

TRUTH &
REVENGE

SHEILA RAWLINGS

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For Martin

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CHAPTER 1

Monteriggioni, Italy 1986: Betrayal

Roberto was desperate. His last hope dashed, he knew it was only a matter of time before they came looking for him.

His heart was beating fast as he hurried back to his car and an overwhelming sense of panic was starting to creep through his body.

He had to get back to his family before the inevitable happened.

The hot Italian sun blazed overhead and it was difficult for him to determine whether the beads of sweat on his forehead were induced by heat or fear. He mopped his brow, scrunching his handkerchief tightly before stuffing it back into his pocket.

He replayed in his mind the meeting he had just left with a man he had thought was his friend. Their families had known each other since the war and the two boys had played together in the school holidays. He thought he knew him, but today he had seen a man he did not recognise. He felt betrayed.

He climbed into his car and sat for a while, hands gripping the

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steering wheel while he tried to think of a last way out of his treacherous situation. But nothing came to him. So he started the car and began the short journey back home to his wife who had also been so sure that their friend would help them. It pained him to destroy her faith in friendship.

As Roberto pulled up outside the humble dwelling that he and his family shared, the door was flung open and his wife came running out to meet him, with their six-month-old baby in her arms. The child, perhaps sensing its mother's anguish, was crying inconsolably. He tried to appear brave for their sakes, but he knew that it was a futile gesture.

"What did he say," she asked, before he had time to get out of the car, gently caressing her baby in an attempt to calm the distraught infant. "Can he get the money to you in time? You told him how urgent it was, didn't you Roberto?"

Roberto got out of the car and stood staring at the ground, unable to look his wife in the eyes.

"He said he isn't in a position to help," he lied, knowing that the answer had been more forceful than that – a point-blank refusal. "He said he can't lay his hands on that kind of money at such short notice. I'm sure he would, if it were possible." His wife was not fooled. She knew her husband too well. She realised he was covering up for the man who was obviously not the friend he had pretended to be, and who had now condemned them to their fate.

"May he rot in hell," she cursed, her eyes almost black with fury. Roberto put his arm around her and stroked his child's face with his free hand. The panic he had felt earlier for their safety was becoming

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harder to control. Time was running out, though, so he began to hurry her towards the house.

“Isabella, I must get you and the children away from here,” he said sharply. “We don’t have much time. They will be here by nightfall and I don’t want you anywhere near the house... or me. It’s me they’re after, and I don’t want to risk them using my family as leverage. I’ll take you to your parents’ house. You should all be safe there. I’ll come back here and try to buy some more time.”

Standing her ground, Isabella looked deep into her husband’s eyes and released herself from his grip. “I am not leaving you on your own to face those *parassiti*,” she hissed. “I am your wife and we will face them together. Even they would not hurt a woman with young children. I am not afraid of them, only for you *caro*.”

Her blazing eyes filled with tears and as Roberto gently wiped them away, an intense feeling of pride for his wife welled up inside him. Fully aware of the danger he had selfishly put them in, she would stand by him and now he just wanted to protect the thing he valued most – his family. Isabella was still as beautiful as the day he married her, and the fierce strength she now displayed in defence of those she loved only served to make him feel just how unworthy he was of her devotion.

He had always met her pleas to stop gambling away money they did not have with assurances that it was only a few games of cards with friends. What he had failed to admit was that his gambling had become an addiction. Now, after getting himself involved in a high-stakes game run by a local gangster, he found himself in debt to the tune of 23 million lira, with no possible means of paying it back.

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Today was collection day.

“Isabella,” he whispered gently. “I can’t put you or the children in danger for my stupidity and weakness. Please, let me take you to your parents and I promise you I will take care of the situation. He replaced his arm around her waist and, before she could protest again, pulled her through the door of the house, where a wide-eyed, five-year-old boy was waiting for them.

Roberto let go of Isabella and gently closed the front door, then took the boy’s out-stretched hand. He crouched down beside him, pulling him into his arms and holding him tightly.

“You are going to have to be the man of the family now, little one,” he said to his son, trying not to display any signs of emotion. “You must look after your *mamma* and sister for me until I can be with you all again. You must be good for your grandparents and do what ever they say without complaining. I will come for you as soon as I can. Remember, you are Italian and Italian men are brave.”

The boy threw his arms around his father’s neck and Roberto felt his heart break. How could he put his family through this pain?

Gently pulling his son’s arms free, he stood up and was about to utter a few more words of comfort when the sound of a car crunching on the gravel as it pulled up outside the house made him start. They were early!

