THE UNEXPECTED NEW BEST FRIEND

A SHORT STORY

A.E. RADLEY
The sound of the doorbell rang throughout the downstairs of the house. Caroline sighed and rolled her eyes.

It was typical, really. She’d taken a parcel in for a neighbour seven hours ago.

And, for the last seven hours, she had waited for the owner of the parcel, Alex Carlisle according to the address label, to arrive.

But nothing.

Nothing until Caroline was at the most crucial stages of preparing her evening meal. She turned down the heat on the hob and grabbed a tea towel to wipe her hands as she walked towards the front door.

She hadn’t even wanted to take the damn parcel. She hated the new trend of delivery people leaving a delivery with a neighbour rather than taking the delivery to a depot. Or, better still, returning at a later time.

Suddenly, she was having to meet her neighbours. Neighbours she had carefully tried to avoid over the months she had lived in her small cottage. She had never managed to
perfect the art of small talk. Coming up with feeble comments about the state of the weather just wasn’t something she was interested in.

But the UK delivery drivers had rallied against her. She was doomed; the only person in the street at home during the day. A new link in the delivery chain. Online store, delivery driver, Caroline, consumer.

Worse still, the neighbours turned up whenever they felt like it. Like during dinner preparations.

But what could she do? The delivery may well be for her. If she didn’t answer the door then a parcel for her may be delivered to one of her neighbours and she’d be the one going to them and making polite but pointless conversation on their doorstep.

No, this was the best solution. In this scenario, she was in control. She could hand over the parcel and slam the door closed whenever she desired.

She stepped into the hall and checked her appearance in the mirror before turning towards the door. She opened the door and paused.

She’d been expecting a man; Alex Carlisle as promised on the address label.

Instead, a woman in her thirties stood in front of her. For some unfathomable reason, she was dressed as a witch. She wore stripy tights with big, black boots. She also had a torn black dress with a cape that drifted in the slight breeze. Her long, brown hair cascaded from under a pointy witch’s hat, and her face was painted a lighter shade.

“Trick or treat.” The woman grinned. “Kidding, I’m Alex. You took in a parcel for me?”

Caroline blinked. “Oh, yes, I…” She turned around and picked up the package from the floor. She hadn’t been
expecting a woman and she certainly hadn’t been expecting a witch. But then Halloween was only a few days away. Wordlessly, she handed over the box.

“Good thing you were at home,” Alex said as she took the parcel.

“I work from home.”

She didn’t really know why she was making small talk with the woman. She should have complained about being put out by the delivery and slammed the door shut by now.

“Oh, what do you do?” Alex asked.

Caroline winced. She hated this line of questioning, it always led in the same direction.

“I’m an author,” she said. She waited for the endless questions about what kind of books and if they were in bookstores. No one understood the modern-day intricacies of the publishing world.

“Ah. You’re making dinner late in the evening,” Alex said as she gestured to Caroline’s apron.

Caroline opened and closed her mouth. She didn’t know what to reply. She’d been swept up in her latest chapter and had lost track of time. Not that it was any of Alex’s business.

She was also shocked that news of her profession hadn’t gone in the usual direction. Where were the questions about how much money she made selling books? Or if she made real books or only eBooks?

“Be honest,” Alex said before Caroline could think of what to say next. “Does this nose look like a witch’s nose or is it just disgusting? I mean, I want it to look spooky and witch-like, but I don’t want people to lose their lunch.”

“Um. I-it’s fine.”

“I thought so.” Alex nodded sagely. As sagely as she could consider she was staring at the plastic nose attached to her own face with a cross-eyed look.
“David at work said it put him off his spam sandwich. But, frankly, if you’re eating a spam sandwich then you must have a cast-iron stomach to start with. Do you like spam?”

“Um. No.” Caroline shook her head. She had no idea why the woman was talking so much. Or why she hadn’t already slammed the door in her face and gone back to preparing dinner.

“It’s too low cut, isn’t it?” Alex asked. She looked down at her chest. “I thought this would fit me but it’s just a bit too much cleavage, right? My mum would go insane if she saw me in this.”

Alex grabbed a fistful of the material and attempted to cover herself.

“It’s fine.” Caroline realised she’d been staring and dragged her eyes up to meet Alex’s.

“So, it’s good to know you’ll always be in,” Alex said. “Why they deliver in the middle of the day I don’t know. Everyone’s at work. Well, everyone except you. Good to know. I’ll put you down as my alternative address. See you later, neighbour!”

She watched Alex walked away, her mouth opened in shock.

Suddenly, she realised she was about to become a very permanent link in the delivery chain.

“Now, wait a minute!” Caroline called out.

Behind her the smoke alarm sounded and she realised she hadn’t turned the oven off, only the hob.

“Better check your dinner,” Alex called back. “See you soon. I’m expecting a delivery tomorrow!”

The doorbell sounded.
Caroline groaned out loud. She’d heard the tell-tale sound of a van pulling up outside and that meant one thing: a delivery.

While preparing for bed the night before, she’d made a decision. She wouldn’t answer the door and she wouldn’t take in any delivery for Alex Carlisle. It was simple and fool proof.

Until the morning when she received an email informing her that her specialist ink had finally made it out of customs. The Brussels customs department finally agreed with her that it was just ink and not a deadly toxin to be released upon the general public.

That meant she had to answer the door if she wanted her precious ink. The ink she had been waiting two whole months for.

Saving twenty-five percent and having it delivered from Hong Kong, via Brussels, had seemed like a great idea at the time. But now she wished she’d paid extra and used her usual supplier, then she wouldn’t the stress of taking in another delivery.

She pushed away from her desk, clicking the save icon before she left the room. It was a habit she couldn’t break; she saved her documents at least once a minute. Even when nothing had changed.

She walked through the hallway, checked her appearance in the mirror, and opened the door.

