

Pride and Prejudice meets the 21st century  
in this sun-soaked enemies-to-lovers rom-com

# STUCK UP



# Stupid



ANGOURIE RICE  
AND KATE RICE

STUCK UP  
& Stupid



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CANDLEWICK PRESS

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*To our mothers and sisters*



# 1

Everyone knows that past performance is a good indicator of future behavior, so when four young people arrived at Pippi Beach's most expensive house by yacht, Lily wasn't surprised that her mother was the first to notice. Within minutes, Lydia was on the deck in her best bikini, eyes glued to the telescope.

"Mum!" admonished Lily. "They'll see you."

"I'm counting on it."

Two young men, who could safely be judged handsome even from this distance, were transferring luggage and supplies up to the house, assisted by someone clearly from the local marina and therefore unimportant. Two young women in sunglasses and flowing fabrics stalked the sand nearby, flicking their hair around.

"You looking?" Lydia asked.

“No,” said Lily, her eyes fixed determinedly elsewhere.

“You will when I tell you who it is.”

“I don’t want to know who it is.”

“Yes you do!”

“No I don’t.”

“Because it’s Casey Brandon!” Lydia tore her eyes away momentarily from the telescope to gloat. “Casey! Brandon!”

“I don’t think—”

“I know my rich and gorgeous megastars.”

“Really?” An internationally famous visitor at their tiny beach settlement seemed unlikely to Lily, but she didn’t like to confirm or disprove it by telescope. Not that she could have pried it from her mother anyway.

“Oh my goodness, there it is. He’s taken off his shirt.”

“Mum!”

“He clearly wants attention.”

“Not from you!”

“How do you know? I’m not just your mum. I’m a hot mum.”

“He’s probably come here to get some privacy.”

“He’s American. They don’t know what that is. It’s our duty as Australians and neighbors to welcome him, show him around—”

“Please do not do that. Mum? Please?”

Lydia didn't reply. She was too busy monitoring the way shirtless Casey Brandon was carrying a box of groceries. All supplies to Pippi Beach had to be brought over by boat, and what people chose to bring offered quite a bit of insight into their lifestyles, tastes, intentions, incomes, and length of stay. This was all important information, especially to the few who lived in the pretty beach settlement all year round. Lydia had become a very experienced judge.

Six years ago, Lydia and her two girls had come to her older sister Jane's beach house at Pippi for a family Christmas and never left. Jane, who only came to Pippi for weekends and holidays, offered the house as a temporary solution until Lydia got back on her feet. Another apartment, another job, and another relationship had all fallen through, at least partly because of the girls' father, who had failed in pretty much every respect as a partner and as a reasonable person. Lydia felt it was only fair; Jane had practically sleepwalked into a high-income interior design career and then selfishly topped it off with a wealthy husband. And what were sisters for if not to share their good fortune?

At Pippi, Lydia found somewhere to bring up her girls. By overstating her ability to maintain the place, which comfortably slept six in the main house and

six more in a separate pavilion out back, Lydia talked Jane out of requiring rent. She found work in a casual partnership with local entrepreneur Birdie-Round-the-Back, cleaning weekenders and holiday houses but not more than four hours a day and not at all during the summer holidays when the extended family gathered at Pippi. There were three other sisters between Jane and Lydia whose visits to Pippi with their partners and children provided Lydia with what she loved most: an audience.

Unfortunately, this summer would be relatively quiet. Jane and her family were there, and one of the other young cousins, but the rest of them had quite rudely decided to spend most of the holidays elsewhere. Lydia was determined to make this the best summer ever, to make it clear to her sisters that they had missed out—especially Elizabeth, who, as a successful children’s author with a husband even wealthier than Jane’s, was the richest.

“You watch,” Lydia murmured to Lily as she observed the supplies being hauled up the steps and into the network of architectural decks at the cliff house. “I’ll be best friends with them in no time.”

“That is not a good idea.”

“I’m thinking of you children.”

“We’re not children, we’re teenagers, we’re perfectly capable of amusing ourselves, and we don’t need you spying on strangers.”

“It’s not spying if they’re our friends,” insisted Lydia, who, in her mind, was already up at the cliff house having a glorious time with attractive young people who never had to worry about boring things like money.

Lydia found a more appreciative audience for her news in her younger daughter, Rosie, and niece Kat, who were not at all averse to looking at movie stars in general and already followed Casey Brandon on social media. Aunt Jane agreed with Lily, who said that perhaps visiting celebrities ought to be left alone, rather like snakes in the sun. The younger teens took little notice of this opinion (even though Lily was the eldest of the cousins and recognized to be the smartest) and spent the entire afternoon lounging on the deck in their brightest bikinis, tense with anticipation, discussing how they would best engineer a casual conversation when Casey walked by. Which he was bound to do, sooner or later. The family house was right on the beachfront and very close to the jetty where Pippi time was marked by hourly loops of the ferry. All the theater of Pippi life played

out before the front deck, or within sight of the many picture windows, so there was plenty of opportunity to both observe and show off. From inside, the family enjoyed beach, jetty, and water views. From outside, passersby and beachgoers could see straight into the high-ceilinged timber-furnished interiors and the lives that played out there. Lily had long ago stopped pulling the blinds down; Lydia always put them back up again. Sadly, there was no such exhibitionism on offer at the cliff house. No one emerged for the rest of the day and the girls had to content themselves with watching the lights go on in the evening and conjecturing which of the shadowy figures on the main deck was Casey.

It was actually Aunt Jane, who wasn't the least bit interested in meeting him, who was the first to encounter the one and only Casey Brandon while on her morning run along the beach. She returned full of smiles and rather happy to discuss the movie stars after all, which was lucky, as her sister Lydia and the younger girls could speak of nothing else.

“What was he like?”

“What was he wearing?”

“What brand?”

“Was he nice?”

“Was he as good-looking in real life?”

“Did you shake his hand?”

“Did he have an accent?”

“Why is he here?”

“Aren’t you a lot of stickybeaks!” Jane declared. “You can find all this out for yourselves on Friday.”

“He’s coming to drinks,” Lily pointed out. “It’s not like he’s doing anything important.”

“He’s meeting me!” yelled Lily’s younger sister, Rosie. She was fifteen and for several summers now had been going through a loud phase. “What’s more important than me?” she yodeled.

“My bikini!” brayed Lydia. Everyone laughed, and Lily seriously regretted weighing in.

As the conversation veered toward competitive wondering about what to wear and what to bring to make the best impression, Lily retreated to the back deck with Juliet, who was the cousin closest to her in age and temperament. Juliet was a pale city girl, the only child of glamorous Aunt Elizabeth. She and Lily had spent every holiday together since they were babies, and now that they had just finished school, they were closer than ever. The summer and their lives spread out before them, with all the delights of burgeoning adulthood. Together,

Lily and Juliet considered the celebrity issue in a way that was appropriate to their advanced maturity and coolness.

Lily did a quick internet search and found an impressive array of magazine covers and designer-sponsored content.

“How has such a star found Pippi?” Juliet wondered.

“And why?” asked Lily.

A few C-list celebrities had stayed at Pippi before—models-turned-TV hosts and former soap actors. They always treated Pippi like a quaint amusement park. They doted on the wallabies and gawked at the goan-nas, then left plastic champagne glasses on the beach and had bonfires during a fire ban. Lily often trawled the sand and the bush trails picking up after them and helped Lydia to clean their holiday rentals. She’d learned that people are a lot messier if they have the money to pay for incidentals.

“Perhaps he’s only here for Friday-night drinks,” Lily laughed.

“I mean, it must be very different from what he’s used to,” Juliet said.

“But he might love plastic bowls of dubiously flavored chips.”

“Drunk dads.”

“Ferocious little kids.”

“Big dogs.”

“Spilled wine turning the crackers soggy.”

“I do hope we don’t scare him off!”

“Ha! I kind of hope we do!”

For Lily, the only thing worse than cleaning up after careless celebrities was having to watch the locals—including her own family—try to impress them.

# 2

Lydia's community spirit, which tended to lag when it came to fundraising and volunteering, peaked around social events. Indeed, she rather felt that the collective success of the entire summer depended on the first Friday drinks: how long she stayed and how much fun she had. So she went early, decked out in a plunging bikini top and a sarong and carrying one of Jane's bottles of bubbly, secure in the knowledge that she did this every year, movie stars or no. Jane followed a little later with a cheese platter.

