you hear me? The wind is really picking up and I'm getting seriously concerned. Is there any kind of storm shelter on the island?

02/15—02:16 a.m.

Over Easy, if you're receiving this, please come in, this is urgent. The storm is getting really bad and I think we might need to evacuate. Just now our villa— Oh God!

CHAPTER 3

It's always difficult explaining what you do as a scientist to outsiders—spike proteins and viral entry pathways isn't everyone's cup of tea at the best of times. It's doubly hard when you're on a Zoom call with a group of producers who keep talking off mic. When Baz called me an "egghead" for the second time, I felt my patience snap.

"We tend to prefer scientist," I said a little shortly.

"What's that?" Baz said, leaning into the camera. "I didn't catch that, sweetheart." He had a strong Australian accent, and the screen-name at the bottom of his picture read *Baz—Effing Productions*.

"The egghead thing," I said. "It's just . . . you know, it's not how I tend to describe myself. I'd say scientist. Or, you know, virologist if you want to get down in the weeds."

"Ha," Baz said, grinning widely. He had an extremely '90s tongue piercing, which was distracting on camera. You could see it when he laughed, and he kept playing with it when other people were talking, clicking it against his teeth. "You're funny. I like that."

Funny? Before I could figure out how to explain not just that I wasn't joking, but that I didn't even know what the joke was supposed to be, the conversation moved on to questions about mine and Nico's relationship—how long we'd been together, where we saw ourselves in five years.

"We've been together three years," Nico said, squeezing my hand. I opened my mouth to correct him—we'd *met* three years ago, but we'd actually been together slightly over two, and even that was pushing it. But then I remembered I wasn't at work, and I closed it again. No one was going to quiz us for supporting documentation and calculation methodology.

Nico was still talking and had moved on from first dates to his five-year plan.

“I mean . . . this is hard to answer without sounding either pathetically humble or delusionally ambitious, but I’m an actor—I want to be acting. I guess, you know, thinking about the career paths of people I admire, I see myself very much in the James McAvoy, Adam Driver kind of mold: indie word of mouth, critical acclaim, moving onto mainstream success, but keeping the artistic integrity. A bit of theater here and there, keeping myself artistically grounded, not letting success change my commitment to my craft . . .”

In the corner of the screen I saw Ari shift in his seat.

“. . . what I’m saying is, where’s the *Skins* for my generation? Where are the edgy, authentic depictions of life in your thirties?”

“Uh . . . yeah.” Baz had clearly tuned out and was looking at something his assistant was showing him. “And, uh, Leela, sweetheart, what about you?”

“Me?” I was taken aback. I should have seen the question coming but I’d been so preoccupied by Nico’s answer that I’d failed to anticipate being asked the same thing. “Um, it’s Lyla actually,” I said slowly, buying myself time to think. It wasn’t just that Nico’s answer was sort of delusional—did he really think that he was on an Adam Driver career path? I might as well compare myself to Rosalind Franklin. It was also that not one word of his answer had featured me, or indeed any kind of homelife at all. “Five years. I mean, I—”

I stopped. Where *did* I see myself? In five years I would be thirty-seven. A few weeks ago I might have answered, if not confidently then at least optimistically, heading up a research team on something exciting—dengue, maybe; there was some exciting work on IgA antibodies coming out of the US—with a permanent academic post. I’d have bought a flat somewhere in east London, convenient for my mum to come and stay. Maybe even a little house, if I were prepared to commute. There might be kids on the horizon—if not actual babies, at least the idea of one in the not-too-distant future.

Now, after the conversation I’d had the other day with Professor Bianchi, I honestly wasn’t sure. It felt like I’d screwed my chances

with this project, and I badly needed a few publication credits on my CV—the long gap with no papers was starting to look ominous. And how long it would take me to find another more promising project, get hired, complete the post-doc, write up a couple of papers and get them through the publication hurdles? Three years? That was pushing it. The chikungunya research was supposed to give me a boost onto the next rung of the ladder. Unfortunately, that rung had just broken.

