

Chapter 1

ONE WEEK EARLIER

Dad was down on one knee. The gravel from Loretta's driveway was biting into his kneecap. But the pain in his knee was nothing compared to the painful awkwardness of the situation.

Dad had just proposed marriage to the staggeringly beautiful Swedish au pair who lived next door. And he had done so in front of his own children, Joe, Fin and April, plus several armed federal police officers and their beautiful yet sociopathic

fifteen-year-old next-door neighbour, Loretta Viswanathan.

To top it off, Ingrid had then surprised them even more by responding with a ‘yes’ in perfect English, a language she had spent years pretending she did not speak. Unsurprisingly, Joe, Fin and April were still in shock. April was not reacting well to the news that she was getting a new stepmother.

‘You can’t get engaged to Loretta’s babysitter!’ cried April.

‘Well, actually,’ said Dad, ‘I’m pretty sure I can.’

‘But you’re married to Mum!’ accused April, grabbing her father by the shirt front as she said this to emphasise her point.

‘Um, no,’ said Dad. ‘It’s quite complicated . . .’ He thought about it for moment. ‘Well, actually no, it’s quite simple. A marriage is a contract. And if one of the people entering into the contract is not who they say they are, then the contract is void.’

‘Huh?’ said April.

‘You can’t be married to someone if you don’t know who they are,’ explained Fin in a grim monotone. He always spoke in an expressionless monotone, but he was extra especially expressionless when he was feeling

really emotional, and that was how he was feeling right now.

April turned round and shoved Fin for good measure. ‘Now is not the time to be pedantic and right. It’s just annoying!’

‘I apologise for my accuracy,’ said Fin.

‘He can’t marry Ingrid,’ said April, wheeling back around to confront her father again. ‘Because he just can’t.’

‘I can,’ said Dad with uncharacteristic decisiveness. ‘Because I want to.’

‘Say something.’ April turned on Joe now.

‘W-w-what?’ asked Joe.

‘Tell him he can’t,’ ordered April.

‘But Ingrid is n-nice,’ Joe pointed out.

‘She secretly speaks English!’ said April.

‘We all have secrets,’ said Fin.

‘Yeah, but not like . . .’ April stopped mid-sentence when she realised that Fin was entirely right. They did all have secrets. The type you shouldn’t yell about in front of immigration officials and federal police officers. Not when your whole family was in hiding from an evil international spy organisation.

‘This is all immaterial, sir,’ said the senior officer, grabbing hold of Ingrid’s arm again. ‘The expulsion procedure has gone too far. Ms Bjorg will be flying back to Sweden this afternoon. You can pursue your legal options independently, but I don’t like your chances. It’s very hard to gain readmission for an illegal alien who lied on her visa application.’

‘She’s an alien?!’ exclaimed April. ‘I thought she was just Swedish. Now you’re saying she’s from outer space!’

‘He means “alien” in the legal sense, to be an alien is to be an “outsider”,’ explained Fin.

‘Shut up,’ said April. ‘I’m sick of you being such a know-it-all.’

‘You asked a question!’ protested Fin.

‘Yeah, but I’m sick of you always being able to answer them,’ said April, grabbing her brother.

‘I’m sick of you,’ said Fin, grabbing her back. They started scuffling about, trying to pull each other over on the gravel driveway.

Pumpkin barked excitedly and launched into the fray to help April by biting Fin hard on the bum.

‘Ow!’ cried Fin.

‘Take it back!’ demanded April.

‘Take what back?’ asked Fin. ‘The factual truth?’

The argument was almost brought to an end in the most grizzly of ways when a navy blue Mercedes swept up the driveway and skidded to a halt just centimetres from where April and Fin were wrestling.

‘What now?’ demanded the senior officer.

As it turned out, it was his worst nightmare. The driver’s door swung open and a short, immaculately dressed woman in a dark suit stepped out. She would have barely been above five foot tall, but she wore three-inch stilettos which added to her air of authority. She took in the scene, then focused on the senior immigration officer, glaring at him hard.

The immigration officer gulped.

‘My name is Henrietta Klaus, and I demand that you release my client immediately,’ said the short woman.

‘Client?’ asked the immigration official.