It had been years since Lily and the rest of the cousins had been young enough to really enjoy being anywhere near the adults when they got boozy. While little ones spent Friday-evening drinks capering on the green in view of their parents, teens tended to slink off for their own gatherings on deserted decks or among the rocks at the north end of the beach. But not this Friday. There

was no way Rosie and her cousin Kat, age fifteen and thirteen, would miss this opportunity to meet Casey Brandon. They spent the afternoon showering, blow-drying, and curling, while Lily and Juliet didn't even get changed and insisted to themselves and each other that they were only going out of curiosity. The other cousin, Jane's fifteen-year-old son, Martin, forgot the drinks event was even on. His passions were video games and spreading awareness of the climate crisis, and as Casey Brandon was neither of those things, he went off with a local friend to find out whether the vines along the main hiking trail were strong enough to climb.

Word of the newcomers had spread well beyond the family circle. Pippi Beach was such a hidden pocket that overseas visitors were rare. It was a small beach settlement surrounded by dense bushland, only accessible by boat or a two-hour hike, with no shops, bars, restaurants, cars, or roads. Its pristine beauty attracted only those with the energy to seek it out. Locals and the wealthy businesspeople who spent their weeks in the city and their weekends in the top-tier waterfront properties liked to keep it that way, smug in the knowledge that they really did know Sydney's best-kept secret and only happy for publicity of the most exclusive kind, such as appearing on fashionable lists of Sydney's best-kept

secrets. A small amount of social media was considered appropriate, preferably with ocean views and sunsets, good grooming, smiles, and expensive props, like boats. So a clutch of rich celebrities was most definitely on-brand for those at Pippi Beach who cared about branding, and was unlikely to disturb the peace and privacy of those who didn't. These were the long-term original residents, the nature-lovers, the boaties, and the retirees who lived in beach shacks or old cottages on the blocks back from the beach with no water views. Yet everyone, even Max, the local hoarder and plumber, seemed to have put a bit more effort into their beachwear and were more aggressively jovial than usual. Lily noticed that all eyes flicked regularly, apparently randomly, to the line of houses rising across the south headland, even though before yesterday, most of the over-forties, who made up most of Pippi's population, hadn't even known who Casey Brandon was. In just one day, all had become very familiar with his entire filmography and were able to conduct knowledgeable conversations about his upcoming releases.

The adults were on their second drink by the time Rosie spotted movement on the path from the cliff house.

"They're coming!" she shrieked. The adults paid no

attention to her but nevertheless proceeded to stand up straighter and laugh more loudly. The younger teens watched the approach from a safe distance, while the older ones steeled themselves for potential embarrassment by pretending not to care. They need not have worried. When the four newcomers—two young women and two young men—reached the group, any awkwardness was soon nullified by Casey Brandon’s winning smile and genuine charm. He already appeared to know everyone. While his three well-groomed friends kept their distance, Casey fielded handshakes and backslaps and follow-up questions from previous chats. It appeared that Jane was not the only local he’d befriended, nor the only one who had invited him to the drinks. Lily watched with amusement as a handful of people jostled to introduce him to everyone else, only to find he knew them already.

Lily could see that, unlike his three friends, Casey Brandon had a knack for making everyone feel comfortable. He chatted with people as though there was nothing he would rather be doing right now. Lydia poured him a champagne and tried to fill her own glass at the same time, which caused her to spill half of it down her front. She shrieked with laughter and made a joke about a wet T-shirt competition. Casey’s lofty friends visibly

recoiled, but any embarrassment Lily felt was soon swept away by admiration for how quickly and easily Casey got his glass and moved on, somehow leaving Lydia with the impression that he found her delightful. Meanwhile, Fire-Chief-Steve thrust a beer at the other young man (“Here, have a real drink! It’s local!”), who accepted it in a way that made it clear he would much rather not. In that moment, all the teenagers watching knew this wasn’t just any young man. This was Dorian Khan.

Tall, dark hair, brown eyes, amazing posture, cheekbones and jawline that could cut glass, and a distant air of preoccupation with something important and devastating, like the environment. Lily marveled that he had remained at Pippi unrecognized for so long and mused that perhaps the weight of fame had kept him indoors. Casey Brandon was a relatively recent star; Dorian Khan had been in the public eye for over ten years. He first appeared at the age of fourteen in the lead role of a teen-spy franchise. Since then, he’d been in blockbusters, well-reviewed independent films, and further installments of the original franchise. He had an actual Oscar nomination and was currently appearing in moody black-and-white photos on magazines and

bus stops advertising watches that no one his age could afford to buy. Lily noted he was wearing one now.

Rosie and Kat were beside themselves at the appearance of Dorian Khan. Lily and Juliet had to physically hold them to stop them from squealing and jumping up and down. Rosie wriggled away from her sister and squeezed in through the crowd on the pretext of retrieving a handful of chips. She came back bursting to report what she had overheard Casey say: nobody was anybody's girlfriend or boyfriend! Lily winced. Who would even ask that? But it was just Sheila, who was over sixty and beyond flirting, unlike Lydia, who had cleaved herself to Casey's side and was laughing way too loudly. Soon everyone knew that the exquisite tall girl with dark complexion was Casey's sister Cecilia, the delicate one who didn't speak was her friend Yumi, and Dorian was, of course, Dorian Khan. Mega movie star.

Kat wanted Rosie to go with her on another mission to get chips, but Lily talked them out of it by pointing out that if they went anywhere near Lydia, she would claim them as her young relations and neither of the girls wanted to make a first impression being labeled as mere children. Casey was surrounded by adults. Max was giving him advice on the best wind for sailing; Sue the

artist was offering him her kayaks; and Fire-Chief-Steve was trying to tell him the history of the cliff house, Pippi Beach, and the greater Sydney area. The two girls who had arrived with him hovered nearby. Lily, Juliet, and local friend Nicola wanted to make a social approach. They were clearly quite close to the American girls in age, but somehow any attempts to make eye contact, or even get close enough to say hi, slid off and ended in distant smiles or turned shoulders. The American girls entertained some light chitchat when Casey drew them into broader conversations, but mostly they just took photos of each other and themselves and the sunset in a way that was appreciative of Pippi's glory. This was enough for word to spread among the adult locals that the girls were, indeed, very sweet. "Nice to see some smiles. You girls could learn a thing or two from them," Birdie-Round-the-Back told Lily and her friends.

Meanwhile, Dorian remained firmly on the outside of the group and refused to allow Casey or anyone else to draw him into it. Word spread just as quickly that he was arrogant, pretentious, and not at all nice. "Reminds me of your mum's ex," sniffed Birdie-Round-the-Back. Lily watched Dorian shut down an attempted approach by the president of the Pippi Beach Association. Yes, he might have been extremely old, but he had a sense of

humor and a PhD in environmental law and it hardly seemed fair to give him the flick when poor Casey was stuck with Bob-with-Two-Dogs, one of the biggest bores at Pippi. Dorian hovered near the sand and looked at his phone, ignoring the crowd, the sunset, and the glowing water so comprehensively that many locals gave up on him and concentrated all their attention on Casey and the girls. But Lily kept an eye on him and concluded that a career playing sensitive, intelligent, and artistic young men in sensitive, intelligent, and artistic films didn't necessarily cultivate those qualities in a person. And in fact, might incline one more toward the exact opposite. She noticed Casey tactfully escape Bob-with-Two-Dogs, having just heard all about the distinguishing features of yachts, and seek out his friend.

“What are you doing, man? Lurking on your phone? You look like you're on the subway.”

“I'm checking the weather.” He spoke with a clipped British accent, so perfect it almost seemed like a cover-up.

“The weather's here,” urged Casey as he spread his arms to the sky. He noted his friend's reticence and changed his tone. “It's cool. No one's asking for selfies.”

“No need to ask when they're on offer.”

“Don't make me babysit you.”

“Go ahead and socialize. I’m not stopping you.”

“You’re ruining the vibe.”

“Casey, these people are just kissing up to you. You know that bores me.”

Casey tilted his head toward Lily, who stood nearby on the edge of a conversation with Juliet and Nicola. “What about her? She’s not kissing up. She looks kinda fun.”

“She looks suburban.”

Lily’s eyes flicked to Dorian’s at this casual dismissal. She had heard every word, and as a look of recognition passed between them, he knew it and she knew he knew.