I realized every face on the screen was looking at me, waiting for my answer. Plus Nico.

Dammit. Nico. Where *was* Nico in all this exactly? Living in my terraced house in suburbia?

“Five years,” I said again, feeling their eyes on me. “God. I . . . I don’t totally know. I’m kind of at a crossroads, to be honest. I have to make some decisions.”

“Really.” Baz’s eyes had focused again, and now he looked interested, his voice drawling as he stretched out the two syllables. “Is that so? What kind of decisions, sweetheart?”

Fuck. This was a conversation for me and Nico after a lot of wine, not for a sober Zoom call in the presence of Baz, Ari, and bunch of people I’d never even heard of.

“I just . . .” I swallowed, trying to stop my gaze from flickering nervously sideways to see how Nico was taking this. “I guess you could say my last project didn’t go so well. I have to decide . . . I mean, I have to decide if science is still for me. It’s a tough world. Your profile is really everything.”

“Well, that’s where we come in,” Baz said. He was leaning forward. “Let’s be honest, not everyone can win the pot, but you’re all going to come out of this a hell of a lot more high-profile than you went in, if this show is the hit we think it’s going to be.”

I pressed my lips together, forcing a smile that somehow stretched my lips without feeling in the least bit genuine. The kind of profile I would get from *One Perfect Couple* wasn’t going to matter a toss in the academic world. In fact, possibly the reverse. I couldn’t imagine

anyone taking my funding application seriously if they'd seen me frolicking in a bikini on a tropical beach. Fortunately, I didn't think grant committees were likely to be the core audience for a brand-new streaming channel focusing exclusively on reality TV.

Still, Baz's mention of "the pot" had given me the chance to pin down some of the more elusive variables still floating around the whole project.

"The pot you mentioned," I said. "How much is it exactly? And while we're on the subject, can you talk a bit more about the structure of the show? I'm unclear how this is all going to work."

"Sure," said one of the other producers smoothly, leaning in towards the camera. I got the impression that Baz was not much of a details guy. "So, the pot isn't fixed, but will be determined partly by how everyone does in the tasks—the idea is that you'll all be contributing to build it up. And then at the end . . . well, I can't talk too much about that, but there will be a mechanism for splitting it between the final contestants, or possibly not. It could be taken home by just one person. Those details are still confidential."

"Okay," I said, "but assuming everyone hit their targets and got the maximum possible, how much are we talking?"

There was a short, uncomfortable silence. The producer flicked his eyes at Baz, but before either of them could speak, Ari, Nico's agent, leaned forward and unmuted himself.

"Lyla, I think the thing is, as Baz mentioned, the prize here, at least as far as people like Nico are concerned, really isn't the money. Whatever the prize pot actually turns out to be, it's going to be small beans compared to the subsequent professional opportunities the show opens up."

"Sure," I said, "but—"

But then I felt Nico squeezing my hand. I looked across at him. He was smiling, but there was an unmistakable, *let this go* behind the smile. I took a breath.

"Okay. I take that point. So, what about the format and so on?"

“It’s elimination,” the unnamed producer said. “Ten contestants at the start, and they’ll get whittled down one by one, each week over nine weeks. There will be some strategic advantage to being in a couple for the tasks, so there’ll be a recoupling opportunity each week, and you might find there’s a few twists and turns to shake things up, but again, the details of that are top secret at this stage. All you need to know is five couples go in, one couple comes out. And it could be you!”

“Bu—” I started, but Baz was speaking, his microphone overriding mine, and he clearly felt like he was the one who was supposed to be asking the questions, not me.

“So we know about Nico, from Ari here”—he gestured at the place where Ari’s face presumably was on his screen, although confusingly it was the opposite side on mine—“but let’s hear a bit more about *you*, Leela. Would you call yourself a feminist?”

“A *feminist*?” I was puzzled. I wasn’t sure what I’d been expecting on this Zoom call—questions about my relationship with Nico seemed fair game—but this was a surprise. What on earth was Baz trying to find out? “I mean . . . I guess so. I believe in gender equality. Doesn’t everyone?”