It was the same delivery man as the previous day.
“Good morning,” he greeted. “Package for you.”

*Just as chipper as yesterday,* she mused.

“Hello.”

He held out a padded envelope that looked like it had gone ten rounds with a world heavyweight. She took it between her thumb and forefinger and looked at it forlornly.

“It was like that when I got it,” he explained.
Considering the package had been on an all-expenses-paid trip around the world, she couldn’t be surprised at the state of it.

“Could you take another package in for number seventeen?” He asked, already handing it over before she agreed.

With no real opportunity to say no, she took the parcel.

He tapped some buttons on an electronic device and then held it out to her.

“Sign here, please.”

The screen was scratched and smudged. Probably home to a million kinds of bacteria and possibly one or two new forms of life. She looked up at him with a raised eyebrow, silently wondering as to a stylus she could use.

“Just use your finger,” he suggested.

She adjusted the packages in her arms and took the device. She attempted to conceal a wince at the damp feel of the underside of the machine. She pointed her index finger at the screen and tried to write a legible signature. She managed half a C and something that looked like a dead spider.

He took the machine from her. “Have a nice day,” he said, already on the way back to his van.

She closed the door, locked it, and applied the chain for good measure.

She put the two packages on telephone table in the hallway. She wondered why her package looked like it had been caught up in a controlled explosion while Alex’s parcel was immaculate.

She picked up Alex’s pristine parcel and turned it over. There was no return address, no company name, no indication of what it was. The postmark said London, which was woefully unhelpful.

She held it up and examined it.
It could be a book, she thought. Or a DVD boxset. She seems like the person who would waste her brain cells in front of the television for hours and hours.

She shook it. There was no identifying sound. She sighed and put it back on the table. She picked up her embarrassment of a jiffy bag and stalked back to her office.

The doorbell rang. Caroline groaned again. She’d deliberately starting cooking dinner earlier so that Alex wouldn’t interrupt her again.

She turned off the hob, and the oven this time.

She walked into the hall, checked her reflection, and then opened the door.

“What do you think?” Alex asked.

Caroline let out a sigh. This time Alex wore a white sheet with two holes cut out for her eyes to see through.

“A masterpiece,” she drawled.

“I was over thinking things with the witch outfit; this is easy. And I can take it off on the train. Although, if the wind blows in a certain direction, it moves the sheet and then I can’t see anything.”

“Well, we must suffer for our art.” Caroline picked up the package and held it out.

“Hold on,” Alex said. The bottom of the sheet shifted and eventually a hand popped out.

Caroline took a step forward and placed the parcel into the waiting hand.

“I’ve been upgraded,” Alex said. “Yesterday I was on the floor. Today I’m on a table. You must like me.”

Caroline turned around and looked at the table. She spun back to look at Alex.
“This parcel was smaller, it fit on the table,” she explained.
“David offered me a Spam sandwich today,” Alex said. “God forbid you insult a man’s spam sandwich. He made me one special, can you believe it?”
“No, I cannot,” Caroline said.
“Disgusting. Can I offer you a piece of advice?”
“I think you will anyway.”
“If anyone offers you a Spam sandwich, decline. It’s just as gross as you think.”
“I’ll do that.”
Alex pointed to Caroline’s apron. “So, are you cooking something fancy that takes hours or are you having dinner earlier today?”
Caroline couldn’t believe the audacity of the woman. It seemed that there was no barrier between thought and speech.
“Why are you dressed as a ghost?” Caroline asked, deciding the only way to be on the front foot was to beat the woman at her own game.
“I told you, it’s so much easier than the witch outfit. Oh, I have to get going. I just remembered I have to take something out of the freezer.” The ghost turned around started to walk away.
Caroline shook her head in dismay. Getting a straight answer out of Alex Carlisle was like pulling teeth. She stepped back into the house.
“Oh, by the way,” Alex called out before she could close the door.
Caroline looked up at her. “Yes.”
“Thank you for taking in the parcel.”
“Oh, you’re welcome.” Caroline was relieved that manners weren’t completely dead.
“’Night,” Alex said as she walked away.
“Goodnight,” Caroline called after her.
She started to close the door.
“See you tomorrow.”
Caroline threw the door open again. “Tomorrow?!”
Alex was across the street by now. A ridiculous looking figure in a white sheet with a hand clutching a parcel.
“Yeah. I have another parcel coming. ’Night!”
Caroline stepped forward, ready to shout that she wasn’t Alex’s personal delivery acceptance service, but she refused to stoop to the level of bellowing across the street.

The next morning Caroline decided that she wasn’t going to be a link in the preposterous delivery chain for a moment longer. She had no deliveries due that day and so she would simply not answer the door.

When the time came, and she heard the doorbell sound, she simply placed her headphones on and turned the volume up. Despite the loud sounds of Classic FM, she could still hear the doorbell ringing and the delivery man knocking on the door. She couldn’t blame him, she was always in. He presumably thought she hadn’t heard him and was doing his best to get the delivery to her.

Eventually he gave up and went away.

Despite having won the delivery battle she felt empty. She couldn’t focus on work. No words were coming to her and she ended up browsing the Internet under the guise of research.

After an hour of zero productivity, she decided that she needed some fresh air. She stood up and looked out the
window, grimacing at the tracks of raindrops that slid down the glass.

She hesitated for a moment before reminding herself of her father’s motto that rain never hurt anyone. She got her handbag ready with the essentials she’d need for a quick trip into town and grabbed her coat from the rack.

She picked up her keys, opened the front door and was surprised to hear a small thud.

She looked down at the welcome mat and let out a groan.

A small parcel had been propped up against the door, presumably by the moronic delivery man. She bent down and picked it up. The damp cardboard squished beneath her fingers.

She read the address label and realised that Alex had put her name with Caroline’s address as a care of.

“As if she bloody well lives here,” Caroline grumbled.