“Aw, she heard you, man!” complained Casey.

“I’m going back to the house.” Dorian shoved his barely touched beer at Casey, turned, and strode off.

“Hey, wait for us,” cooed Casey’s sister, Cecilia.

Cecilia and her friend Yumi swayed after him, but Casey didn’t follow. Instead, he turned to the three Pippi girls with a winning smile. “I’m so sorry, we haven’t met. I’m Casey.” And he shook hands with all of them, repeated their names, and asked questions with such unaffected charm that quite soon they were laughing along with him as though they’d known him all their lives.

Later at dinner, Lily told everyone of her encounter

with Dorian, which she thought was hilarious. Lydia, on the other hand, found it outrageous.

“Suburban!” she exploded. “We’re not suburban, we’re semirural! Anyway, who cares about Dorian bloody Khan.”

“What?” Rosie frowned.

“You know he’s originally from Geelong, right? Now, that’s suburban.”

“Mum, he’s an Oscar nominee,” said Rosie.

“So? Let me know when he wins.”

# 3

Pippi Beach's unique qualities attracted an eclectic mix of people united by their insistence that they were all very different from everyone else. Of the hundred dwellings sprinkled across the beachfront, headland, and bush hinterland, only about twenty were permanently inhabited. The rest were weekenders and holiday houses. Everyone came here to escape, retreat, or regenerate. For the younger generation, weekends and holidays at Pippi meant freedom: from school, organized sports, uniforms, shoes, routine, rules, and expectations. As long as they appeared somewhere in view of their parents' deck before nightfall, they were free. Imaginations blossomed, anxieties dissipated. Things that normally dominated their lives, like timetables and the news and who liked whom at school, were nothing; the only thing that mattered was the height of the tide. The handful of young people who lived at Pippi went to school by

ferry and appeared to lead a life free of care. When Lily and Rosie had come to live here, age just twelve and nine, they could hardly believe their luck. Lydia kept reminding them that someone still had to unpack the dishwasher and take the garbage out, but taking out the garbage was no hardship when it involved a walk along the waterfront to the public bins on the end of the jetty. Even something as tedious as garbage, collected twice a week by barge, seemed romantic.

The morning after Friday drinks, Lily and Juliet sat together on the deck, sipping tea in silence as Lily wondered how long it would take for Juliet to steer conversation toward the celebrity guests.

“He was surprisingly nice, wasn’t he?” ventured Juliet.

“Yes, he was,” conceded Lily. No need for clarification. Casey was gorgeous and Juliet was quite clearly smitten.

“And really funny.”

“Mm.”

“And good-looking. Objectively, I mean.”

“Objectively, sure.”

“You didn’t like him?”

“Did you like him?”

Lily smiled as Juliet flushed.

“Oh, I mean—”

“I think he liked you.”

“Really?” Juliet’s face betrayed surprise and hope. “I mean, he was friendly with everyone.”

“He chose to sit down with you. Not Bob-with-Two-Dogs.”

Juliet smiled and shook her head.

“Shame about his friends,” Lily said.

“What do you mean? You didn’t like them? Why? They were so beautiful!”

“All the better to appreciate from a distance.”

“I think they were just shy.”

Lily laughed. “I don’t think anyone who wears designer gear at Pippi can be shy. But I love that you think it’s possible.”

Juliet was kind and smart, but she could be a little naive. Casey Brandon was clearly special: generous, sincere, and unaffected. These were rare qualities anywhere, and possibly even rarer among the young and rich. Lily believed Cecilia and Yumi had been deliberately standoffish, and Dorian was just plain cold and unfriendly. The three of them had lived right down to Lily’s expectations.

“I wonder what they thought of us?” mused Juliet.

“We know they didn’t think much of me,” laughed Lily. “But I think you made a good impression. Between you and the view, I think they can afford to overlook my shortcomings. And the catering.”

Meanwhile, up at the cliff house, Casey, at least, had nothing but praise for Pippi, its views, and its residents. “I wanna move here,” he announced as he looked out at the sparkling water.

“No, you don’t,” Dorian said with a shrug.

“This view, it’s insane. Nature. It’s everywhere. And the people, they’re just . . . they’re real, you know?”

“You’re so American,” said Dorian. “You’re hypersensitive to any sliver of authenticity—which, by the way, is only a sliver here. They’re just as obsessed with money and power as everyone else; they’re just too embarrassed to admit it.”

“Your cynicism is totally rotting your insides.”

“I’m just saying, don’t be fooled. Yes, they live in the middle of nowhere and talk with an accent—”

“You mean your accent.”

“But people can be just as grasping and obsessive here as in LA.”

“No one’s obsessing over you here, man; literally no one cares!”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.”

“Then what are you talking about? No, don’t answer that because I don’t care. Look at that sun! The water, the sand, the wilderness! My God!”

“It is indeed beautiful.”

“Then why don’t you just enjoy it!”

“I am. I’m going kayaking,” Dorian snapped. He proceeded to check coast maps and the weather report.

The tide was high.

For the kids at the beachfront house, high tide meant gathering at the end of the jetty to fling themselves up into the sky and down into crystal-clear water. They did this over and over and when they got tired, they lay in the sun, glistening with salt, sparkle, and happiness. This was their magic summer ritual and nothing could improve it. The international celebrities in the cliff house became irrelevant again, and even Rosie seemed to forget about them entirely.

In the heat of late morning, the younger ones retreated to trampolines and tire swings in the valley around the back of Pippi, while Lily, Juliet, and their friend Nicola lay on towels in the shade and reflected on the life ahead of them with all the gravity of young adults who had very little to worry about.

“I’m just so glad school’s over,” murmured Juliet.

“Oh my God, yes,” exploded Nicola. “Finally. No more algebra, no more Shakespeare. And if anyone asks me for a piece of persuasive writing, I will say NO.”

“Me too. And if they ask why, I’ll tell them—with

a killer introductory paragraph, several awesome body paragraphs, and a devastating conclusion,” laughed Lily.

“Can you stop being smart just for a second? Just to make me feel better?”

“She can’t help it,” said Juliet.

“Not smart,” added Lily. “Indoctrinated. How wonderful to finally be in the real world—not be judged anymore.”

“I’m still judging you,” said Nicola.

“That’s fair. But you’re not judging me against some arbitrary set of learning criteria set by a disgruntled ex-teacher.”

Nicola and Lily giggled. They had gone to the local high school, an establishment with a bit of a reputation for turning its teachers toward office jobs, stress leave, or out of the profession entirely. The school’s biggest claim to fame was that its alumni included two world-class surfers. Juliet, however, had attended an exclusive city girls’ school that had world-class everything. Nicola felt sorry for her—the school seemed to put so much pressure on study—but Lily rather envied Juliet’s private-school education. Lily could hardly complain about disadvantage—her teachers had gone out of their way and had even run advanced classes just for her, which

would have been socially ruinous if it weren't for Nicola. But at the end of her time in high school, Lily found herself adrift. She didn't know what to do next. She was interested in so many things—literature, art, science—and her teachers and aunts had all told her she could do anything she wanted. The problem was, she wasn't sure what that was.

“Poor Lily.” Nicola pouted. “You know we're in the real world now, right? Thinking is optional.”

“No thinking! How delicious,” added Juliet.

“Definitely no thinking while we're away in America,” warned Nicola. All three girls had planned a gap year, and Nicola and Lily were off to Los Angeles for four whole weeks in the middle of it.

“I won't know what to do with myself,” Lily laughed. “Imagine going to a museum without a busload of kids and a notebook!”

“We are not going to museums.”

“Not even to meet the love of your life while you're both sketching the same sculpture?” coaxed Lily.

“The love of my life doesn't sketch sculptures. And neither do I.”

“Going to a museum gala event would be fun,” put in Juliet. “Red carpet. Formal wear. Teeny tiny little canapés . . .”

“Champagne,” added Nicola. “And lots and lots of guys who look like they put some effort into their outfits.”

“There is nothing sexier than a man who cares about fashion,” Juliet said with a sigh.

“So, was that an Italian designer Casey was wearing last night?” teased Lily.

“No, American. A new ethical brand, really interesting. Casey said the fabric is recycled—” She stopped at their laughter. “What? What’s so funny?”