“Define gender equality?”

“I guess . . . having the same pay for the same work . . . the same professional opportunities . . . the same bodily autonomy . . .” I was more and more mystified.

“And you wouldn’t say you had that already?” Baz was leaning forward towards the camera, frowning, but he didn’t look put off by my responses, if anything, they seemed to have encouraged him.

“Well . . .” I was completely at sea now. “I mean . . . I’m a scientist. If in doubt, I look at what the data is telling me, and according to the data, no, we definitely aren’t there yet. In my own industry alone, less than a quarter of science professors in the UK are female, even though women make up nearly half the workforce.”

“Citing your sources, I like that,” Baz said with a grin, even though I hadn’t cited any sources at all. Actually, my stats were from an article

I'd read in *Nature* a few years ago, but Baz had no way of knowing that. What on earth was he on about? My jokey remark to Nico about needing a wax and to lose five pounds came back to me, and an image floated into my mind: Baz, turning to his assistant, concerned, *We gotta find out if she's a hairy Mary under that lab coat, Camille!* I stifled a laugh, and then hastily straightened my face, remembering that we were on camera. Fortunately, Baz was still talking. "And your politics. Would you say they're left of center . . . centrist . . . right . . .?"

"I guess . . . center left? Sorry, is this relevant?"

"Sorry, sorry, you're right. I got offtrack," Baz said, waving his hand. "But finding out what makes you tick, what makes you different . . . sure, that's important. We don't want to end up with five identikit couples on the island, we want to get people from right across the spectrum. I suppose that's what we're going for with this show—that's what's going to sell it to Real TV. We want real couples—real authenticity, you know? None of this *Love Island* manufactured shite. We want real partnerships, tested to the hilt in the white heat of competition."

"If you're looking for authenticity, you've come to the right place," Nico said, putting his arm around me. "Lyla and me have that in spades, and we're in it to win. Right, Lyl?"

"Right," I said, stretching my lips again in that fake smile. It felt like the meeting was coming to a conclusion without any of my questions being answered. Nothing had been clarified. There was no real information at all—just smoke and mirrors—and it was completely antithetical to the way I was used to working. Every fiber in me wanted to pin Baz down and get a proper answer from him. But I could feel Nico beside me practically begging me not to fuck this up for him—and I guessed this was probably just how TV worked. *Fake it till you make it*, wasn't that what they said about Hollywood? Or was that Silicon Valley? Either way, it was a long way from the world I knew—faking anything at all was the polar opposite of good science.

"Well"—Baz looked across at the colleague sitting next to him and raised one eyebrow, and when she nodded, he turned back to the

camera—"I think we can safely say you'll be joining us on the island in a couple of weeks."

His words gave me a jolt like an electric shock. First of all, I hadn't agreed to this yet. This was only supposed to be a chat. Second, a couple of *weeks*? I shot a panicked look at Ari, and then at Nico, but he was looking excitedly at Baz, who was still speaking.

"My assistant Camille"—he indicated a blond girl sitting far back, almost out of frame, who leaned forward and gave a shy little wave—"will be in touch about booking flights and so on, so keep an eye out for her email. We'll be flying into Jakarta and then traveling by boat to the actual island, and I assume Ari's shown you the pictures? It's my mate's place—brand-new, you'll be the first-ever guests to stay there, and words really don't do it justice."

"It looks *incredible*," Nico said, very sincerely.

"Ari, Camille will send over the contracts and confidentiality agreements today," Baz said. "Are you happy for her to contact Leela and Nico direct about the flights? We really need to get booking those, and she'll need their passport numbers and all that bullshit."

"Sure, sure," Ari said expansively. "Camille, just drop me a line and I'll hook you guys up."

"Great. And in the meantime, Leela, Nico, get picking out your favourite bathers. We'll see you in paradise!"