She slammed the front door closed and put the parcel on the telephone table. She glared at it and sighed. She may not want to be a link in the delivery chain but if she was destined to be one then she wanted to do the job properly.

The parcel was damp, squashed, and mucky.

She shook her head. It had to be fixed.

She took the parcel into the kitchen. Placing two clean sheets of kitchen paper down on the work top, she delicately placed the parcel on top. Then she put two more pieces of kitchen paper on top, effectively creating a bed for the poor cardboard box.

She lifted the paper. It still looked like it had been dragged through a wet hedge.

Removing her coat, she reached into her bag and pulled out her phone. She started googling how to repair a wet cardboard box. She scrolled through the results and
eventually came across a result that a few people claimed worked.

She opened the utility cupboard in the kitchen and took out the ironing board, the iron, and a fresh tea towel.

The second half of the door chime had barely had time to stop reverberating around the hall when Caroline swished the front door open. She held out the parcel.

“It got wet,” she explained. “I was out. The delivery man left it on my doorstep for some unknown reason.”

This time, Alex was dressed in a floor-length red and black dress with a high-neck collar. Her hair cascaded over her shoulders, her make-up fierce and dark, a trail of fake blood dribbling down her lip.

She took the parcel and glanced at it half-heartedly.

“Looks fine to me,” she said.

Caroline let out a sigh of relief. An hour of ironing the package followed by two hours on a low heat in the oven made the box look brand new. She was rather impressed.

“So…” Caroline looked up and down Alex’s latest outfit.

“You’re a vampire today?”

“I am.” Alex performed a twirl. “What do you think?”

Caroline didn’t have a reply ready.

“Do you have a cat?” Alex asked.

“A… cat? No.”

“Are you a dog person?”

“I’m not really an animal person,” Caroline confessed.

“Me neither. Everyone always says you should be a cat person, or a dog person. I don’t care much for either. Don’t get me wrong, I wouldn’t drop kick one across the street or anything but… nah.”
As was becoming usual in these evening chats, Caroline felt completely turned around within moments. Despite spending most of the day coming up with questions she could ask Alex, and answers to bizarre questions Alex had previously asked her. She came up blank.

“Anyway, here you go,” Alex thrust the parcel back towards Caroline.

Caroline looked at it in confusion. “It’s for you.”

“No, it’s for you,” Alex corrected.

Caroline tentatively took the parcel and looked at Alex with a raised eyebrow.

“It’s a thank you, for taking in my mail. Kinda ironic that your thank you for taking in my mail comes in the form of mail you also took in for me. Anyway, enjoy!” Alex turned on her heel and walked away.

Caroline looked at the parcel in her hand in shock. She’d spent all day restoring the packaging for something that was hers.

She closed the door and ripped open the parcel.

“Oh, for god’s sake...” she mumbled upon seeing a box of, now thoroughly melted, chocolates.

Three weeks went by without any deliveries. Nor any sign of Alex. Caroline thought she should have been overjoyed but, in fact, she felt distracted.

After the first week, she had created a new character for her latest book. She was a neighbour of the protagonist and completely insane. In the second week, she smoothed out the neighbour’s personality traits as she felt she had been unfair in her first draft. As she delved deeper into her new
character, it wasn’t lost on her that she was analysing, and missing, Alex.

By the third week she was completely preoccupied with thoughts of Alex. Where was she? Why did she not have any more deliveries? Why did she always wear Halloween outfits? Why did she answer questions with questions?

She knew she could answer all the questions by simply going over to Alex’s house and knocking on the door. She knew where she lived, after all. And it wasn’t like Alex was the kind of person who would turn her away. Alex liked to talk. She’d probably invite her in, offer her a drink. All the things that Caroline now wished she had done when she had the chance.

But Caroline wasn’t a social kind of person. She didn’t knock on other people’s doors. It was in her nature to avoid other people wherever possible. She was an author for heaven’s sake. The very epitome of a hermit.

But this hermit was looking out of the window at every opportunity, trying to figure out where Alex was.

A thought crossed her mind that maybe Alex had moved. It seemed unthinkable that she wouldn’t see Alex again. That she hadn’t had a chance to say goodbye. Not that Alex would have allowed her the opportunity to squeeze in the word “goodbye” anyway. She’d probably steer the subject onto something ridiculous like her favourite flavour of pie or if she’d ever been skiing.

She had to do something. The not knowing was intolerable.

With that in mind, Caroline formulated a plan.

Caroline looked at her reflection in the hall mirror and fussed
with her hair. Her plan had worked. But now the moment had arrived, she wished she’d never gone through with it.

It had involved speaking with a courier company, in a fake Welsh accent just in case anyone realised she was sending a delivery to herself. Then she had to spend the last three hours out of the house, drinking far too much coffee at the local trendy coffee shop.

She hated the trendy coffee shop. The coffee was vile and overpriced but, for reasons she couldn’t fathom, it was always full. Usually with pretentious students who were talking about regional politics.

She had fought the urge to stand on her stool and yell, “the Governmental whitepaper on transport in the North of England is one thing but I paid three pounds twenty for a thimble of coffee that took twelve minutes to make and tastes like dishwater.”

None of them would have listened. She was invisible. Always had been. But Alex seemed to see her, seemed to like to talk to her. At least she hoped that was the case. A part of her wondered if Alex was mentally unbalanced and chatted to everyone. She’d soon find out.

She’d returned home and picked up the “while you were out” card that she knew would be laying on her doormat. She had very specifically told the courier company to deliver to Alex’s address in the unlikely event that the recipient was out.

Of course, she was the recipient and she had planned to most definitely be out.

Now, she just hoped that her plan would work. Or her extremely expensive out of hours courier delivery plan would be a waste of time, money, and stomach acid on that swill that some people called coffee.