Ms Klaus took out a business card and handed it to the immigration official. ‘Henrietta Klaus of Klaus and Klaus Attorneys at Law.’

‘She’s the lawyer who costs \$800 an hour,’ said Loretta gleefully. ‘I called her when you first pulled up.’

‘It’s outrageous that you are physically manhandling my client when she has been an exemplar as an immigrant, has committed no infractions, and has been a peaceful, law abiding member of this local community,’ accused Ms Klaus.

‘But she lied on her visa application,’ protested the immigration official.

‘We contest that,’ said Ms Klaus, taking a letter out of her folder. ‘I petitioned the immigration court and we have a hearing date scheduled for next month. I insist that you release her pending that hearing.’

‘I can’t just let her go,’ said the immigration official.

‘The Viswanathans will post her bond and assure her presence in court,’ continued Ms Klaus, handing the immigration official another sheaf of papers. ‘The Viswanathans are pillars of the community. In fact, Mrs Viswanathan performed open-heart surgery on the head of the Department of Immigration just two months ago. I’m sure he’ll see it our way.’

‘And her fiancé will look after her,’ said Loretta excitedly. She turned to explain to the lawyer. ‘Mr Peski has just proposed to Ingrid. I suspect that they have been in love for some time.’

Dad looked startled by this statement, but he dutifully nodded.

‘And it’s wonderful for Joe, Fin and April too,’ continued Loretta. ‘They are sadly in need of a mother figure.’

‘What?!’ exploded April. ‘You’re as nutty as a fruitcake!’

‘You see,’ said Loretta. ‘She desperately needs a feminine influence.’

Ms Klaus quickly took in the situation. ‘Then there are clearly abundant grounds for my petition. It’s remarkable that you had the audacity to pursue this vexatious claim in the first place. I insist that you release her immediately. Family relationships are essential to integration into the community. Ms Bjorg, soon to be Mrs Peski, needs to build her relationship with her stepchildren.’

‘She does not!’ yelled April.

‘You see,’ said Ms Klaus. ‘She has a lot of work to do. She has a lot of hostility to overcome. She doesn’t have time to be locked in immigration detention. You will release her into Mr Peski’s custody, pending the hearing in four weeks.’

‘This is all fabricated,’ argued the immigration official. ‘What if their relationship is a sham?’

Dad realised he should do something. He put his arm around Ingrid’s shoulders. It wasn’t very

convincing. He wasn't a man who was comfortable with physical affection. 'I need Ingrid. And she needs me,' he said with a quaver in his voice.

'There will have to be interviews to establish that they really are a couple,' threatened the immigration official petulantly.

'Not a problem for our soon-to-be newlyweds,' said Ms Klaus. 'Now, if you could leave as swiftly as possible. These four impressionable youths are no doubt suffering irreparable psychological damage from being exposed to this level of police brutality. I would hate to have to sue for psychological damage as well as the outrageous abuse of immigration powers.'

'It's true,' said Loretta, holding her palm to her forehead. 'I can practically feel the emotional scarring taking place.'

The immigration official clearly did not want to back down, but no one fears getting in trouble more than a public servant with a cushy, super safe job. With minimal grumbling, the police and immigration officers soon got in their vehicles and left.

'Well done!' said Loretta happily, clapping her hands with delight as the officials pulled away.

‘This is only the first stage,’ said Ms Klaus. ‘They’ll be watching you like a hawk until the hearing.’

Ingrid nodded.

‘But we’ve got nothing to hide,’ said Dad.

The Peski kids all turned to look at him. Apparently, their father had forgotten that he was literally in hiding from the Kolektiv, that their mother was imprisoned in a secret European jail, and that Professor Maynard, the operative in charge of looking after them, had threatened to withdraw all protection if they didn’t start behaving sensibly.

‘Okay, maybe I do have a couple of things to hide,’ conceded Dad.

‘They can’t disprove what’s not there to disprove,’ said Ms Klaus. ‘It would be best if the wedding took place as quickly as possible. And, of course, Ingrid will have to reside in your house.’

‘What?!’ exclaimed Dad.

‘If you’re not already living together,’ said Ms Klaus, ‘you should start now. It will look better.’