"See you in paradise!" Nico shot back, his grin almost wider than his face, and I heard my own voice, like a pale echo repeating the phrase, with a good deal less conviction.

"See you in paradise."

And then the screen went dark.

There was a moment's silence. Then Nico turned to look at me, his face alight with enthusiasm.

"Well? What did you think?"

"I think that all went incredibly fast," I said a little edgily. "It was only supposed to be a chat, but everyone, including Ari, seemed to think it was a done deal."

“Well, hey.” Nico looked a little flustered. “I mean . . . nothing’s signed. But are you seriously going to turn this down? I mean, God, this is the real thing! We’re going to be famous—properly famous! Think about what this would mean for my career!”

“I *am* thinking about that,” I said. “That’s the only reason I was on the call. But didn’t you get a bit of a weird vibe from Baz?”

“From Baz?” Nico was taken aback. “What do you mean? I thought he was great.”

“Really? I thought he came across as a bit of a . . .” I stopped, struggling to find the word. “I don’t know. A bit of a chancer?”

The truth was, though I wouldn’t have said it to Nico, on the call he’d reminded me of Ari, Nico’s agent, who talked a very impressive talk, but who somehow always had an excuse for why the money hadn’t come through, or he hadn’t done some very simple thing that Nico had asked. Nico had signed with him straight out of acting college on the promise of TV, riches, and stardom. Seven years later, Ari had yet to deliver anything more impressive than a few walk-on roles and a minor speaking part in *Holby City*, all of which I was fairly sure Nico could have got on his own. His much vaunted but never specified “contacts” had never seemed to come through—until now at least.

Because this was the thing: on paper, *One Perfect Couple* seemed to be the real deal. It *was* major, it *was* telly, and it *had* come about through one of Ari’s contacts. Okay, there was probably no money involved—unless Nico won, which seemed statistically unlikely. But if the format caught on, there was every chance of this raising Nico’s profile considerably, and I had to give Ari props for that. There was just something about the whole thing that didn’t seem right.

“A chancer?” Nico looked at me like I was mad. “In what way?”

“Well . . .” I scabbled to try to remember one of the warning bells that had gone off during the call. Effing Productions. Calling me Leela. I didn’t think Nico would care about any of those, and I certainly couldn’t say that he reminded me of Ari. “Okay . . . for example, what do you think Baz meant about selling it to Real TV?”

“What do you mean?”

“When he was talking about us being an authentic couple, he said, *that’s what’s going to sell it to Real TV*. But I thought they’d already sold it? Ari made it sound like it was a done deal. Their flagship show and all that.”

Nico waved a hand.

“You’re reading too much into it. It’s just a figure of speech. He probably meant that’s what Real will like about you and me.”

“I guess. I just . . . I don’t know. I was surprised no one from Real was on the call.”

“They’re busy people, Lyla. I mean, let’s be clear, they’re setting up a whole new TV network! It’s not surprising they don’t have time for meetings about flight times.”

“Ugh.” I stood up and walked to the window, staring out over the grimy rooftops. There was a dead pigeon lying in the gutter opposite and I turned away. “I just . . . I want to be supportive, Nico, I really do, but I just wish they’d answered a few more of my questions.”

“Look,” Nico came over to me and put his arms around me. He pressed my cheek against his chest, and I could feel how much he’d been working out, presumably with the prospect of *One Perfect Couple* in mind. “Look, Lyla, this isn’t your comfort zone, I get that. TV’s weird. It’s not science-y types dotting every *i* and crossing every *t*—there’s a lot of shifting parameters and building the plane on the fly. But it’s not as seat-of-your-pants as it seems from the outside, there *is* a process to protect everyone involved. There’s contracts and legalese and all the stuff that’s Ari’s job to worry about. That’s what I pay him for—he’s got years of experience and lawyers coming out the wazoo. He’s not going to let us get caught up in anything that’s not kosher.”

But you don’t actually pay him, I thought. *You don’t make any money, and a percentage of nothing is nothing*. I couldn’t say the words though. I wasn’t that cruel.