She checked her appearance one last time before heading
out and crossing the street towards Alex’s house. It was cold. In her haste to see her plan through, she’d forgotten to bring a coat. She shoved her hands into her trouser pockets and hurried up the small pathway to Alex’s house.

The house was small. Definitely smaller than her cottage. It was modern and well kept. Except the garden, which was a little overgrown in places. She stood on the step and let out an anxious breath.

She didn’t have time to press the doorbell when the door was flung open.

“Hey, I saw you walking up the path.”

Caroline looked at Alex for the first time in three weeks. It seemed like a lifetime ago. Alex wore a pair of smart black jeans and a fitted cream woollen sweater. Caroline was pleased to see that she did own normal clothes.

Then she heard the hum of activity coming from inside the house. The unmistakable sound of multiple conversations and muted background music.

She’s having a party, Caroline realised with horror. Her strange obsession with seeing Alex had her interrupting the middle of a party.

“Strange that this came so late in the day,” Alex said. She was holding out the parcel for Caroline to take.

“No Halloween costume today?” Caroline asked. She took the parcel.

Alex laughed and looked down at her clothes.

“No, only at work. I work at a fancy-dress warehouse.”

“Ah!” The jigsaw pieces fell into place.

“I wanted to thank you, for the chocolates,” Caroline said, suddenly remembering her pre-prepared speech. This could be the last chance she got.

“Thank you for taking in parcels for me,” Alex returned. “I... haven’t seen you recently?”
“I haven’t ordered anything to be delivered.”
Caroline bit her lip and nodded. She had no idea what else to say. She wasn’t the one who came up with random questions to prolong a conversation. She was out of her comfort zone. On a stranger’s doorstep. Interrupting a party.
A cold wind blew down the street and she shivered.
“I should go. Let you get back to your party. Thank you for... this.” She turned and started to make her escape.
A hand gripped her arm.
She turned and stared at Alex’s hand, wrapped around her bicep.
“Do you want to come in?” Alex asked.
She peered past Alex into the house. She saw some smartly dressed people, drinking wine and laughing. It looked like hell.
She shook her head. It was clearly a pity invite so she didn’t feel bad declining.
“I don’t want to interrupt, I should get back home...”
“I’ll walk you,” Alex said.
She let go of Caroline’s arm and pulled the front door closed.
“But... your guests?”
“It’s my housemates party. Come on, you’re freezing.” Alex looped her arm through Caroline’s and they walked across the road.
Caroline tried to think of something to say but her mind was coming up blank. Twenty-seven novels to her name and not a single sentence would surface when she most needed one.
All she could focus on was Alex’s arm holding hers, their bodies closer than she thought was appropriate for strangers. But maybe they weren’t strangers? Sure, Alex was the closest thing Caroline had to a friend, but Alex wasn’t to know that.
Sadly, the short walk home was exactly that: short. Alex let go of her arm.

“Home safe and sound. You can never tell with dangerous neighbours like ours.” Caroline looked up and down the quiet street.

“Yes, I’ve heard rumours of a strange woman walking around in all kinds of scary outfits.” Caroline had to stop herself from smiling triumphantly at finding something moderately witty to say.

“Yeah, you have to be careful. So, where were you tonight? Somewhere fun?”

Caroline felt heat on her cheeks. “A... party.” Alex smiled and folded her arms across her chest.

“Really? What a coincidence. You must have left it early?”

“Yes...” Caroline panicked. This wasn't how it was meant to go. She had an entire speech prepared. A speech which had left her and now she was floundering, and Alex had taken control of the conversation. Which meant anarchy.

“Would you like to come in?” Caroline threw out the invitation before she lost her nerve.

“Love to,” Alex said.

Caroline got her key from her pocket and opened the front door. She gestured towards the living room. Alex walked into the room and sat on the sofa. She crossed her legs and leaned back, instantly at home.

“Can I get you a drink?” Caroline asked. She stood in the doorway, nervously wringing her hands.

“Are you gay?” Alex asked.

Caroline blinked.

“Yes,” she whispered. Her knees trembled slightly. She was grateful for the doorway that she reached out to hold on to.

Alex let out a relieved breath. “Phew. I thought so. But
you’re hard to read. I am too, by the way. Gay, not hard to read. Well, I’m bi. I’d love a drink... whatever you have. Except beer. Beer makes me gassy. Why would anyone want to drink beer?”

A smile started to take over Caroline’s face without her permission.

“Wine?”
“Sure.”
“I’ll be back in a moment.”

Caroline hurried into the kitchen. She opened the fridge door and took a few deep breaths, relishing the cool breeze. In the last few moments her temperature had spiked with sheer terror. Or maybe it was something else. Maybe it was hope?

Of course, Alex would be bold enough to just ask whatever was on her mind.

And frankly, thank goodness. With Caroline in charge, it could have taken months.

She let out a long sigh of relief, silently thanked the delivery man, and grabbed a bottle of wine.

THE END
Thank you for downloading and reading this short story, I really hope you enjoyed it!

You may be interested in my other books and so I have included the first chapter of my latest releases for you to sample.
Kate Kennedy prides herself on running the very best advertising agency in Europe. One day her top client asks her to work on a lucrative project with the notoriously fastidious Georgina Masters, of the American agency Mastery. The temporary merger causes a fiery clash of cultures and personalities. Especially when Georgina sets her romantic sights on Kate’s young intern, Sophie.
“A sports car?” Kate repeated. She furrowed her brow at the idea.

“Yes, silver and red and really, really fast,” Yannis said.

He stood up and paced excitedly around the meeting room. Yannis was tall, over six feet. His lanky frame seemed at odds with his constant need to bound around.

Kate suppressed a chuckle as she watched him pace. She appreciated his enthusiasm, no one wanted to work with a miserable client. But Yannis was almost too enthusiastic. He switched from one major project to another without stopping to catch his breath.