“There’s nothing sexier . . .” Nicola echoed. Juliet loudly protested that they were just chatting, they had only just met, she was being polite, the designer came up in conversation and it didn’t mean anything, and it certainly didn’t mean she liked him. The truth was, since her conversation with Casey Brandon the night before, she had thought of little else.

“I’m not attracted to him or anything. He’s good-looking, that’s all,” Juliet said with little conviction.

“He’s gorgeous,” agreed Lily. “A bit smiley for me, though. Too nice.”

“Ha! Of course, you like a bad boy,” said Nicola. “Someone with cheekbones and a moody glare.”

Lily rolled her eyes.

“And a stick up his potato?”

“Right up there.”

“I am so not interested in Dorian Khan.”

“Not even a little bit?” asked Juliet, glad to have the spotlight thrown somewhere else. “I mean, he seems really smart.”

“Acting superior does not mean you’re smart. And I should know, it’s my thing.”

“And he is really good-looking,” added Nicola, which sparked quite a discussion in which they agreed that Dorian was better-looking but Casey was more attractive and, in any case, in the greater scheme of things, what a person looked like was the least important thing about them.

“Anyway, the point is,” Nicole went on, “if Dorian walked up to you right now and said, ‘Lily, I love you, come away with me, my helicopter’s waiting,’ you’d be gone. In a second.”

“I can assure you I would not,” retorted Lily, laughing at the very idea. “I wouldn’t walk with him to the end of the jetty.”

“Liar!”

Of course, Dorian Khan didn’t turn up with any offers at all and remained locked away inside the cliff house for the entire day. But Lily meant what she said and truly did not care.

# 4

Over the next few days, everyone remained on high alert for encounters with the celebrity visitors. Casey had been open enough with the locals for most of them, including Lydia, to consider him their particular friend, so he was often caught up in conversations while out and about. He was also clearly on trash duty because he walked past the beachfront house most evenings. He was always keen to have a chat, not at all conscious of the rubbish bags grazing the side of his brand-name board shorts. He stayed longer if Juliet was there, which she almost always was. She had abandoned even the most dramatic board game to run out and say hi to him. Lily began to suspect that the trash run was merely an excuse to talk to Juliet.

The fact that the two other glamorous girls kept to themselves, and Dorian Khan was rarely seen at all, confirmed the view, formed early by Lily and now

shared by everyone else, that they were not that nice. So Lily was surprised when Juliet returned from a solitary walk down the south end of the beach chatting pleasantly—and even laughing—with Cecilia and Yumi. They turned their reflective sunglasses toward the deck as Juliet introduced them to Lily and Nicola. Then, with a great show of reluctance, they declined an invitation to stay.

“You’re so sweet,” Cecilia drawled. “We’d love to, really, later, tomorrow, for sure.” She and Yumi ambled off. Lily knew they had no intention of ever setting foot on their deck.

“We too suburban for ya?” Nicola murmured after them.

“No!” Juliet defended her new friends. “They’re lovely. Once you get to know them.”

“And did you?” Lily asked.

“Of course!”

As the week went on, Cecilia and Yumi continued to extend smiles and occasional invitations to Juliet to walk and swim but displayed little interest in getting to know anyone else. The attention that Juliet took for sincere, Lily judged as exploitative. They probably just wanted a local who would take them to the best places and protect them from the many natural dangers. Most importantly,

Lily thought, they wanted someone to whom they could meaningfully show off. They told Juliet everything, and through her, Lydia and the younger ones extracted the most important details. Casey and Dorian were starring in movies in Australia that autumn. Dorian was doing some independent feature in Victoria and Casey was in a blockbuster on the Gold Coast. They chose Pippi for their holiday because one of Dorian's school-teachers used to come here. Cecilia was an influencer ("Ha! She couldn't influence me to stand on one leg!" barked Lydia). Cecilia also did Casey's social media. Yumi was her plus-one and stylist to all four.

The younger teens hung on every word.

"You can do my social media, Lily," announced Rosie, "when I'm famous."

"Lucky me."

"I'll be your stylist," offered Nicola.

"Who can I be?" asked Juliet.

"Casey's plus-one," said Nicola.

Juliet blushed and protested loudly to cover how thrilled she was at the very idea.

"So, are they coming to Friday drinks again tomorrow?" asked Rosie.

"And more importantly," said Nicola, "are they bringing Juliet's dream man and Lily's nightmare?"

Yes, Cece (as Juliet was now allowed to call her) had said they'd be there.

Sure enough, as the sun was sinking the next day, the quartet arrived at the community drinks, dressed as though for a beach-inspired fashion shoot. Casey beamed and the two girls smiled from behind their hair and sunglasses. Dorian Khan followed with the air of one being held hostage. Casey and Juliet quickly found each other, while Cece and Yumi stuck close together. Dorian hung back, clearly uninterested in their conversation, in everyone, or in being there at all. Yet whenever his eyes flicked over the group, they always seemed to land on Lily.

"He's looking at you." Nicola poked Lily in the ribs.

"Who?"

"The man whose charms you are so resistant to."

"Ha! You are ridiculous."

"But he is!"

"You should be a chef, Nicola. Always stirring the pot."

"You should be a dad, Lily. Always making terrible jokes and avoiding talking about feelings."

"He's not even looking at me."

"Well, he was before."

"The python was back this morning."

“Stop trying to change the subject. But please tell me about the python.”

As Lily proceeded to tell Nicola about the big black python that had taken to basking in the morning sun across the path outside their house, her eyes drifted toward Juliet, who was smiling shyly in conversation with Casey. Nicola followed her gaze. They both watched as Juliet talked and Casey listened and nodded as though his life depended on it.

“He looks like a bobblehead,” remarked Nicola.

“Rude.”

“Significant. Bobblehead nodding means he likes her.”

Lily looked at Nicola skeptically. “Then he’s head-over-heels for Bob-with-Two-Dogs.”

“His ripped undershirt makes him irresistible.”

Lily snorted into her drink.

“Anyway, she clearly likes him,” Nicola continued.

“Who? Bob?”

“Casey, you idiot. She’s doing that hair thing she always does when she likes someone.”

Lily’s stomach twisted in an urge to protect her cousin from whatever brand of trouble Casey might be.

“They’re cute together,” Nicola went on. “I reckon she should make a move. Tell her to make a move, Lily, she won’t listen to me.”

“That’s because most of your suggestions are highly unreasonable. And anyway, what do you mean, ‘make a move’? This isn’t an ’80s rom-com. They’re both grown-ups. If they like each other, they can just say so.”

Nicola rolled her eyes. “That is literally the very last thing grown-ups do when they like each other.”

“Aren’t we all a bit over playing games?”

“Games are fun!”

“Steeped in patriarchal norms? I mean, ‘make a move,’ what does that even—”

“Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God.”

“Ow! Stop doing that.” But when Lily turned around she was thankful for the sharp poke because Dorian Khan was navigating through the hubbub of muumuus and muscle tees right toward her.

Lily glared at Nicola, who just shrugged and smiled.

“Don’t you leave me—” Lily began, but Nicola was already stepping backward.

“What was that? I can’t hear you, my patriarchal norms are calling!”

“Nicola!”

“Byeeeeee!” and she was gone.

And Dorian Khan was standing right in front of her, a sweaty beer in his hand, complete with comedic

souvenir can cooler, and a serious but not hostile look on his face.

“Hi,” he said. “I’m Dorian.”

“Hi. Lily.”

“You’re Juliet’s sister.”

“Cousin.”

“And you live here.”

“Yes.”

Lily couldn’t help smiling. Had he come over just to make pronouncements about her? And get half of them wrong? She wondered if he was working up to an apology for his remark last week, and if so, how would she respond? For him to apologize would be to acknowledge what he had said and that she had overheard. She should probably just jump off that bridge when she got to it.

“Are you hungry?”

That was not what she had expected. It was all Lily could do to stop herself from laughing. His serious expression, the red flush on his cheeks, the absurd question! She couldn’t wait to tell Nicola about it later.

“Um, I guess so,” she responded, wondering whether he expected her to ask him the same in return. That was how conversations worked, right? But never before had

she had a conversation like this—if you could even call it that.

“There’s chips and dips,” Lily said. She gestured toward the sad plastic platter of supermarket nibbles and wondered if this guy ever laughed. “Flavor undetermined—I think that’s French onion and I think that’s just . . . yellow.”