Signalling to his wife to be quiet and take the children into the lounge, he furtively peeked through the hall window and saw three burly men getting out of the black Mercedes-Benz sedan. Despite the fact that all three wore dark glasses, he recognised them as the heavies that had been present at the game and felt his heart

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pounding. They did not look in the mood to negotiate.

“De Luca,” the biggest of the trio shouted, throwing his burnt-out cigarette onto the ground and treading it into the gravel. “The boss wants his money, so you’d better come out and pay up or we’ll come in and show you the consequences of renegeing on a deal.”

Roberto leant with his back against the door, trying to figure out his next move. They could make a dash for it out of the back door, but his car was out front and they would never make it to safety on foot – not with two small children in tow. He knew calling the police would be futile, as the men’s boss was in cahoots with the chief of police. There was nothing else for it, he had to confront them and hope he could stall for time. At least he could divert their attention away from his family.

Looking at Isabella, who had returned to the hallway, he took her face in his hands and kissed her. She threw her arms around his neck.

“Please don’t go out there,” she cried desperately. “They will kill you. There must be someone we can call.”

Roberto carefully released himself and tried to give her a reassuring smile.

“There’s no one,” he said. “I have to face them. Otherwise, they will come inside. We must think of the children. Go to them and keep them safe. I love you *cara*. Always remember that.” Isabella fought back the tears and, kissing Roberto softly on his lips, went back to the lounge. Roberto sighed, took a deep breath and opened the door.

The men watched him walk slowly out of the house and descend the few short steps. Time seemed to stand still momentarily as they

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eyed each other up and down, the men waiting to see how Roberto would react. Roberto was first to break the tension.

“I need more time to get Signor Rizzo’s money. It’s a lot to get hold of. I need to call in a few favours but I can assure Signor Rizzo that he will be repaid in full.” He hoped they had not noticed the sweat now cascading down his forehead.

The gang’s self-appointed spokesman, a man in his late thirties with rough stubble on his chin and a thick gold chain, visible beneath his open-necked shirt, walked towards Roberto, stopping a few feet away from him.

“Signor Rizzo wants his money *now*,” he said menacingly. “He’s already given you longer than agreed. He’s not a patient man. Are you going to pay or not?”

Roberto took another deep breath and silently prayed to God for strength. “I don’t have the money now,” he repeated. “I really need more time.”

The man glanced back at his two companions and, walking towards Roberto, sighed. “Then we will have to show you what happens to people who disappoint Signor Rizzo, my friend.”

Roberto did not see the first punch coming. He felt a searing pain in his stomach as he doubled up and sank to the ground. The first blow was followed by another stronger punch to his face, breaking his nose and leaving him writhing in agony. Before he had time to defend himself, all three heavies had joined in the assault and were relentlessly kicking every part of his body as he lay crying out in pain.

Isabella could not stop herself. She rushed out of the house to find her husband unconscious and bleeding profusely into the gravel. The

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men stood over him as she rushed to his side, screaming his name. Anger took hold of her as she beat her fists hard on the first man's chest.

Without flinching, he grabbed hold of her wrists and pulled her towards him, glaring into her terrified eyes.

"This is what happens to people who don't honour their debts," he hissed in her face, turning and spitting onto the lifeless body of Roberto. "Just think yourself lucky that my father is a gentleman who respects women. I myself do not, but fortunately for you I respect *his* wishes. As you can't repay the debt, my father wishes to inform you that your house and property is now forfeit to him. You have two days to pack up and leave. You won't get another warning. Next time we will come and take what is now rightfully ours, whether you are here or not!"

He pushed her roughly to the ground, turned and, followed by the other two, got back into the car and drove off, leaving Isabella to crawl over to Roberto and cradle him in her arms. The tears were now rolling freely down her cheeks and dripping onto her husband's face.

"Roberto," she cried, kissing and stroking his forehead and trying to rouse him. "*Caro*, please speak to me. I'll get help. Just open your eyes and look at me." She kissed his lips and taking a handkerchief from her pocket, tried to wipe away some of the blood. Roberto groaned and gradually opened one eye, the other being too swollen and bloody to respond.

"I'm sorry," he rasped, coughing blood out of his mouth. "Please forgive me. I've let you and the children down but I love you, *cara*."

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Please. Never forget that.” He tried to raise his hand to her face but it never made it. As it fell back to the ground with a dull thud Isabella felt his body go limp.