“Why a sports car?” Kate queried.

“We build engines, sports cars need engines. This is fantastic,” he announced.

Kate suspected that Yannis felt his high-intensity enthusiasm would wear off on those around him. Bouncing around meeting rooms with excitement and informing people
that things were fantastic were his way of injecting passion into a project.

Yannis was certainly a successful businessman, but he also was primarily an ideas man. Leaving the details to others. Like her.

“It’s... different,” Kate allowed.

“Different is good. Exciting.” Yannis paused in front of the windows that overlooked the sprawling City of London. “We need to be different. We need to move, grow, change, adapt.” He leaned closer to the glass and peered out of the window. “You can see my house from here.”

Kate rolled her eyes good-naturedly. She stood up and walked around the meeting table to join him by the window. This wasn’t the first meeting she had spent chasing after the excitable man, and it probably wouldn’t be the last.

“This is east, yes?” He pointed out of the window. Before she could reply, he was staring intently into the distance, looking for landmarks.

“Yes,” she replied. “Yannis, let me just get this straight in my mind. Atrom are going to build a sports car—”

“Ten,” he corrected, still gazing over the city to get his bearings.

She felt her eyebrow raise. “Ten?”

“Ten,” he repeated. “Selling for a million pounds. We’ll only sell ten. I’m having one, of course.”

Kate looked skywards. “Right, okay. Atrom are going to build ten sports cars, each priced at one million pounds, and you will buy one for yourself?”

Yannis looked at her. He smiled and nodded his head. “Yes, that’s it. And this is big news, so I need my favourite marketing guru to tell the world for me.”

“And we’ll be more than happy to help,” Kate assured. “I
assume you want the works? Press releases, websites, viral campaigns, video campaigns, news slots?”

“Everything. International,” Yannis said. He looked at her seriously. “It is very important to me that this is international news.”

“That’s definitely something we can do.” Kate mentally put together a quick marketing brief. While she considered Yannis an idiot for investing in a project that was a glorified toy for himself, she welcomed the money the project would bring.

“It’s a big job,” he said.

“It is,” Kate agreed. Huge, in fact. Atrom Engineering was by far their biggest client, in terms of size and profitability. The introduction of a new product, and all that went with it, meant a huge amount of income for Kate’s agency, Red Door.

Yannis Papadakis was the kind of CEO that Kate adored. He was rich, eccentric, and didn’t think twice about spending a small fortune marketing his already successful engineering company.

“I had lunch in New York last week,” Yannis continued. “With Georgina Masters, you know her?”

Kate tried to control her grimace. “I’ve met her a couple of times. Award ceremonies, conferences. That kind of thing.”

“Mastery is considered to be the best advertising agency in America.” Yannis walked back to the meeting table. He sat down and opened his MacBook. He hunched over the small machine and typed in his password. “Georgina really knows her stuff.”

Kate hummed noncommittally at his mention of the woman. If life were a cartoon, Georgina Masters would be her arch nemesis. The two women were constantly compared
within the industry and by the media. They were both businesswomen in their forties, give or take, who had set up successful marketing companies in a male-dominated sector. Of course they were often compared. But comparisons are rarely kind; they certainly hadn’t been between Kate and Georgina.

Kate had come to loathe the very mention of Georgina Masters. She was sure Georgina felt the same way about her.

“She is very interested in the sports car industry,” Yannis was saying. He turned his MacBook around so Kate could see the screen.

She stepped away from the window and walked towards the table. She wasn’t particularly interested in whatever Yannis was about to show her, but she knew she had to make an effort.

“This car was built by some guys in California, they are trying to go for the world land speed record. Georgina is representing them.”

Kate picked her glasses up from the table and put them on. She peered at the website. It was garish. She had no doubt that many would think it was a fantastic example of modern web design. Flashing images, unclear navigation, lightboxes popping up. To Kate, it was gimmicky and crass. Just what she had come to expect from Mastery.

“It’s a bit... flashy. Don’t you think?”

Yannis grinned. “Yes,” he agreed.

Kate removed her glasses and tapped the arm on her lip. “If this is the style you like, we can definitely follow this example. Maybe tweak it a little so there’s not quite so much... visual noise.”

Yannis spun the MacBook around to face him again and started to type. “I want you and Georgina to work together on this. Red Door and Mastery working together. Hand in hand.
Then, this project would have the best marketing minds in America and in Europe. Together, the three of us can make something really exciting.”

Kate blinked. She stared at Yannis, but he was again lost in his computer screen and oblivious to her reaction.

“You want us to work together?” Kate couldn’t shake the shock from her tone. “Georgina and me? Working together?”

“Yes, isn’t it perfect?” He didn’t look up.

“Perfect isn’t quite the word I’d use,” Kate confessed. The last thing she wanted was for Georgina Masters to swoop in and take all the glory. And, potentially, the entire Atrom contract. “Yannis, we’ve worked together for years. I like to think we have a good working relationship?”

Yannis was focused on his screen. “Yes, yes, of course.”

Kate knew he was only half-listening to her. “And Atrom and Red Door have always worked well together, haven’t we? We can directly attribute the twelve-percent sales growth Atrom experienced last year to Red Door’s advertising campaigns. Bringing in another voice, it could be tricky.”

Yannis patted the seat next to him, still focused on his screen. “Look at this.”

Kate rolled her eyes and shuffled around a couple of seats at the round meeting table. She put her glasses on again. Yannis gestured to a presentation chart on the screen.

“We need to get more social,” he explained to her as if she were a child.

The presentation bore the Mastery logo. Kate pursed her lips. Clearly Georgina had presented this to Yannis and convinced him to take a new direction. Upon closer examination, it was clear that Yannis had been enticed by pie charts and line graphs that showed upward trends.