“Would you like to come to dinner?” he asked in a rush, almost aggressively.

If Lily had been shocked by his first question, it was nothing compared to the utter bafflement she felt now.

“You mean now?” Wasn’t it only five thirty?

“Later.”

“After drinks?”

“Sure.”

What did that even mean? Was he inviting her or not?

“I can’t,” she said. “I have to make dinner for the family tonight. No one else knows how to work the oven.”

She smiled lightly and his eyes went cold. It was true, as far as it went, that no one else had taken the trouble to learn the correct sequence of switches. But she and Dorian both knew that this was hardly an excuse. On a Friday night during the summer holidays on a virtual island, there was really nothing that would prevent her from going to dinner at the cliff house apart from her

own disinclination. She didn't even say "maybe another time" to soften the blow and protect his feelings, if he had any. Why should she lie to protect him from a perfectly reasonable refusal of an invitation that was so clearly inappropriate? Or at the very least, too early? She hardly knew the guy, and what she did know was not inspiring. He appeared to struggle to find his words for a moment but managed a gruff "Right" before marching away.

Lily felt no remorse or regret for declining and guessed that Casey had put him up to it. God, she thought, Nicola is going to die.

On the other side of the throng, Dorian stood with his fists in his pockets, his half-empty beer discarded on someone's picnic blanket.

"Where've you been?" Cecilia sidled up to Dorian and draped an arm around his shoulder. He shrugged her off. Pretending not to care, Cecilia shifted her weight and followed Dorian's gaze into the crowd. "Talking to that girl? God, she's so boring." She yawned.

Dorian said nothing.

"Just being honest," she said, reading his silence as one of disapproval.

"You're being rude."

"I love it when you get all judgmental."

Dorian was silent again.

“Oh, I’m sorry, do you like her?” Cecilia teased in a singsong voice.

Dorian rolled his eyes and strode away, muttering something about dinner.

“Oh my God, you do!” Cecilia giggled loudly after him, her over-the-top hilarity hiding her disappointment that Dorian had a crush on someone and it was not her.

# 5

No one could quite believe Lily had turned down an offer of dinner at the cliff house. Lily, however, had no regrets and was somewhat annoyed that her friend, sister, and cousins were more outraged at her refusal than at the invitation itself, considering she'd barely exchanged two words with the guy. Even more regrettably, the noise Rosie and Kat made about it reached the ears of Lydia, who had just arrived home after a good couple of hours of drinking and flirting with Bob-with-One-Dog, only to discover his ex-girlfriend was arriving on the last ferry.

Lydia was declaring loudly that nobody ever got to know anybody properly by talking to them, when Casey jogged up from the beach and asked Juliet straight out, right there on the deck in front of everyone, if she'd like to join them up at the cliff house for dinner. Confusion immediately reigned. Juliet mumbled something about the lasagna being in the oven, and Lydia interrupted her,

shrieking, “LORD, yes, of course she’s free and don’t you worry about US!”

Lily and Juliet made eye contact. Lily asked with her eyes, “Do you want to go? I’ll save you if you don’t!” Very few people could stop Lydia in full flight, and not even Lily could do it every time, but there was no way Lily would let her mother force her cousin to go on a date she didn’t want. But Juliet’s eyes responded, “Yes!” Within seconds, Jane was offering him a drink while Lydia shouted at various nearby daughters and nieces to “get him a chair, a glass, and for goodness’ sake get Juliet fixed up, she looks an absolute fright, she can’t go like that, he’ll think we’re BARBARIANS.” She burst into braying laughter over the top of Casey’s protests that Juliet was absolutely fine to come as she was. Jane rushed to find a suitably masculine beer while Lily whisked Juliet off to get her changed before Lydia said anything too obnoxious.

“Yes, that dress. No, you don’t need to do anything to your hair. Yes, a bit of perfume. You look gorgeous. Now go before she starts talking about her acting career.” They got back to the deck just as Lydia was mid-story about how one time she spent a whole afternoon kissing strangers at an audition for a toothpaste commercial.

“Didn’t get the job, but I got a couple of drinks and a ride on the back of a motorbike! Ha ha ha ha ha!”

Juliet had never headed off so fast.

“Wait!” shouted Lydia. “You can’t go barefoot! Here!”

Lydia hopped madly on one foot as she yanked off her own wedge heels and thrust them at Juliet.

“We’re the same size,” she huffed proudly. “Go on, take them!”

Lily tried to stop this horrifying exchange, but the wedge heels were off and dangling center stage. Lydia gushed, “Put them on, they do wonders for your legs, truly, put them on, PUT THEM ON!” So to shut her up, Juliet did as she was told and scurried away, practically pushing Casey before her down the path as he tried to shout back his thanks to Jane for the beer.

“Mum!” remonstrated Lily.

“What? She’s got cankles just like ours; I was doing her a favor.”

Lily retreated to the kitchen to take a breath. She felt a sense of regret that she wasn’t going too, inspired mostly by the urge to protect her cousin. She judged Casey to be safe—genuine even—and it seemed he really liked Juliet. If Juliet liked him back, then Lily would be nothing but happy for her. But what about his

friends? And his sister? She remembered Dorian's cold eyes when she told him no. She had to smile to herself as she flicked the oven off. She'd turned down a movie star for the sake of a dodgy switch.

Just as Lily brought the lasagna out to the front deck, Casey reappeared, out of breath and clearly shaken. "I'm so sorry, Juliet fell on the steps. She's twisted her ankle—badly—but she won't let me call an ambulance. She says there isn't one, but surely . . ."

A cacophony of loudly expressed concern and indecision erupted. Jane wondered aloud whether to call the water police, water taxi, Fire-Chief-Steve, or nobody at all, and Lydia insisted that if there was no blood or a snakebite, she'd be fine. Rosie and Kat clamored to go up to the cliff house to see, while Casey was still trying to get an answer to whether there was such a thing as a water ambulance or paramedic helicopter, like they have at the Grand Canyon.

"Stop it, Mum!" asserted Lily. "Aunty Jane, don't call anyone yet. I'll go up and see how she is and I'll let you know. Rosie and Kat, sit down and eat your dinner. Casey, please, just wait. I'll be right there."

Lily grabbed her socks and sneakers and cursed her mother for causing yet another vanity injury. Lily had dealt with a lot of them over the years—sunburned

skin, infected ear piercings, blistered heels, and insect bites—sometimes Lydia’s, sometimes Rosie’s, sometimes her own. This time, poor Juliet was the victim. The steps to the cliff house were steep, uneven, and rocky, and now Lily would be ascending them that evening after all, cankles at their absolute worst, because Lydia thought that legs were not primarily for walking but for attracting boys.

Lily followed Casey down the path and up the steps at a brisk jog and tried to calm him along the way.

“Accidents happen at Pippi,” she said. “This won’t be the worst one, and even if it’s bad, we can deal with it. The water police can get a boat here fast and an ambulance to meet it on the other side. But we won’t call them unless we have to.”

Casey breathlessly explained how he caught Juliet in his arms as she stumbled and fell, avoiding a greater tragedy, and luckily they were at the top of the steps so he was able to carry her into the house. The conversation was all a bit embarrassing as both knew the stupid wedge heels were to blame, though neither said so. Despite the clear emergency, Lily couldn’t help admiring Casey’s genuine concern. She imagined that the moment Juliet fell into his arms must have been just a touch romantic.

Lily found Juliet draped on an enormous designer

couch. Her ankle had swollen up like a balloon and was bright red from ice packs hastily cobbled together from tea towels and novelty cocktail ice cubes shaped like billiard balls. Cecilia hovered nearby making the right sorts of remarks and suggestions with little conviction, while Yumi stayed on the deck looking funereal and occasionally glancing at her phone. Dorian was attentive but quiet.

“We have to call an ambulance,” he said in a tone that Lily found unnecessarily authoritative. “Don’t worry, we’ll pay for it.”

“Money’s not the problem,” Lily shot back. “It’s the boat, the resources. The paramedics have to come up by water police. They cover the entire peninsula and we shouldn’t tie them up if it’s not a genuine emergency.”

“Truly, I’m fine,” Juliet insisted as she gasped with pain.

“I don’t like it,” said Casey. “Not one bit.”