“So . . . are we really doing this?” I asked instead. The question

was more to myself than to Nico. But it was Nico who answered, looking down at me, his face incredulous.

“Hell yes, we’re doing this. Are you kidding? You don’t turn an opportunity like this down.”

I nodded. I was feeling slightly sick—but Nico was right. *This was* the crunch point of his career. If *One Perfect Couple* was the hit Nico hoped, it could change the whole direction of his life—and maybe mine. And just because my own career felt like it was heading for the rocks, didn’t mean I could deny Nico his chance.

“Lyla?” Nico said now, tipping my face up to look at him. “Lyla? Please tell me you *are* up for this?”

“Yes,” I said weakly. “Yes, I’m up for this.” And then, in an attempt to convince myself, “I am really up for this.” And then, as the reality of what we were proposing sank in, “Fuck, I’ll need to buy a bikini. I don’t suppose my Speedo one piece is going to cut it.”

“A bikini?” Nico raised one eyebrow. “I think you mean *bikinis*, plural. In fact, you probably need a whole new wardrobe. Get yourself down to H&M with my credit card.”

“What about you?” I said, ignoring the fact that Nico’s credit card was so maxed out I’d be lucky to get a single pair of socks. “What does the fantasy first boyfriend wear on the beach? A crisp white T-shirt?”

Nico smirked.

“Maybe. But I’m not planning on wearing a top for much of the filming.” He lifted up the hem of his shirt and pointed at his washboard stomach. “These abs didn’t come cheap, you know.”

“Of course,” I said. Somehow, now that it was a done deal, now that I had actually said the words, *yes, I am up for this*, my nerves were fading a little. Nico was right. Ari wouldn’t let us sign up for anything dodgy. And I needed to get away, we both did. “You owe it to all those hours in the gym. And your thirteen-year-old fan base, of course.”

“Well exactly,” Nico said. He slid his arms down my back to my bum, squeezing my arse with both hands. “We can’t all be girl-next-door fuckable, you know.”

“Girl-next-door fuckable,” I growled, nettled all over again by the stupidity of the term. “I’ll give you girl-next-door fuckable.”

“Oh, I’ve already *got* girl-next-door fuckable,” Nico said, smirking. “She’s right here, waiting to be fucked.” He hoisted me up, his strong arms underneath my butt, and I wrapped my legs around his waist, laughing down at him.

“Is that so? That’s quite the set of assumptions right there, mister.”

“Well, there’s only one way to test this hypothesis, Dr. Santiago,” Nico said, grinning up at me as he walked me backwards to the bedroom door. “And I think I’ve got just enough time before the gym.”

02/15—06:34 a.m.

Hello? Hello? Is anyone out there? This is an emergency Mayday call. We are stranded on an island in the Indian Ocean after the storm last night. I don’t have any coordinates, but we flew into Jakarta and sailed southwest on a yacht called *Over Easy*. The yacht is gone and we have no idea what’s happened to it. Several of our group are seriously injured and need medical help. I don’t know how long the battery on this radio will last, but if anyone can hear me, please send help. I repeat, this is an emergency Mayday call for medical assistance. Can anyone hear me? Can anyone help? Over?

CHAPTER 4

The next few days were a whirlwind. Somehow, unbelievably, it seemed like we *were* actually doing this, and almost within hours, Ari was sending over draft contracts with terrifying nondisclosure

clauses, and Camille was asking whether we'd prefer to fly out of Gatwick or Heathrow.

The strangest thing was that apart from me, everyone from Ari to Professor Bianchi was acting like this whole thing was perfectly normal. Professor Bianchi didn't seem to understand that this was any different from your regular last-minute winter break—although I hadn't exactly tried to spell it out. Ari appeared to think that dropping everything and flying to Indonesia on two weeks' notice was totally reasonable. And maybe it was, in his line of work.

Nico's friends messaged with sincere-sounding congratulations that unsuccessfully masked their professional jealousy. Mine made envious comments about free holidays and winter tans.