Competitor agencies pitching to existing clients wasn’t a new thing. Any marketing director worth their wage would
use any opportunity to speak to decision-makers. Subjectivity was not just the beauty of the marketing industry; it was also its curse.

In other businesses, a job may be a simple predefined product. The business makes widgets, a widget has set parameters. The business decides its success on widgets produced.

But marketing involves so much more. Marketing can be good or bad, or good and bad at the same time. A logo can be loved and hated within one focus group.

The individuality of marketing allowed seeds of doubt to be planted by competitors. A magic formula could be proposed, fancy charts could be distributed and buzzwords deployed. All business owners want to recreate the success of other businesses, so a marketing agency promising such success was a potent thing.

Kate looked at the presentation with interest. As she thought, it contained all the generic statistics regarding social media success rates—the standard lure marketing agencies used to hook new prospective clients.

“Engineering firms can only benefit from social media to a point,” Kate explained. It was a conversation they’d had several times before. Each time she explained it, Yannis agreed and understood. But within a few weeks, his flighty mind had forgotten and she was left to repeat herself. “The average person on the street doesn’t care that the engine on a train is made by Atrom.”

“We need to be a part of the conversation,” Yannis insisted, clearly repeating the buzzwords he’d recently heard.

“There is no conversation about your sector, Yannis,” Kate replied. She took off her glasses and let out a small sigh. Competitor interference in marketing was a common thing. One day a client would be happy, the next they would have
read an article and would be explaining what they felt her agency needed to do.

Kate spent most of her days explaining to clients that she knew their market better than the competition. The difficulty was, this was Yannis. The phrase bee in his bonnet might have been created specifically with him in mind. Once he had an idea, nothing could make him let it go.

“Georgina has more information on this,” Yannis explained. He gestured to the screen. “You understand all of this better than I do, anyway. But the thing to take away here is that this is exciting! We are going to build sports cars, and I want everyone to know about them. We can work together and make this the best campaign ever. Between us, I’m positive that we can make The Bolt something that everyone is talking about.”

“The Bolt?”

“I’m thinking of calling it The Bolt.” Yannis closed the MacBook and placed his fingers on top of it, protecting the secrets within. He leaned close to Kate. “I am still working out all of the details, but I can feel this is going to be a huge success.” He smiled at her, willing her to join him in his excitement.

While his passion for the project radiated from him, Kate felt utterly unable to join in. She didn’t want to work with Mastery. The whole point of running her own agency was that she didn’t have to work with anyone.

“Yannis,” Kate said carefully, “while working with Mastery would be wonderful, I’m not sure how we can work out the logistics. They are based in New York. You and I are based in London. Trying to split the workload, coordinate the teams, that would be very difficult.”

“We’re a modern world,” Yannis told her. “We have video conferencing, Internet, and airplanes.” He stood up and
started to pack his belongings into his laptop bag. “I need the best, Kate. That’s you in Europe. But I need the American market. Do you know how many millionaires are in America?”

“Not off the top of my head,” Kate admitted.

“Me neither, but it’s a huge country, so there must be a lot. Picture it, my Bolt driving down Sunset Boulevard, maybe driven by a movie star or a pop singer. Who knows?”

Kate knew when his mind was made up. In his head, he was already winning awards and being proclaimed the genius behind the sports car of the decade. Yannis had often explained that his success was borne entirely from his sheer willpower to make success happen. He was dogged in his approach, unwavering in his beliefs. If he wanted Kate and Georgina to work together, that is exactly what he would have.

Any further argument from Kate would just make her sound awkward. As much as she hated the idea, her best course of action now was to play along.

Georgina wasn’t a fool, she didn’t get to where she was by not spotting an opportunity. There was no way she’d just stumbled upon Yannis. She’d sought him out, presumably armed with enough statistical information on the car industry to put Jay Leno to shame.

It was clear to Kate that Georgina was after the Atrom Engineering account. Now it was up to Kate to do everything she could to hang onto it.
Amy is stuck in a rut. After graduating, she never left her temporary job at the motorway service station. Daily visits from a mysterious woman are the highlight of her days.

Until one day, when the mystery woman vanishes.

Amy investigates the disappearance and makes a shocking discovery. Suddenly, she’s being framed and no-nonsense Claudia McAllister is being sent to arrest her. Will Amy’s unique approach to evading capture prove successful?
Amy let out a sigh and leaned back heavily on the plastic chair of the break room. She looked at the two male police officers in front of her and shook her head in despair.

“She might be dead, you know,” she told them.

The older officer smirked and looked away. Probably to prevent himself from saying anything that would upset her further. Since they had arrived, both had been cocky to say the least. They had spoken down to her; mansplaining the rules on exactly when and how to declare someone as missing. The older guy had stood by the door, presumably eager to get away as soon as possible. He leaned against the wall, his thumbs hooked onto his utility belt as he left most of the conversation to his younger colleague, Officer Raj Patel.

“I think you are jumping to conclusions based on very little evidence,” Raj told her in a soft tone that made Amy want to wring his neck.

“Why do I pay my taxes?” Amy asked.

“Good one, never heard that before,” the older guy said with a sarcastic laugh.
Raj turned around and gave him a look. He turned back to Amy and tried to look reassuring. He obviously hadn’t had a lot of practice. Amy wondered if she should suggest he request further compassion training. Or any.

“Look,” Raj said, “I get that you’re worried about your friend.”

“She’s not my friend,” Amy pointed out. For the third time. “She’s just a customer.”

“Do you monitor all of your customers so closely?” the older officer asked, a smirk firmly planted on his face.

Amy turned to look up at him. “She comes here to the motorway services every day, every single weekday morning. She arrives at six-thirty, has breakfast, we talk, and she leaves by ten to seven. She’s been doing that every day for the last ten months. Until three days ago, when she didn’t show up. Those specific details about your day, you kinda remember.”