A compromise was reached when Lily suggested they call the telephone nurse service, which they duly did, on speakerphone. Everyone added a bit to the story, including Yumi, who came in especially to say clearly that Juliet had been wearing three-inch platform wedges at the time. It was the first thing Lily had ever heard her say.

After some detailed description of the foot and the nature of the pain, the nurse concluded that it was probably a sprain, best to keep it elevated for twenty-four hours and see a doctor within forty-eight hours.

“I guess you’re not going home tonight, then,” said Casey in a way that suggested he wasn’t altogether displeased.

“If that’s okay,” said Lily, at which Casey and Dorian both assured her quite firmly that any attempt to move the patient was entirely out of the question, while Cecilia murmured her agreement as she tossed a salad.

“I’m starving. Can we eat already?” Cecilia said.

Casey looked to Lily. “Please join us for dinner. I’ll run back to get whatever Juliet needs from home.”

Lily was about to protest, but Juliet stopped her with one look. Her red-rimmed eyes begged Lily not to leave her there alone in such a vulnerable state with people she didn’t know well. Not yet. So Lily smiled, thanked Casey, and accepted the invitation gratefully, for Juliet’s sake. She flicked a glance to Dorian and was relieved that he had the decency to smile briefly at her, in a way that was not triumphant or mean or at all like a potato on a stick. Just in a way that suggested he was glad that the crisis was over and he understood and respected Lily’s decision to say no to dinner before and yes now.

“I’m so sorry,” said Juliet. “I don’t want to put you out.”

Casey reassured her she was welcome to stay as long as she liked. The cliff house’s rustic beach-shack aesthetic—raw wood, breezy louvered windows, and shabby chic furniture—was just set dressing for all the space and luxury of a five-star resort. With one suite farther up the cliff, another below, and three bedrooms on the main level, there was plenty of room for an extra guest.

“Oh! Yes, that’s a bedroom, isn’t it?” Cecilia said when Casey reminded her—upon his remarkably speedy return with a hastily packed bag for Juliet—that the smallest room was technically vacant, even though she and Yumi had festooned every available surface in it with clothes and accessories.

“The closet space here is so miserable,” Cecilia explained to Lily as she moved armfuls of designer wear off one of the single beds. “Can you, like, not put that there?”

Lily obediently moved Juliet’s small bag of belongings from the bedside table to her designated bed.

“I just don’t want her to lose her stuff, you know, in this mess. I’m so messy. It’s because I just don’t care about material things,” she explained as she fondled a watery-thin sweater. “See this, this is cashmere silk and

I've practically ruined it. It really should be in its own bag."

The beginning of dinner was awkward. Casey insisted on eating with Juliet on the couch to keep her company, and the two of them curled up in a private chat that no one else could hear. The dining table seemed rather too vast for four, and Lily felt like she'd never sat with people less able to conduct a sociable conversation. Yumi stared off into space, Dorian looked at his plate, and Cecilia checked her phone more than once.

"Oh look!" Cecilia squealed and thrust the screen at Dorian. "It's Sigrid! Oh my God, she's hilarious. Look, Yumi. That's so her." Her laughter subsided as she put the phone back down. "Dorian's sister," she explained to Lily. "We miss her so much."

"She's not joining you for Christmas?" Lily asked.

"No," said Dorian. "She's studying," he added shortly, as though there was nothing more that could possibly be said on the matter.

"She is supersmart," purred Cecilia. "Isn't she at, like, Oxford or somewhere?"

"Cambridge."

"It's like Harvard for England," she explained to Lily, who had to take a drink of water to keep from laughing. She didn't dare raise her eyes.

“I could never, like, study,” Cecilia went on. “I was so glad just to graduate high school.” Cecilia looked to Dorian for signs of approval and received none. “I mean, of course, I love learning. But I feel like you learn more from travel. Don’t you think? Dorian?”

“I’m not in a position to say.”

“I’m taking a gap year to work and travel before I go to university,” Lily said. “My friend Nicola and I are actually going to the US.”

Dorian looked up at this and Cecilia visibly bristled.

“That is so awesome! Where are you going? LA? Oh, that’s so great, I know all the best places to go, you will absolutely love it.” Cecilia smiled, showing her teeth. “I can’t believe you’ve finished school. I thought you were, like, fifteen.”

“It’s because,” declared Yumi, “she doesn’t do her hair or wear makeup.”

An hour later, Lily helped a drowsy Juliet into bed, handing over a small pack of painkillers she’d managed to source, said her goodbyes with much alacrity, descended the steps to the beach, and breathed a sigh of relief. What a debacle of a meal, just as she had foreseen. Yes, Casey was charming and fun, and Lily was confident he would take care of Juliet and shield her from any awkwardness. But the other three! Dorian,

all guarded and taciturn, who took any kind of question as a personal slight. Cecilia, fluttering around in front of him, constantly seeking his attention. And Yumi, who was just rude. If that was what passed for fashion, success, and a movie star lifestyle, Lily wanted nothing to do with it.

Juliet, warm in the glow of Casey's charm and slightly high on painkillers, shared none of Lily's judgment. Despite her sprained ankle, she fell asleep thinking she'd never had a more delightful evening.

# 6

Thankfully, when Lily got home that night, everyone was too involved in a very exciting card game to notice her return. She crept off to bed, glad to avoid the inevitable interrogation.

The next morning, she woke up to a cheery text from Juliet assuring her that all was well. Cecilia and Yumi had been so nice to her, she felt they were quite good friends. It turned out they had spent a week in the very same village where Juliet's parents were right now, in the French Alps! Lily smiled to herself. Connections and shared privilege had, no doubt, brought out the haughty girls' best.

It wasn't until after breakfast, when Lydia was doing her habitual sweep of the water and the cliff house with her telescope, that she realized that with her own niece up there, she, Lydia, had a perfectly natural reason to supplement her long-distance stalking with a personal visit. Rosie and Kat whooped with excitement at the

prospect. It was all Lily could do to dissuade them from trooping up the steps straightaway like some colorful parade of amateur cheerleaders.

“It’s too early. I’ll go later. You stay here,” she begged. “There is absolutely nothing you can do for Juliet that I can’t do better by myself.”

Everyone agreed this was true, but it was no reason for them not to go because they had no intention of doing anything to help anyway. They wanted to check out the boys and the house, and Lydia declared that her status as a local resident more than entitled her to take a look at the recent renovation, injured niece or no. Lily was genuinely worried they would all barrel in and forget Juliet was even there. Lily persuaded them to go for a swim first (tide was high), then slipped off toward the cliff house while they were still in the water, hopeful to make it there and back without them noticing and to report no need for further visits.

To her relief, Lily found Juliet recovered enough to stop all talk of calling a doctor so close to Christmas. She could hobble with assistance, and Casey delighted in carrying her piggyback wherever she wanted to go. Unfortunately, the descent back down the steps was still impossible.

Lily refused Casey’s offer of coffee, made a quick note

of what Juliet needed from home, and was just about to leave when Lydia's voice floated up from the beach steps below. "Yoo-hoo! It's only me!"

"No need to come, all good here," Lily yelled back—but Lydia was already there, red-faced, wearing silly shoes and a sparkling animal-print maxi dress and declaring how lovely the view was from this particular spot. Rosie and Kat crowded behind her, bursting with glee at their proximity to fame.

"Best view in Pippi," Lydia declared, "and I ought to know because I've been in every single house on the headland and, LORD, isn't this a nice reno?"

Before Lily could stop her, she was in the kitchen checking out the soft-closing drawers, commenting on the brand and model of the dishwasher, and talking prices.

"I mean, you can get a perfectly good kitchen for twenty grand if you're prepared to do your homework."

Casey asked if she knew the owners—a polite inquiry, designed to relieve the awkwardness—which Lydia took as an invitation for a long monologue about who owned the house now, who owned it before, the builders, the architect, and how much they spent on the renovation.

"You know how much those taps cost? Five hundred dollars. Each. And you can get the same thing at the

hardware store at the Point for fifty. Have you been? You should go, it's Saturday. On Saturdays they have a sausage sizzle. You know, sausage in bread? Love me a sausage," Lydia laughed.

Dorian stood on the threshold to the deck, silent and serious, as Lily desperately tried to stop the unfolding disaster.

"Anyway, we'd better leave you all to it—" Lily began, signaling "no" with her eyes at Rosie, who had picked up an ornamental seashell. Lydia continued as though she hadn't heard Lily at all and segued into bragging about her own house.

