

## DEV

All Viv's doubts and preconceptions become irrelevant the moment she walks into the coffee shop and locks eyes with the man sitting alone under the window. She is knocked sideways, she will relay later to Julia, left breathless. Both reactions, Jules will point out, were most likely on account of being late, and having just lugged her weighty tome down several blocks of soulless Bishopsgate in pouring rain, when there was a perfectly good cafe at the station.

The inescapable fact is that Dev is one of the most jaw-droppingly attractive men Viv has ever set eyes on. He is dark-complexioned and, equally plainly, only in his mid-forties. She was expecting that. She wasn't expecting him to be such an unmitigated knockout. Never in a million years, she will tell Joy, was she prepared for that.

She realises that she is standing mutely in front of him – slack-jawed, quite possibly – while he remains seated, openly inspecting her in turn. Not standing up, not even pretending to identify the dripping volume wedged under her left arm.

Viv gives a little laugh and immediately regrets it. She drags off her raincoat and dumps the book on the floor, together with her scarf, bag and umbrella. She feels uncoordinated and burdened with a mountain of paraphernalia, all of it wet. The simple operation seems to take forever, and for its duration Dev continues to watch her intently, his handsome features unreadable.

She slides into the chair opposite him. Breathe normally, she tells herself, and don't let nervousness cause you to avoid eye contact. Then, when this is patently not working: for *fuck's* sake, woman, get a grip.

Dev is dressed in a conservative dark suit with a white shirt and plain blue tie. Viv is wearing jeans and a cherry-red cardigan, long and rather baggy, over a white cheesecloth shirt. She didn't pay much attention this morning because she hadn't taken this appointment seriously. She is feeling insecure enough already; this only adds another layer of discomfort.

Her hair is damp and windswept. She had forgotten to wield the firm-hold, high-gloss hairspray Ramona had urged her (successfully) to purchase. And her cheeks and nose will be red and shiny from the cold. She must look like a bag lady. Dev is probably thinking she's a gauche ageing hippy. But perhaps that's just what I am. Although I wouldn't say I was gauche, exactly ...

'I am very pleased to meet you, Vivien,' he is saying politely. 'Very pleased indeed.'

The formal cadence sounds genuine to Viv's sceptical ears. She's on an all-systems alert for any suggestion of distaste or (horror of horrors) pity on his part. He has thick black hair, glossy without the aid of product, full sensuous lips and the kind of soulful brown eyes often described as melting. Viv has read the description many times, dismissing it as a cliché, but never before has she sat so close to someone whose eyes cry out to be so described.

Dev extends a smooth hand across the table. He looks dry and unruffled. Did it start raining after he arrived? How long has he been sitting here – is she very late? Not more than a few minutes, surely. Ten? She takes a surreptitious glance at her watch. No, twenty. How did that happen? She sees an empty coffee cup in front of him.

'I'm sorry I'm so late, and so bedrugged,' she says. She wipes her cold wet hand on her cardigan and belatedly shakes his, introducing herself, giving her full name without a qualm, even though

Martin had stressed this was not obligatory. She's finding it hard to equate the rather immobile person facing her with the chirpy texter. It shows how misleading punctuation marks can be.

'Yes, I had been looking through the window,' Dev says, still on his former train of thought. He is keeping hold of her hand longer than is normally considered best practice. 'I knew it was you, Vivien, even before you opened the door.' His voice is deep and resonant. Viv has a swift mental picture of the still depths of remote rock pools in the Kakadu National Park, which Jules has promised to show her someday.

'I knew it was you too, Dev, oddly enough,' she murmurs. 'Not that there were many other—'

'And even though,' he interrupts with emphasis, 'you had left me in the dark. You gave me no information about your clothing. Or your hairstyle. Luckily this turned out to be quite unnecessary, because you were self-explanatory, Vivien.'

What was it Ramona called her hair? Headstrong. She tries to pat it down. 'Self-explanatory?' What does that mean? Could it be a joke? No, Dev is unsmiling. Martin Glover must have given him some kind of description. If so, it might be cause for concern. But – here's another thing – Dev thinks I am only in my late fifties. Perhaps he thinks this is how Englishwomen of my age just *are* ...