‘Dad can’t have his girlfriend move in,’ protested April. ‘We’re impressionable children.’

‘If you’re going to marry an illegal alien,’ said Ms Klaus, ‘you can’t be seen to be reluctant to live

with the illegal alien. Especially when said alien is incredibly good looking.’ Ms Klaus turned to Ingrid. ‘Sorry to objectify you in that way.’

‘Quite all right,’ said Ingrid with her characteristic Scandinavian calmness. ‘I know this is true.’

‘But what about me?’ asked Loretta. ‘If Ingrid moves in with Mr Peski, who will look after me?’

‘Your p-p-parents?’ suggested Joe.

Loretta, Ingrid and Ms Klaus paused for a beat, then burst out laughing. It took a while for them to compose themselves again. Ms Klaus even had to dab away tears.

‘I love Mummy and Daddy,’ said Loretta, ‘but there is no way they are capable of, or indeed interested in, looking after me.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Ms Klaus. ‘Even I would have a hard time arguing that they are responsible guardians, and I once convinced a judge that he had committed the bank robbery my client was on trial for.’

‘I suppose Loretta could move in with us too,’ said Dad, chewing his bottom lip nervously.

‘What!’ exclaimed Joe.

‘Yes!’ exclaimed Fin.

‘Noooooo!’ bellowed April.

‘You can share April’s room,’ said Mr Peski.

‘No way!’ yelled April. She was starting to hyperventilate.

‘N-n-not a good idea,’ said Joe. ‘There’s a reason why they don’t put two bull elephants in the same enclosure at the zoo.’

‘April, be reasonable,’ said Mr Peski.

‘She can share my room,’ offered Fin.

‘She can *have* my room,’ said April. ‘I refuse to share with her, not with all her girly ways, and her ironed clothes, and her clever comments. I’ll go and live in the attic!’

‘I’m p-p-pretty sure there are b-bats in the attic,’ said Joe.

‘There are bats in your belfry if you think I’ll put up with sharing with her,’ said April.

‘But it would be fun,’ said Loretta. ‘It would be like we were sisters. I’ve always wanted to have a sister.’

‘Well, I’ve always been a sister,’ said April. ‘And two brothers is quite enough siblings for me, thank you very much. I’m sleeping in the attic.’

April stomped off to start moving her stuff.

Loretta beamed and bounced on the spot excitedly. ‘I’m sure I’ll win her over. She’s just emotional

about getting a new mother. This is going to be so much fun. I'll call the removalists.' She hurried back towards her own house.

'But this is just temporary,' Dad called after her anxiously. 'Surely removalists don't need to get involved.'

'Of course they do, Mr Peski,' Loretta called back as she entered her front door. 'I'd hate for you to sprain your back lifting one of my aquariums.'

Loretta disappeared inside the house. Ingrid followed her at a slower pace.

'What have I done?' muttered Dad. He had started to quiver with fear. The only thing more terrifying to him than an international spy agency were females, and he had just agreed to allow two more into his house.

'Expanded the family,' said Fin.

'I'd better file all this paperwork,' said Ms Klaus, checking her watch. 'I'll throw in a complaint about excessive force and brutality just to spice things up.'

'But I haven't been brutal to anyone,' said Dad in alarm.

'Not you, Dad,' said Joe. 'The i-i-immigration people.'

‘No one is filing a brutality complaint against you, Mr Peski,’ chuckled Ms Klaus. ‘Unless the Viswanathans try to regain custody of Loretta, then that would be a good tactic. I’ll keep it in mind.’

She got in her car and drove away.

‘What now?’ asked Joe.

‘The carrot bed needs preparing,’ said Dad. He started walking towards his own garden.

‘Aren’t you going to help your new fiancée move her stuff?’ asked Fin.

‘I’m sure I’d only get in the way,’ said Dad. ‘But soil doesn’t till itself.’

‘But . . .’ began Fin.

Joe put his hand on Fin’s shoulder. ‘Let him go. He needs to r-r-regress. It’s going to take Dad a while to p-process all this.’

‘He’s going to need to process it before he actually says “I do”,’ said Fin.

‘I think he’s better off focusing on his v-veg,’ said Joe.