"Mine and my sister's, but she's hardly ever here and I'm the one who cleans the toilets! Ha ha ha! Seriously, I mean, this view is great, but I nearly busted a lung getting up here. You need a bloody donkey. It's so much better on the beachfront than the cliffs; the houses up here are an absolute nightmare to keep clean."

Lily saw a look pass between Cecilia and Yumi that was as clear as if they'd said it out loud: cleaning and carrying things were not their concern.

"I know you're only here for three weeks," Lydia went on, "but you would have gotten the discount if—"

"Excuse me," interrupted Dorian. "How do you know how long we're staying?"

Lily and Juliet cringed as Lydia expanded, completely oblivious to Dorian's implication.

"Oh, my mate Michelle at the agency. No secrets here. So I know if you'd taken it for the full month, it's much better value, PLUS you get the cleaning included mid-stay, which you haven't, so—" She fished a gold-edged card from her cleavage. Lily wanted to die. "Ooh, it's all warm. Just popped it there for the climb." Lydia wiped it on her maxi dress and offered it to an astonished Casey. "Call me if you want a quick refresh. I don't do much myself over the summer, but my mate Birdie can get you her new girl, fresh off the boat. She can't speak English, but she does hotels and everything."

Lily went red, Yumi's face froze, Dorian went stony, Casey's mouth fell open, and Juliet bit her lip.

"Mum!" Lily said.

"What?"

"You can't say that."

"Say what? What are you, the PC police? We're among friends, aren't we?"

"I'm sure you didn't mean to offend," assured Casey to relieve Lily's (and Juliet's) obvious distress, to which Lydia remained oblivious.

"Now we really have to go," said Lily as she bodily

pushed her mother back out to the deck, wildly scanning the room to see where Rosie and Kat had gone.

“What’s the rush?” protested Lydia.

“We haven’t even seen the upstairs yet,” added Rosie, wandering out from the bathroom holding a fancy bar of soap to her nose. “Here, smell this.”

“We have to leave them to their holiday,” Lily hissed as she snatched the soap and returned it, her face burning.

“It’s so lovely,” continued Lydia. “You must be loving it away from the big city.”

“Very peaceful, yes,” agreed Casey.

“SO peaceful!” screeched Lydia. “Get it while you can! Just you wait till New Year’s, this place will go off. Boats everywhere!”

“We’re not staying for New Year’s,” said Cecilia, as though this ought to be obvious.

“We’re seeing the fireworks,” explained Casey. “On Sydney Harbor, we have a friend with a—”

But he was drowned out by a chorus of dismay from Rosie and Kat.

“You have to be here on New Year’s,” whined Rosie.

“It’s the best day of the whole year,” Kat insisted. “Races, sand sculpture contest, there’s a talent show—”

“A band!” added Lydia. “They play all the good

songs—everyone joins in—you’ll absolutely love it,” she shouted with the particular conviction that extroverts seem to have when it comes to the preferences of strangers.

“Sydney on New Year’s is terrible,” Rosie declared.

“You can see fireworks anywhere,” said Kat. “Please stay!”

In the awkwardness of the moment, while Lily kept pushing them to leave and Dorian stood as silent as death and Cecilia looked inclined to laugh openly and Yumi ready to kill someone and Juliet about to cry, Casey promised that they would stay in Pippi Beach on New Year’s Eve.

# 7

Lily slipped back up to the cliff house before dinner in the hope that Juliet would now be well enough to come home. She was indeed much better and thought she could probably get down the steps with help, but Casey insisted there was no need to be brave.

“We love having you here,” said Casey, and Cecilia and Yumi backed him up so effusively that even Lily thought they meant it.

“You’re definitely safer here,” said Dorian with an air of authority that made Lily roll her eyes on the inside.

“He’s done a lot of damage to his ankles, knees, whatever, on set,” Casey explained. “We’ll move you down in the morning after another twelve hours of keeping it elevated.”

Juliet was easily convinced. Lily less so, but she was hardly in a position to object. When Casey asked her to stay for dinner again (“We’re getting delivery! By boat!”)

and Juliet assured her it would be fun, she gave in, accepted a cocktail, and shot a text back home to say not to wait for her for dinner. Two nights in a row at the cliff house. Yet this time the atmosphere was very different.

The previous evening had been overshadowed by Juliet's pain, the adrenaline spike, and the awkwardness of new acquaintance. The emergency was over now, and a whole night and a day later, Juliet felt accepted. She sat at the table next to Casey, perfectly relaxed and happy. Lily, however, was very aware she was on the other side of a growing gulf. While she was glad to be there for Juliet's sake, and enjoyed the lighthearted chat about previous emergencies, falls, and injuries, she was very conscious of the impression she—and her family—had made on Cecilia and Yumi. Last night, she felt they had judged her as smart and sly. Now, after properly meeting her mother, they knew she was most definitely the poor cousin.

But she cared too little about what they thought of her to be very uncomfortable. Casey was a charming host who kept the atmosphere buoyant. He entertained them all with anecdotes of on-set antics, pranks in five-star hotels, and encounters with outrageously famous celebrities. Lily enjoyed seeing him make Juliet laugh.

She found it even more amusing to watch the American girls' performance of being charmingly entertained, which she rightly guessed was very much for Dorian's benefit. Dorian himself, meanwhile, sat slightly apart, engaged little in the conversation, told no fun anecdotes of his own, and didn't even add to the ones in which he featured. Soon after dinner, he checked the time and stood up to leave.

"Excuse me, I have a meeting. I'll be back in twenty minutes."

"Nooooo!" whined Cecilia.

"Oh come on, we're on vacation!" complained Casey.

"I won't be long."

"Then why go?"

"Because it's a workday in London and my team is working for me."

"Ugh, that word," slurred Cecilia, who had already had a cocktail and two shots. "Work! How can you even say it? I won't let you go. No, I won't. You'll have to kill me first." She stuck a high-heeled leg across to the coffee table to prevent him from leaving.

"I'm going."

"You beast."

She ran her foot up his thigh. Dorian caught her ankle

and placed it on the floor casually but firmly. And while Cecilia visibly fluttered at his touch, he was unmoved, as though he'd just removed a slightly bothersome insect.

"If you're not back in twenty minutes, I'm coming out to get you!" she called after him. "In my underwear!" she added with a laugh. "I mean, no online meeting's complete without it, right?"

Lily suspected the scene of Cecilia interrupting a meeting in her underwear would have been a good one, but it didn't come to that. True to his word, Dorian reappeared within twenty minutes.

"Everyone! He's back!" Cecilia announced. "Working, on vacation, during a party. I mean, the rabble think that people like us don't work, but you know what, we work so hard. So hard." She mourned into her cocktail.

"You save the world out there?" asked Casey.

"I saved my schedule."

"Good for you, man, good for you. I would not sacrifice this moment—this view, this company—for anything." Casey spread his arms and looked straight at Juliet.

"Unless you had to," said Dorian. "And I reminded you."

"You would too! Meetings, schedules, budgets, scripts, endorsements. You're all—bam!" He punched a hand

for emphasis. “And I’m all—what?” He fluttered his hands in circles. “Having a good time.”

“Ha,” said Dorian.

“What can I say. I’m embarrassed.”

“No you’re not; you’re showing off.”

“You’re right!” crowed Casey, clearly enjoying himself.

“You’re always right!”

“I’m not always right and I’m not always working.”

“Dude, you literally just came out of a meeting.”

“It was important and now it’s over.”

“So what constitutes ‘important?’” asked Lily.

All eyes turned to her. Should she go on? It was too late; she had waded in. She thought it was pretty rich for Dorian to call Casey out for showing off when he made such a performance out of a phone call.

“I mean, some things are more important than work,” said Lily.

“That is true,” conceded Dorian, with a sarcastic edge. “Perhaps I prioritized my meeting unfairly. Did I miss anything crucial?”

“Yes, actually,” put in Cecilia. “My shoulder strap broke. See?” She pointed to where she’d fixed it with a safety pin.

Dorian remained unmoved and Lily remained determined to push him out of his smugness.

“I’m just pointing out that where we draw the line is up to us. Casey puts fun and friends before work. Is that such a bad thing?” Lily said.

“It depends on the work. What its needs are.”