Dev, her new template of male beauty in its prime, is still holding her hand. His large and seriously melting eyes are fixed on her face. 'Your hand is *very* cold, by the way, Vivien.'

'Yes, I'm sorry about that. It's very cold outside.' How feeble is this?

'Sorry? You must not keep saying that. The English are very fond of saying sorry. Too fond of it. Cold hands mean a warm heart. That is how the English saying goes, I think.'

'Yes, it does go like that. It's probably rubbish, though.' Might this be construed as belligerent? 'Not,' she adds hurriedly, 'that I would want to cast aspersions on your choice of English saying.'

The humour sounds clunky to her ears, and it elicits no detectable response. Almost certainly a misjudgement. She casts around for something to say but finds that her capacity for easy small talk seems to have flown out the window. What could Martin have been thinking, introducing her to this paragon of pulchritude?

And Dev himself must be fuming, planning to give the Discretion Agency an earful the moment she leaves. Should she leave now? No, that would definitely be taken as rude. And probably racist as well. Which could not be further from the truth.

Awkwardness must not be allowed to set in. But she has never tried to make small talk in such an unlikely setting with such an unlikely man, with a subtext they both know but cannot mention: the reason they are here. The reason being hardly credible. We are checking each other out to see if we want to go to bed together, of all things. Of all the lunatic, deluded things. Of all the *unlikely* things.

Her eyes alight on an object on the floor. 'That's my weight-lifting done for the day,' she says, indicating her book, *Cultural Amnesia*. 'You must have thought I was striving to impress. When the truth is, I was trying to absorb reams of arcane knowledge by osmosis.'

This is worse still. Smart-arse. Perilously close to inanity. Present me with a young and ridiculously gorgeous man and I fall to pieces. Dev's expression hasn't changed. He is still expressionless. Could it be horror-induced paralysis?

Then he says, 'Vivien, do not feel you have to make conversation in order to entertain me, please. We must relax together, in each other's company. This is an important first step for us.'

First step. Could this mean he is envisaging a second? Dev leans forward. He has dropped her hand but hasn't once taken his intent eyes off her. 'That is a very beautiful pendant you are wearing.'

Her hand moves to her necklace. 'Do you like it? It was given to me by my—' It was a present from Geoff, when Daisy turned twenty-one. A sinuous, sterling silver pendant from Tiffany, set

with an exquisite natural pearl. By far the most expensive piece of jewellery she owns.

‘Yes, it goes with everything, no matter how ratty, so I tend to wear it all the time without thinking.’

It partners another favourite, the Mexican bracelet of beaten silver she clasped on her wrist, also semi-automatically, this morning. Geoff always had excellent taste in jewellery, and in the latter part of his career the means to indulge it a little. Viv feels a small pang in the pit of her stomach.

‘Don’t you think it is very strange indeed, Vivien,’ she hears Dev ask, ‘that I knew immediately who you were?’

‘Well, there aren’t many people in here ...’ It’s not a very appetising cafe. Of course, it’s made more alluring by—

‘But even if there were a *great* many customers arriving, there was something about you, as you came through this door. Something that—’ He breaks off. He has the most luxuriant dark eyelashes Viv has ever seen. There is another abrupt, alarming pause. It stretches out disconcertingly. She is struck by his statuesque stillness.

‘Something that?’ echoes Viv, faintly. She swallows, feeling herself wilt (melt?) under this steady beam of scrutiny. *The male gaze*, she thinks. I’m thrown by it. It’s something to which I have become unaccustomed. I don’t know how to read it anymore.

She imagines they are being filmed. They are in a scene from a movie, a comedy but not one of the witty, Cary Grant–Katharine Hepburn variety. A peculiar one, with two decidedly odd protagonists. This conversation, if you could call it that, has a distinctive, stop–start rhythm of its own. Dev is still waiting. Does he want her to finish his sentence?