“Roberto,” she screamed, patting the side of his face and trying to shake life into his listless body. His lifeless, single open eye stared unblinkingly up at her. He was no longer in pain.

Isabella threw herself across his body and cried uncontrollably. Her whole world had begun to crumble around her and she wanted to die with her husband. Through the tears, she was aware of a small voice calling to her from the doorway.

“Mamma, why is papa lying on the ground? He’ll get all dirty.” Her son was looking at her, innocently waiting for an answer. She knew her grief would have to wait. She had to be strong and protect her children, but the anger raged inside her.

They would pay for this. They would *all* pay.”

CHAPTER 2

Poggibonsi, Italy 2006: Revenge

It was New Year's Day 2006 and Santo Rizzo was working late in his office. His wife had taken umbrage over a rather enthusiastic kiss he had enjoyed with the host's wife as they saw in the New Year at a friend's house.

A heated argument had ensued on returning to their own home, so he was in no hurry to repeat the experience, her mood being no less antagonistic when he had left earlier that morning.

They had married young, when he had still been working in his father's café-bar in Capaci, Sicily. She was a popular local beauty and he had prided himself on being the one to successfully win her affections from amidst her throng of young admirers. As his fortunes steadily began to rise – largely as a result of his growing involvement with influential, if dubious, businessmen he had been introduced to by friends – she had proved an excellent asset. A beautiful woman on his arm had made him the envy of all the men at many a social

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occasion, and Santo loved attention and power.

However, the acquisition of such beauty had come at a price and, after moving to Tuscany, he soon discovered that beauty was not his wife's only weapon. She also possessed a passion for shopping and the high life, as well as an extremely spiteful tongue, all of which overshadowed her slow wit. In short, she was costing him a fortune and providing him with a constant headache. Their rows had steadily increased until the point that it was now difficult for him to spend any length of time with her, except at formal or social occasions, where the presence of others meant he could leave her in the hands of other unfortunate listeners.

The two sons that she had borne him were also slow-witted, but their hefty size had proved useful in handling situations that required brawn rather than brains. His lucrative, albeit illegal, gambling and money lending activities had more than made use of their particular talents. They at least knew how to discreetly deal with troublemakers without drawing attention to him. He was well respected by some of Tuscany's most high-powered figures and preferred not to have his position of power compromised by inconsequential nobodies.

It had long since grown dark outside and, because it was a national holiday and he was alone, he had only switched on his desk lamp. He preferred the soft, comforting light it emitted to the harsh glare that came from the fluorescent light of the main office. He had unplugged his direct telephone line and switched off his mobile, in order to get some peace from his wife. In the past, just being in the office had proved an inadequate barrier to her nagging; better not to take any chances.

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Santo finished signing the letters his secretary had left on his desk the day before and lent back in his chair, closing his eyes to enjoy the serenity that enveloped him. He would probably look in at his club on the way home and enjoy a brandy or two, to numb the effects of the lecture he knew was coming upon his return home. He could not even count on his sons to distract her, as they had both wanted to spend time at home with their wives and children this year, eschewing the family get together he usually hosted. He would, therefore, have to face her alone. He sighed at the thought.

He opened his eyes, logged out of his computer, drained his now lukewarm cup of coffee and put on his coat. Switching off his desk lamp, he slowly made his way towards the door, which was illuminated solely by the dim light from the corridor. Making sure that the office door was securely locked behind him, he left the building, nodding to the security guard on his way out, walked around the back of the office block and down an alleyway towards the deserted car park. His car stood all by itself in its usual reserved bay, lit by a solitary lamppost.

As he put his key in the lock of the car door, he felt an arm wind vice-like around his neck and the cold steel of a gun pressed against his temple. The catch of the gun clicked back, and the sensation of warm breath passed over his ear.

“Buona sera, Signor Rizzo,” hissed his unseen assailant. “I’ve been waiting for you. It’s taken me a while to get you on your own, but I’m a very patient man. We have some unfinished business to attend to, my friend. Rest assured, I will also be paying a visit to those Neanderthal sons of yours, but I thought it only right for you to be

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the first.

“Roberto de Luca sends his apologies but, due to the disrespectful treatment he received from your gorillas, he is unable to come himself. However, allow me to present his calling card.”

With that, he spun Santo round, threw him back against his car and pulled the trigger of his gun. The bullet hit Santo directly in the forehead and with a look of shock still etched on his face, he slid down the side of the car.

