

# ONE PERFECT COUPLE

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*To Ian, my absolute favourite scientist.  
Thank you for being you.*

## PROLOGUE

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

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

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

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

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



PART ONE

**THE CALM**

**15/02 – 02.13**

Hello. Hello?

## CHAPTER 1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nico shrugged.

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

I sighed.

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

Not with Nico's meagre snippets of income as an aspiring actor

and part-time barista, was the unspoken coda, though I didn't say it. But Nico was shaking his head.

'But Lyla, that's the point. If I got this, it'd be real exposure. I could be a household name by the end of the series, we'd be talking TV roles, films, ads – you name it. It'd be proper money – regular money. *House-buying* money. I could take some of the pressure off you. Come on, Lil, think about it. Please?'

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

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

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

'Can I at least tell Ari you'll meet with the producers?' Nico said, his breath warm against the top of my head. I shut my eyes, knowing that if I looked at him, at his brown puppy-dog eyes and pleading expression, I'd be lost. What I *wanted* to say was that there seemed

precious little chance of this getting past the first meeting, when the producers would presumably meet me and realize I wasn't the big-boobed hottie they were looking for. Reality TV wasn't exactly my usual entertainment fare, but I'd watched enough to know there was a certain physical type for female contestants, and that I didn't fit it. Nico – with his gym-toned body and salon-tanned skin – he was different. He'd have fitted in fine on *Married at First Sight* or *Perfect Match*. But me? Were they really going to look at a thirty-something scientist with fingers stained purple from protein gels, and a permanent frown line from squinting into a microscope, and think, *We want to see her jogging down the beach in a skimpy bikini?* Unlikely.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I looked up at him, at his broad grin, his white teeth, his sparkling dark eyes, and I thought, how, indeed, could they resist? No one could say no to Nico. I just had to hope Professor Bianchi would feel the same way.

**15/02 – 02.13**

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

**15/02 – 02.14**

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