‘Was it something about me you recognised?’ she says at last. ‘Did I look like someone?’ But who could it be? ‘People have said I remind them—’

He shakes his head emphatically. ‘No, not at all. Not at all, Vivien. You do not remind me of anyone. On the contrary. But, as

I was just saying, there was something – something very hard to put into words.’ He is frowning in concentration, but hasn’t shifted his gaze.

‘Could it have been – you felt – something that *connected*?’ Viv can’t quite credit she is saying this. Daisy would explode. But it seems she has struck a chord. Dev exhales a long breath.

‘That is it, yes. You are right. I cannot define why this should be. I felt an *emotional* connection.’

Viv swallows. Since she arrived he has hardly moved. Apart from breathing and speaking, that is. Deeply, in both cases. Whereas she has twitched, and shifted.

‘Yes, I feel drawn to you, Vivien. I hope you are not shocked. And I hope you don’t mind if I tell you this straightaway, with no beating about the bush and no polite nothings. Because I think both of us have no time for that. Do you know what it is I am talking about?’

‘Well, I – not entirely, no.’ Viv is feeling gobsmacked, she has no other word for it, by the course events seem to be taking. Unless she is misinterpreting them, which is quite possible. She essays a nonchalant smile, but the muscles around her mouth have atrophied with no contribution from Botox. Dev is not smiling, and his delivery is even and intense. ‘I mean, an unusually deep connection. A physical connection between us, Vivien, that I have sensed before you have even touched me.’

‘*Oh.*’ Viv’s facial muscles spring to life of their own accord as her mouth drops open for the second time this morning. If only she had a secret device to record this riveting conversation. A miniature one, perhaps, inside a fountain pen.

‘I would like you to ask yourself whether you too are feeling, or can come to feel soon, what I am talking about. It is an important principle to establish. Before we go any further.’

Viv feels an involuntary stirring of the loins. She may be perilously close to losing objectivity. Is she becoming delusional? She needs to keep her head, regain some detachment.

She unlocks her eyes from his. Their surroundings are indeed undistinguished. They are in a small coffee shop, the basic type, fast-disappearing, where you queue up to order at the counter. More of a sandwich bar, with few chairs and tables. There's a sprinkling of other people drinking coffee and biting into sugary buns. Perhaps they too might do this. She could give herself some breathing space. A minute or two to take stock.

'Shouldn't we – Dev, before we go *any further*, shouldn't we have a coffee? Or tea? If we sit here taking up space without buying anything they'll get, you know – rather peevish.'

She is annoyed with herself for getting so spectacularly rattled. It's very stuffy. Her mouth is dry. She has to project her words in order to get them out.

Dev looks indifferent. 'Certainly. I have had one already. While I was waiting for you. You must have whatever you like, Vivien.' He makes no move.

'Well, I think I need refuelling, even if you don't.' She suspects he may be affronted at the interruption. He remains motionless and impassive as she fetches her coffee, a flat white, the now widespread Australian style Jules introduced her to. And a jam doughnut. She feels in need of something comfortingly sickly, even though she rarely eats doughnuts. Geoff loves them, though. Dev appears not to have moved when she returns to the table, but she sees him observing it.

She gropes for a topic. 'Have you had many other introductions from Martin Glover, Dev?'

He shakes his head. 'This is my first time. You are the very first lady he has sent me, Vivien. And that is why it is such a remarkable coincidence.'

'You're my first introduction too.' She cuts the doughnut in half. The coffee is not well made. It's very weak; she should have asked for a double shot. Or a triple. 'Although I suppose – it's not such a coincidence really, is it? We both went to the same agency, after all.'

'Ah, but how likely is that occurrence? That we are both visiting the same agency, at the same time? Not likely at all, is it? And yet that is what we did, Vivien. It is the hand of fate, I am thinking.'

Is it possible Dev could be a Bollywood film star? His speech is well enunciated and deliberate, rather like that of the late Richard Burton. Its impact is similarly hypnotic. And now he is gazing at her again, the melting brown eyes fixed and unblinking. She's finding the doughnut hard to eat. It sheds granulated sugar and jam everywhere. The debris is probably all round her mouth, like a moraine.