As he landed in a heap on the ground, terrified eyes still staring into space, his killer spat on his lifeless body.

“Don’t worry,” the man hissed. “You will have plenty of company in hell. I’m saving the biggest betrayer until last.”

The shot had reverberated back up the alleyway towards the office block. The startled security guard took his gun from its holster and sprinted out of the building to investigate.

He was too late. Santo was dead and there was no one else to be seen.

CHAPTER 3

London, summer 2012: Opportunity

“Oh hell!” thought Chris as she glanced at the clock and jumped out of bed. “I’m going to be late again. Feldman is going to kill me!”

She hurriedly dressed, gulped down a rather strong cup of coffee, then made a grab for her coat and rushed out of her flat, slamming the door behind her.

It was at times like these that she cursed living on the third floor. When her father had first decided to invest in a flat in London, so that she did not have to waste her money renting, it had seemed a good idea to be above street level and away from traffic noise. However, when it came to rushing down six flights of stairs whenever she was in a hurry – which had become a frequent occurrence – the idea seemed to lose some of its appeal. She was sure that one day she would trip up in her haste, arriving at the bottom faster than anticipated.

Having worked hard to obtain a degree in marketing and media

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studies from Edinburgh University, Chris had finally managed to get a marketing job with Feldman & Son. As an international company there was huge potential for her to do well. There was also the added bonus that her new boss was extremely good looking. All the ingredients were there for her to excel, if she could just learn to get out of bed earlier!

Out in the busy street it felt as if people were conspiring against her desperate attempt to reach the office on time. Groups of elderly women appeared in her path, gathered in leisurely conversation in the summer sunshine; a never-ending stream of cars came from nowhere as she tried to cross the road, and inevitably the tube was both delayed and crammed full, forcing her to wait for several trains to pass before she managed to squeeze into one. This usually happened when she was in a hurry, and why was there always someone immediately in front of her who had a problem with their Oyster card at the barrier or a tourist struggling to understand the intricacies of the ticket system?

On arrival at the office of Feldman & Son, a smart building in the heart of Mayfair, she smiled at the male receptionist while flashing her pass at him. Tim Meyers had only been with the company a few months but had made it his business to recognise all the members of staff who worked there. He was a tall, well-built lad with auburn hair and freckles. Although only twenty-one, he was confident and self-assured, and flashed Chris a cheeky grin while glancing briefly at the clock. "Morning Miss Newman. I think Mr Feldman has beaten you to it today."

That boy is far too cheeky, she thought as she rushed to the lift. As

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the doors opened at the first floor, she dashed up the corridor towards her office, the sound of her footsteps reverberating loudly. “Damn these wooden floors!” she cursed.

As she swept through the open plan area, she was aware of playful banter being exchanged by some of the marketing team who occupied it. “Must be time for coffee, here comes Chrissie,” and “I didn’t know she worked part-time now!” It was like a broken record to Chris, who had received this greeting every day so far this week. However, they were the least of her problems, she still had Feldman to face. With a bit of luck he may not have noticed her absence. He was usually too involved with the day’s work schedule to notice her, even when she was there. She opened her office door gently, hoping to slide behind her desk and assume a relaxed pose, in order to give the impression of having been there for a while.

Unfortunately for her, Simon Feldman had chosen that day to talk to her about expanding their client base and was impatiently pacing the room, inspecting his watch intermittently.

“Miss Newman!” he exclaimed sarcastically, spotting her through the glass partition as she strode into her room. “How good of you to drop in and see us this morning.”

Chris smiled apologetically, knowing that whatever she said would not prevent the forthcoming lecture.

“Are you trying to create some sort of record, Miss Newman? This is the third time you’ve been late this week and it’s only Wednesday! Is there any chance of receiving a full day’s work from you sometime or shall I arrange for a temporary replacement until you can see your way clear to giving us your undivided attention?”

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He was looking at her intently with his head slightly on one side and one of his eyebrows raised, waiting for a reply. He was only four years older than Chris, but his detached manner made him seem much older.

“I’m really very sorry Mr Feldman,” Chris managed to say, while her boss paused for breath. “It really won’t happen again, I promise you. I just don’t seem to be able to hear my alarm clock these days. I must be becoming immune to it.”

She gave him a sheepish smile.

Simon Feldman looked at her impatiently. This girl really was the limit. She had no idea of punctuality and her desk always looked like a battleground. Despite this, however, she was showing signs of becoming a damn good assistant.