In fact, the only person who raised any doubts was my mum, who sounded bewildered when I outlined the situation to her over the phone, the weekend before we were due to fly out.

"A reality TV show? But, Lyla love, why? You don't even watch those programs."

"It's for Nico," I said, knowing as the words left my mouth how lame they sounded. "He really wants it."

"Is he having some kind of midlife crisis?"

I laughed.

"I'm not sure Nico would thank you for calling him middle-aged, Mum. But no, it's not that. It's a career move for him. If they go big, these reality TV shows can be great exposure."

"But why do you have to go?"

"Because . . ." I stopped. *Because it's a couples TV show*, would have been the easy answer, although I wasn't honestly sure if I was allowed to say even that—everything about the format was supposed to be confidential according to the NDA I'd signed. But it wasn't really the truth, and it wasn't what my mum had meant. The fact that the format was couples was why I'd been invited. It wasn't why I'd said yes.

Why I'd said yes . . . well, I wasn't sure if I was ready to probe too deeply on that. Part of it was the knowledge that Nico and I were

at a crunch point. Not a midlife crisis exactly, but we couldn't carry on like this, him banging his fist on a closed door, me increasingly resentful of supporting his dreams when my own were receding further and further. Nico needed a break—and so did I, just in different ways.

“I just think,” my mum said, filling the silence, “that this is the wrong time for all of this. You're thirty-two, love, you and Nico should be settling down. And I can't imagine your boss is too pleased.”

“Mum, Nico needs this, and I love him,” I said. “And that's what you do for people when you love them. You support them.”

“Well, we all need a break from the cold, and I suppose at least it's a free holiday,” my mum said resignedly, and I laughed.

MY MUM'S REMARK ABOUT THE cold came back to me the second the plane touched down in Jakarta. Of course I'd known on paper that February in Indonesia was a completely different climate to February in London, but somehow knowing that fact in theory didn't make the sauna blast of humid air any less shocking. We'd walked onto the airplane wearing raincoats, boots, and scarves. As I made my way down the steps to the tarmac, the sweat was soaking into my bra before I'd even reached the ground.

I'd made the mistake of trying to start the *chikungunya* paper on the connecting flight from Dubai, and now I felt almost drunk with tiredness, in contrast to Nico, who'd downed four gin-and-tonics and then slept for six solid hours despite the cramped economy seat. He looked fresh and positively bouncing with excitement as he wheeled his carry-on to the air-conditioned bus, whereas I felt gray and drained. When I caught sight of my reflection in the bus window, I didn't look anything like a contestant on a reality TV show. I looked like what I was—a stressed, mildly hungover scientist who was trying to spin straw out of gold and form a publishable paper out of dog-crap results.

Luggage claim and customs were the usual nightmare of wailing babies and grown men pushing and shoving to get to a case that would come around the carousel again in less than five minutes. From the aggression of my fellow travelers, you'd have thought that the bags disappearing behind the plastic curtain were about to get incinerated, rather than popping out unharmed a few feet farther on.

But at last we were through passport control and blinking in the arrival hall, scanning the crowds for a familiar face, or at least a sign with a name we recognized. Camille's email had promised "meet and greet on arrival," but as we passed driver after driver, I realized she hadn't actually said what to look out for. Nico's *actual* surname was Rice, Nicholas Rice, in fact. Nico Reese was a stage name. But I couldn't see anything saying Reese/Santiago, Rice/Santiago, or even Effing Productions.

And then I turned and saw a bored-looking man in a suit, holding up a small whiteboard on which was scrawled: NICO LILLA PERFECT COUPLE.

I nudged Nico.

"Do you think that's us?"

"The perfect couple?" A grin spread across Nico's face. "Hell yeah." He yanked his case sideways through the flow of irritated people, like someone fording a particularly turbulent river, and said, "Here from the TV show? I'm Nico. This is Lyla."

"Hello, Pak!" The driver broke into a welcoming smile. "Welcome sir, welcome miss. Welcome to Indonesia. May I take your cases?"