“Maybe she got a new job? Or she’s sick of the swill you call coffee?” He chuckled at his own joke.

“Sorry, I didn’t catch your name?” Amy smiled sweetly.

“David Rowe.”

“Look, Dave,” she drawled his name, ignoring his wince. “I don’t expect you to understand, but some people interact with other people in a cordial and sociable manner, and they make these things called friends—”

“Thank you, Miss Hewitt,” Raj interrupted in an obvious attempt to keep the peace.

“And there is nothing wrong with my coffee,” Amy added.

“Tell that to my tongue,” David said.

“No, thanks, you’re not my type.” She returned his smirk with one of her own.

“Oh, I see.” David pushed away from the wall, suddenly more interested in the case. “You were sweet on her.”
“Sweet on her?” Amy let out a laugh. “Who even says that anymore?”

David pulled a small notebook out of his pocket and detached the pen. He looked over the top of the notepad at her as he very slowly flipped through the pages, deliberately wasting time. Amy watched him, fighting the urge to roll her eyes at his pathetic behaviour.

“So, how long had you been in a relationship with her?” David asked.

Amy glared at him. She bit the inside of her mouth to prevent the reply that was on the tip of her tongue from being let loose. After a few seconds, she took a deep breath. “I wasn’t in a relationship with her.”

“But you wanted to be?”

“No,” Amy defended herself. “We were just friendly.”

“Friendly.” David nodded his head, a sarcastic smile on his lips. “So, can you tell us the full name of this friend?”

“You know I can’t,” Amy sighed. She folded her arms across her chest and stared at him. He was clearly trying to antagonise her, and she wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction.

“Date of birth? Place of work? Home address? Telephone number?” David listed in quick succession.

Amy looked at him for a few more seconds before turning her attention to Raj. “So, you’re not going to help me?”

Raj sat back in his chair and looked apologetic. “I’m sorry, there isn’t a lot we can do. This is a busy motorway service station, people come and people go. This... Carla—”

“Cara,” Amy corrected.

“Sorry, Cara, she may have moved away from the area. Got a new job, like Officer Rowe suggested. There’s no evidence that there has been a crime committed. Just that
someone changed their pattern, which isn’t against the law, Miss Hewitt.

“This is ridiculous.” Amy shook her head and stood up. She pushed the plastic chair back under the table and picked up her apron from the hook on the wall. She hooped the apron over her head and started to tie it around her.

“What’s ridiculous is that we’re not giving you a caution for wasting police time,” David told her.

“You’re banned,” Amy told him sternly.

“What?” he looked baffled.

“Banned. You.” Amy pointed her finger at him. She walked around the table and headed towards the door. “I’m not serving you coffee until you fix your attitude.”

He stared at her. “You can’t do that.”

“I can. I just did. And you called my coffee swill, so presumably you’ll be glad to not have to drink it anymore. Banned.”

She opened the door and stormed into the corridor without a look back. She angrily strode through the staff-only areas of the motorway service station. She was thankful that she was away from the general public and able to have some small respite from the crowds. She needed some time alone to process what was happening. The police clearly didn’t think it was an important matter, but it was. A woman was missing.

Amy knew that Cara would have told her if she wouldn’t be coming back. She had even said that she would see her on Monday morning, as she always did on Fridays. Nothing about her last visit indicated in any way that it would be her last. Something must have happened to her. Women like her didn’t just vanish into nowhere. Cara was beautiful in an exotic way that Amy had just read about in books. People like that didn’t just disappear.

Amy sighed. She’d not wanted to give any indication that
she had a crush on Cara. She knew that doing so would give the police something to laugh about, and ensure they didn’t take her seriously. She hadn’t been able to keep that particular piece of information to herself. She wondered how obvious her feelings were for David to have caught on so quickly.

Despite her crush, nothing had ever happened. Every morning she would anxiously await Cara’s arrival. The tall Spanish woman would stroll into the services, hair and outfit perfect despite the early hour. She would approach Tom’s Café in the corner of the services where Amy would be standing behind the counter, smiling and hoping her hair was behaving for once.

Cara would order breakfast. Everything was precise. Muesli on Mondays and Wednesdays, wholemeal toast on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and a chocolate croissant on Fridays. She always sat at the same table as she waited for Amy to bring the order. When Amy brought the food, Cara would invite her to sit down. They’d talk about nothing in particular, never anything personal. Amy couldn’t be sure, but it always seemed like Cara was flirting with her. At least Amy hoped she was. She was certainly flirting with Cara. Or doing her best to.

Cara stayed for twenty minutes and then left, promising to see Amy the next day or wishing her a pleasant weekend. Amy would go weak at the knees as she watched the well-heeled woman walk out of the services. It was the highlight of her every morning.

Until one day she vanished without a trace. Monday had been a grey and miserable day, and Amy had been looking forward to seeing Cara. She’d practised her welcoming greeting a few times. She had a witty comment all lined up and ready to go. Despite seeing the woman frequently, Amy
often found herself tongue-tied in the moment she actually arrived. Which was bizarre because usually Amy could talk to anyone about anything. There was something about Cara that just prevented Amy’s brain from working correctly.

As she practiced her supposedly casual greeting, she’d watched the minutes trickle by. Though Cara was a stickler for timing and details, she had been late before. But never by more than a couple of minutes. By seven o’clock Amy was ready to call the police, the army, every hospital in the area.

After checking details of all road accidents within a fifty-mile radius and finding nothing that matched Cara’s description, Amy told herself that maybe she was sick. After ten months of the same schedule, it had to happen eventually. The rest of her Monday shift had gone by slowly and painfully. The only bright spot was that she had convinced herself that Cara would be back on Tuesday.

Except she wasn’t.
Nor on Wednesday.

At nine o’clock on Wednesday, Amy called the local police and informed them that she wanted to declare a person missing. By midday the two clowns had arrived and the ten-minute meeting had been the least productive of her life. She vowed to never bother calling the police for anything ever again.