The fact that she was also quite attractive had not been lost on him either. Those baby blue eyes, long, soft, fair hair and cute smile were too much for any man to reprimand for long, even a serious man like Simon.

Two years ago, when he had taken over the family business, following his father’s retirement due to ill health, he had not relished the idea. He had taken a gap year after university to travel around Europe, particularly Italy, where his late grandmother had been born. Having been spoilt as an only child and indulged as an adult, he had not given much thought to matters of responsibility. Joining the company had allowed him to enjoy many benefits without the inconvenience of having to earn them, unlike many of his contemporaries. However, he had a tendency to be introverted and found it difficult to deal with the new authoritative role he had been

thrust into.

His father's illness had rather thrown him into the limelight, in which he felt uneasy, especially when it meant being responsible for other people. However, having spent a good deal of his working life continuing to build up the business that Simon's grandfather had started, his father had been keen to keep the family tradition going and wanted his son to be the one to take it forward.

As a result he had now become quite an earnest young man, believing that the only way to assert authority was to be aloof and formal. The arrival of Chris had at least added a bit of light relief to the job. She was very easy on the eye and pleasant to work with and did not demand too much of him.

"Perhaps we should club together and rent Big Ben for you in future," he snapped half-heartedly, accepting the fact that he was not going to be able to keep up the 'angry boss man' act for much longer. "In the meantime," he continued, "I have an assignment for you."

Chris sighed with relief at the mention of work. At least he was not going to fire her today. She threw off her coat, which landed half on and half off her chair, grabbed her notebook and pen and followed her boss into his office where he motioned her to sit down.

"I've been reviewing our list of clients," he said opening a file on his computer, "and I've decided that it's time we attracted some new ones. As you know, we already have quite a few foreign clients who have accounts with us to market their products over here, but we've never seriously tackled the home market. This is a pretty competitive area, so we need to be sure that we have a solid strategy and a presentation to highlight our strengths and the level of service we can

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offer when approaching prospective new clients.”

He looked up at Chris momentarily to observe her reaction before continuing. He had found since working with her that her face always betrayed her true feelings. It was therefore almost impossible for her to hide her enthusiasm or disapproval of things. By the way she was hanging on to his every word he knew that, this time, he had her full attention.

“I’ve drawn up a list of companies I think we should contact,” he continued, “in order to persuade them that we could find a better market for their merchandise abroad than any of our competitors. The names of the people you need to speak to are also listed.”

He handed her a sheet of paper with eight names on it. Chris read the list carefully. They were mostly unknown to her, although she vaguely recognised one of them.

“I had the research boys working overtime to come up with possible candidates,” he said, watching her digest the list, “and out of the twenty-odd names they came up with I chose those eight. I think they should prove to have the most potential.” He took back the sheet of paper and glanced at it for a while, then took up his pen and put a tick against four of them.

Handing the sheet back to Chris, he said: “I’m going to give you responsibility for handling those four and I’ll take care of the remaining ones. Get the art department to update our current PowerPoint presentation, with special emphasis on testimonials from satisfied clients for us to show these people. They’re already working on our new promotional material, so they should have all the current data readily to hand. We’ll need to get it burned onto half a dozen

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CDs so that we can leave copies with them. We ought to have a few hard copy presentation folders too, so that we cover all options.”

“When do you want me to start making phone calls?” asked Chris. He had never asked her to do anything like this on her own before and she felt a nervous flutter in her stomach, although the challenge and the opportunity to prove her ability was very appealing.

“As soon as possible,” he replied. “These people are all new to selling their goods abroad and I don’t want anyone beating us to the punch, so make sure those bods in the art department get a move on. They’ll sit on it for weeks if you don’t hustle them. But before you start contacting anyone, I’ll just run over a few guidelines to help you with the initial approach.”

Over the next half an hour, Simon outlined the best way of introducing the company to potential clients, stressing that the principal objective was to obtain a face-to-face meeting. Chris listened attentively, asking questions and making notes. Now that he had demonstrated confidence in her, she was eager to make a start on the task. When she was satisfied she had understood all of his instructions, she thanked him for his advice and went back to her office.

He watched her go out and smiled to himself. She had only been working for him for six months, but having accompanied him to various meetings and liaised with several of the company’s suppliers, Simon felt she had demonstrated the necessary skills and diplomacy to deal with existing and potential clients directly. He had every faith in her.

CHAPTER 4

Chris decided she would need some down time after work to recharge her batteries for the task ahead. She was determined to get as many meetings lined up as possible and felt sure that she would be able to follow through with some positive results. However, despite her optimism she could not stop a few annoying self doubts creeping into her mind.