She scrubs at her face with one of the wafer-thin paper napkins, then worries that she has smudged her lipstick. Or did she forget to put any on? Too late to look for evidence; she has screwed the napkin into a ball.

She asks Dev what he does. He is in the hospitality business, he says, without enthusiasm or elaboration. He puts out a hand and touches her wedding ring. His fingers brush hers. A light touch, almost a caress. Her hand reacts.

'And I think you are married unhappily, Vivien?'

She looks down at her plate. Half a sticky doughnut, smears of jam, a scattering of sugar crystals, a screwed-up paper napkin. Hearing this question posed so starkly, she is unsure how to answer it without being disloyal to Geoff. Disloyal to Geoff, she hears Jules scoff, what do you fondly imagine you're being?

'In a way ...'

Dev responds with unexpected vigour. 'Well, Vivien, I am thinking you would not be signing up with the Discretion Agency and paying our Mr Martin Glover a great deal of money if you were in an ecstatic union. Is that not a correct assumption, exactly?'

'It's – well, I suppose so, yes.' Although how realistic is an ecstatic union in any long-term relationship? Not realistic at all, exactly. That's not what it's all about. It's all about long-term happiness and contentment, and entitlement to a—

‘You are an independent woman, Vivien. I think you are wanting exciting new experiences?’ He pauses. ‘I think you are wishing for someone with whom to enjoy a more physical life than you have been having. You are wanting to desire someone sexually. You are wanting someone to desire you.’

Viv has a sensation that compares, she imagines, with that of being hit by a train. She meets his eyes, this madly attractive man. This madly attractive, considerably younger man sitting opposite her, with more sex appeal than you could—

‘I think that we are both wanting the *same outcome*, Vivien.’

And now she really is poleaxed. She nods dumbly.

‘You will come to the house next week, and we will have an initial assignation.’ He sees she is about to prevaricate. ‘In the country, near London. Don’t worry, there will be no one there.’

‘But what about your – your wife? Or your – partner?’

‘She is not around. Don’t worry.’

Viv looks down. There’s a dusting of white sugar on her red cardigan. She brushes it off. She takes the bull by the horns.

‘Dev, why did you go to the agency in the first place? After all, it’s not as if you need—’

‘*Why?* Surely this is obvious, Vivien.’

‘Well, I’m not sure that it is.’ Something must be said. It simply must. But how to put it? Straight down the line, nothing for it, no alternative. ‘There is a big age difference between us.’

‘A big age difference?’ This seems to galvanise him. For the first time he becomes quite animated.

‘But this is exactly what I wanted, Vivien. This is what I said to him,’ his voice rises excitedly, ‘find me an older, attractive, confident lady who would like to meet me! That was my order to Mr Martin Glover. An independent lady. And he has done it, first cab off the rank. He has hit the jackpot.’

Viv is aware that her misgivings are in steep decline. And this younger man with the film star looks and perfect, dazzling teeth,

sitting less than three feet away, seems to be smiling for the first time. It's certainly not a beaming grin, but it is a movement of the mouth she has no hesitation in finding captivating.

She smiles back, thinking (like Alice in Wonderland) how very curious all this is. My body has parted company with my mind and my reflexes have taken over. It's as if I were a teenager again, in the back seat of a car.

'I hope you would like to meet me. Meet me biblically, I mean, Vivien. Because I, definitely, would like to meet you.'

*Biblically?* Viv barely hesitates. This is her surrender-to-chance moment, and she can't remember when one of those last came along. Not for some years, that's for sure. She knows, and knows full well, that chance is blind. It takes no care and no responsibility. This may not turn out well, but what the hell, she tells herself, if it doesn't? I'm of an age where I can choose to do foolish things. And do them just for the sake of it.

She is ready to suspend her disbelief. More than willing. Because she can't believe her luck. Jules, Joy, listen up, y'all! Just wait until you hear *this*.