While Raj had attempted to be polite, his main aim of simply appeasing her was thick in the air. He clearly didn’t believe Cara was genuinely missing. If Amy hadn’t corrected him, he’d be out looking for someone called Carla. If he even bothered to look for anyone at all.

At least Raj pretended to be interested. David hadn’t even bothered, boredom coming from him in waves. And he’d insulted her coffee. Amy made a mental note to find his photograph on the local police website and print it out and
stick it on the wall to inform her colleagues that he was banned.

She rounded the last corner and stopped in front of the swinging double doors that separated the staff area and the busy motorway service station. She looked through the round glass window and watched the crowds of people. Every kind of person could be found at the services, and Amy watched as they all came together in one large crowd. Nothing connecting them except the desire to rest following a long journey.

Despite the sight of over a hundred people, Amy couldn’t help but think that one essential person was missing.

“Screw the police,” she mumbled to herself. “I’ll solve the damn case myself.”
Leading fashion magazine editor Victoria Hastings always thought that her trusted assistant quit her job and abandoned her in Paris.

A year later, she discovers that Holly Carter was injured in an accident. Brain trauma led to amnesia and Holly cannot remember anything about her life.

Guilt causes Victoria to bring Holly home and into her life to aid her in recovery. But when guilt turns into something else, what will she do?
Louise took a deep breath and quickly started to recite the schedule to her boss.

“So, as you know, the gala is tonight. The table plan is in your room for final approval as you requested. Your car arrives tomorrow at ten o’clock to take you to Charles de Gaulle. I’ll be checking out of the hotel earlier to get the Guerlain samples that you requested for your sister, so I’ll meet you at the airport at quarter to eleven.”

Louise knew this was an exercise in futility. Her boss knew the schedule back to front, and yet she felt the urgent need to fill the awkward silence that permeated the back of the limousine. She subtly turned her wrist in her lap to look at her watch.

“Hm,” Victoria murmured.

Louise looked up to see if her boss would say anything else.

Victoria continued to look over the top of her glasses at the passing Parisian scenery.

Louise debated if she should say something else. Maybe
give another rundown on the first-class menu on offer on-board the flight from Paris to New York. Maybe attempt to get a tiny amount of kudos for having changed the red meat option from lamb for the entire cabin, simply because Victoria couldn’t abide the smell of lamb.

Not that Victoria would ever acknowledge any of the backbreaking, soul-destroying work that Louise did on a daily basis for the impossible-to-please woman. But she lived in hope that a nugget of gratitude would work its way into Victoria’s conscience.

Maybe enough to promote her from her role of assistant. Being an assistant to Victoria Hastings was certainly prestigious. Sadly, it didn’t pay the therapy bills that Louise would need if she managed to survive the role.

Louise’s mobile phone rang, and she answered immediately. “Yes?”

It was that awful French man from the gazette again. Blathering on about something or other and making little sense.

“Look, I’ve told you before, Victoria will not be doing any interviews. If you wanted to speak to her then you should have called before she arrived in Paris for Fashion Week. Do you have any idea how busy she is? Of course you don’t.”

The man continued talking hurriedly. Louise just shook her head, not even bothering to listen to what he was saying. She couldn’t believe the audacity of the man. Thinking that Victoria Hastings of all people would be able to drop everything and speak to some nobody. Did he have any idea who she was?

“Absolutely not, and don’t call this number again!”

Louise huffed, hung up the phone, and tossed it into her bag.

“Damn French,” she mumbled under her breath.
“Problem?”

Louise looked up and realised that Victoria had turned to glance at her. Louise took pride in her appearance, checking her reflection at least every twenty minutes to ensure she was looking her best. But the second Victoria looked at her, she felt certain that she must appear a wreck.

Victoria was the kind of woman who always looked perfect. She must have had a long conversation with Mother Nature in which she put her foot down and insisted she wasn’t going to age another minute. And so, forty-seven-year-old Victoria Hastings looked like a perfectly turned-out woman in her mid-thirties. Not a hair was out of place in her fashionable blonde bob. Her makeup was light but always on point, just enough to rouge her cheeks, plump her lips, and accentuate her steely green eyes. Nothing less could be expected of the editor of one of the world’s leading fashion magazines.

Louise realised that she had been silent for too long. Her panic at potentially not looking her best under Victoria’s frosty glare had thrown her.

“Um. No, no problem, Victoria. Just a journalist, some awful little French man. You know what journalists are like. I don’t even know why I bother sending out press guidelines. He has been calling me here and Claudia back in New York every single day... I... He...” Louise swallowed nervously.

She’d said too much, she’d bothered Victoria with details that were of no interest to her.

Victoria simply stared at her in silence. Slowly, she rolled her eyes. Louise was sure that Victoria was internally questioning the incompetence she was surrounded by. She usually did. Now it was just a matter of whether Victoria would deliver a softly spoken, but scathing, remark, or if she
would ignore her. Louise held her breath while she waited for judgement to be passed.

After a few more frosty seconds, Victoria turned and looked out of the car window again. The conversation was over.

Louise released the breath she had been holding. Silently.

Paris Fashion Week was everything she’d hoped it would be. The shows, the designers, the clothes, the city. But now it was drawing to a close. Three months of doing nothing but planning Victoria’s schedule had paid off. It had been a success. Not that anyone would know it from Victoria’s expression.

From the moment they had landed in Paris, her boss has been quiet and detached. More so than usual. At the best of times, no one would ever accuse Victoria of being friendly or talkative. In fact, Victoria was famously known for destroying careers with a simple look.

But the last few days had been worse than usual.

Louise reminded herself that there was just one more night between her and her comfy bed back home in New York. And the next morning she would be getting to the airport bright and early and thankfully not travelling with Victoria.
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