“What about your needs? Your family’s needs, the community’s needs. Your friends. The environment. There has to be a point where ‘the work’ comes second. Don’t you think?”

“No offense,” sniffed Cecilia, “but, honey, you don’t work in the industry.”

“The industry is irrelevant.”

“No it’s not,” insisted Cecilia, who was pretty sure this Lily girl was making fun of her but was unsure exactly how. “He’s Dorian Khan.”

“My work is no more important than any other kind,” interrupted Dorian. “I just have high standards.”

“It’s not like manual labor,” Cecilia went on.

Lily smiled in the awkward pause that followed. “I’m sure whoever built this house with manual labor had standards too,” she said.

“Do you think they compromised their work for their friends?” Dorian asked.

“The house would have been built faster if the builders never went surfing. It could have been bigger

too, but the owners thought it was important to preserve the look of the headland.”

“Come on, man, she’s just messing with you,” said Casey in a conciliatory tone.

Lily shrugged to make it clear that she was not at all invested. Why was he always so serious? “I’m just making conversation. Wondering aloud about how we decide our priorities.”

“Well, there’s nothing wrong with Dorian’s priorities. He always shows up for the people who matter,” Cecilia asserted, with a pointed look that suggested that Lily was not such a person.

“Now, that is true,” agreed Casey.

Lily smiled at how quick Casey and Cecilia were to defend their friend—who also happened to be the most powerful person in the room. Perhaps the thought that he could ever be wrong about anything had never entered their heads. Or Dorian’s.

Lily felt his eyes on her for the rest of the evening. She wondered why. She couldn’t imagine Dorian was at all disturbed by what she had said, or was interested in her, except maybe as a curiosity. To him, she was probably a creature from another world or a deeply flawed individual who invited further study as some

kind of example of how things could go wrong. Perhaps he was irritated by how little she cared about how she presented herself or what others thought of her. Surely he didn't get to his current position without caring deeply about both. He always seemed to be on guard, and that would take up a lot of energy. And his accent, part-London-part-posh, struck Lily as another aspect of his persona that just seemed careful and cultivated, especially considering he was born in Geelong. Perhaps behind it, he was an outsider too. She felt she disrupted his world somehow, but she wasn't sure whether it was her everydayness or her unique qualities as a Pippi Beach girl who lived among millionaires' mansions, whose mother's job was cleaning them. She couldn't help wondering if Dorian had ever encountered anyone who was not actively trying to impress him, working for him, or wanting something from him. Certainly, Cecilia and Yumi seemed to be all three.

While she couldn't work out what her effect on Dorian might be, she didn't spend too much time wondering. She had no doubts at all about what she thought of him, and he was quite clearly not worth her attention. Yes, he was obscenely good-looking; there were moments when Lily observed him thinking, or looking at the view, or bantering with Casey and it was

like watching him in a movie. Lily half expected him to put in a call to spy headquarters on his watch. But she was quite satisfied that her first impressions of him had proven right. Whatever talent and intelligence this person may have was ruined by his arrogance, entitlement, and inflated sense of his own importance. And he was obviously paid too much.

When dessert was finished, Yumi called everyone out to the deck to admire the moon.

“Feel the vibrations,” she demanded.

Casey and Juliet were far too comfortable on the couch, but Lily was drawn to the fresh salt air. Out on the deck, with the water beneath and the stars above, Lily caught Dorian looking at her again, and really, it was too much. Sure, the camera might love unreadable brooding glances, but in real life they were just strange. So she returned his stare.

“Do I have something on my face?”

“No, of course not.”

He frowned slightly and looked away.

She laughed. “Sorry. I suppose I’m not as used to being looked at as you all are.”

Which led to great protests from Cecilia, who insisted she was completely unaware of how she looked.

“I just never think about it,” she opined as she lolled

on the railing in front of Dorian. “And so many of my friends are so obsessed with their appearance, they have, like, mental health issues. It’s sad.” She tilted her gaze downward. “Oh my GOD! Casey, why didn’t you tell me your deck had a hot tub? I adore a hot tub. Yumi, come on!”

Cecilia and Yumi fled to Juliet’s room to change into their bikinis.

“Did you want to join them?” Dorian asked Lily. At least he had the sensitivity to notice the slight.

Lily laughed. “Oh no. I wouldn’t want to spoil the performance.”

Dorian and Lily were now alone on the main deck with the moonlight, but it was Cecilia and Yumi on the deck below who commanded their attention as they splashed, giggled, and marveled at how peaceful it was and how little they cared if anyone watched.

## 8

Lily soon felt she had seen quite enough of Cecilia and Yumi in the tub, and as Juliet was deep in conversation with Casey on the couch, and Dorian had lapsed into silence, she decided it was time to go.

“I’ll leave you to your evening. Thanks again. I’ll just take these to the jetty with me,” she announced, gathering up the food boxes and scraps. She was surprised when Dorian joined her.

“I’ll come with you,” he said.

“I’m going down anyway.”

“So am I.”

Lily suddenly remembered what she’d said to Nicola the previous week: “I wouldn’t walk with him to the end of the jetty.” But it wasn’t as simple as that now. He had been oddly kind to her and Juliet, and though she knew she’d get an earful from Nicola later, walking down to the jetty laden with garbage was hardly a romantic stroll.

“All right. Thanks.” And she offered him one of the bags.

“Taking out the trash, Lily?” Cecilia called from the hot tub as they passed the lower deck. “Oh, and you’ve got the garbage as well, how kind.”

“Very funny, Cece,” said Dorian without a glance in her direction.

“You know I love you. Wait there, we’ll come.”

Lily paused and shifted the weight of the recycling box onto her hip. Here we go, she thought. Mission accomplished. Dorian now had to stop and look as Cecilia stood up in the tub in her bikini, skin steaming as it hit the air, glistening in the light from the bedroom inside. Oh boy.

Lily observed Yumi struggle with the dilemma. Should she follow Cece as usual or stay in the warm water as the night air cooled?

“I’m never leaving this tub,” Yumi said eventually.

Cecilia didn’t seem to care. She dabbed herself with a towel and threw on a diaphanous robe. She didn’t offer to carry any bags.

Cecilia led the way down to the beach, chatting airily, as Dorian and Lily followed in silence. All three of them kept to the shadows as they passed the beachfront house, though mercifully none of Lily’s family was

out on the deck. It wasn't until they had deposited the garbage and recycling in the public bins ("How adorably communist!" squealed Cecilia) that Lily realized she'd left her phone up at the cliff house.

"You can just get it in the morning," Cecilia offered. Was she eager to rid herself of Lily so she could enjoy a moonlit walk with Dorian? Lily would have been glad to leave them to it, but she didn't want Juliet up at the cliff house without direct contact with her only reasonable and tactful family member.

"I'd prefer to have it tonight," Lily said, and so they set off back toward the cliff house with a running commentary from Cecilia about how little she relied on her phone because social media could be so toxic if you didn't use it right.

Dorian silently ushered the party off the path and down the beach to walk back along the water's edge. Typical, Lily thought. Why should he lead the way? It was annoying how naturally he assumed control, even if this was the way she would have chosen herself. They all removed their shoes, and Cecilia's chatter subsided in the majesty of the night. Even after all her years of living at Pippi, Lily never got over its quiet beauty once the sun went down. Outside the pools of light from the houses, Pippi glowed with its own silvery energy. The

dunes rustled with the breeze and animals, crabs scuttled across the sand, and cicadas buzzed.

“I feel so connected to nature right now,” Cecilia mused as she picturesquely flicked long tendrils of damp hair and stretched her neck.

“You look it,” Lily said with a smile.

“The water is so calm,” Cecilia continued. “Oh my God. Let’s swim!” She flung off her robe, stretched her arms to the stars, and lunged into the shallows with a delighted shriek. “What are you waiting for?”

Lily looked at Dorian.

“Too much nature?” Lily asked, amused.

Dorian didn’t reply. She could barely make out his features to see what he was thinking, but she hardly cared. It was a beautiful night. Why shouldn’t they swim? With as much businesslike speed as possible, she stripped down to the swimsuit she was wearing under her clothes and followed Cecilia in.

“Don’t drown,” Dorian called after them.

The water was lovely. The surface was as smooth as silk and still warm from the heat of the day. Lily dipped under and relished the feeling of salt water on her skin. When she resurfaced, Cecilia was standing closer to the beach, calling out to Dorian.