After her meeting with Simon, she spent a good part of the morning talking to the art department about the updated PowerPoint presentation, including the CDs and hard copies that he had requested. As usual, it proved to be an unpleasant experience.

The art department was made up of three designers. Brad Martinez, an American of Puerto Rican descent on his father's side; Sue Taylor, not long out of art college but with a head full of self importance, and Pete Bradshaw, a nerdy young man who took care of the company's website. Each one of them thought that the inner sanctum of the art department was a place of reverence and that the

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rest of the company should bow to their combined genius.

“When did you say you want all this?” Brad asked arrogantly. As the senior member of the department, he enjoyed making the most of his status.

“Tomorrow morning would be good,” Chris replied, trying not to show how much the design team made her nervous. Why did they have to be so aggressive and argumentative?

“We’ve already got Feldman breathing down our necks for the new promotional material,” he snapped, “and Pete has been working overtime on the redesign of the website. Creativity requires time you know. We really should have more time on this. Can’t you use the old stuff for now?”

Sue looked up from her screen at Brad, quietly smirking, before shifting her gaze to Chris to judge the effect of Brad’s words. She turned away and winked at Pete, who had also been trying to stifle a smirk.

Chris took a deep breath and moved slightly closer to Brad, looking him squarely in the eyes.

“This is important,” she stressed. “We need to start contacting people as soon as possible, before we miss the boat with their business. Mr Feldman is already trying to set up a meeting for tomorrow, so it’s vital that we have everything ready to make a professional pitch. Anyway, the old stuff is out of date.”

She felt a surge of annoyance, which gave her the confidence to push the point home.

“This may very well be the first time that any of these potential clients have heard of us. First impressions are everything. I don’t

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want to risk us looking anything other than a professional organisation. *You*, supposedly, are the professionals – so get cracking please!” She glared defiantly at Brad, who sniffed and fleetingly glanced at the other two, both of whom had returned their attentions to their screens.

“OK, leave it with us,” he uttered begrudgingly. “We’ll take a look at it this afternoon.”

Chris breathed a secret sigh of relief.

“Fine,” she replied. “When it’s been approved I’ll need copies on six CDs, as well as two hard copies. If you could email me a copy of the presentation when it’s done that would be great. I will then check it and get Mr Feldman to sign it off, so that you can finalise the package.”

With that she turned and left the department, unaware of the mocking gestures from the three designers behind her.

* * * * *

Having spent the remaining part of the day doing some research, Chris found herself sitting in Toppers, the local wine bar, at six-thirty with a half empty glass of white wine in front of her, waiting for her friend Tessa to appear. She and Tessa had been at university together doing the same marketing course. They had instantly hit it off and had stayed firm friends since graduating. Whenever she felt anxious or under pressure, Tessa was the first person Chris turned to for moral support or advice, as she always seemed to be able to put things into perspective. She was just mulling over in her head what

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she was going to say to that bunch of irritating morons tomorrow when the door to the wine bar opened and Tessa swung in.

Tessa was slightly shorter than Chris, with dark hair and a heart-shaped face. She looked around the room until she caught sight of Chris, and then, flashing a broad smile under her warm brown eyes, hurried up to her.

“Chrissie! Good to see you,” she cried, taking her jacket off and hanging it on the back of a chair. “I was beginning to think you’d turned into a hermit! It feels like ages since we got together. What are you drinking? My shout.”

Chris beamed at Tessa and stood up to greet her, hugging her tightly and planting a kiss on her cheek. “Pinot Grigio,” she replied, “but let me get this round.”

She started towards the bar but Tessa held up her hand to stop her.

“Sit down, sweetie. This calls for a bottle and I won’t take no for an answer.”

She grinned, and in a flash was up at the bar ordering. Chris watched her from her seat. Her easy grace as she chatted up the young, good-looking barman only served to make Chris more aware of her own awkwardness around men. Deep down she was a tiny bit envious of Tessa, who always had an endless stream of boyfriends, but she was so easy to talk to and genuinely seemed to care about her.

At university it had always been Tessa who had dragged her to parties and social gatherings. Her zest for fun seemed never ending and Chris had been caught up in her exuberance, although she was always the shy, quiet one at her side that no-one seemed to notice

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much. People appeared to like her, but felt more at ease with Tessa. Tessa never deserted her though and tried repeatedly to include Chris in every conversation, however short lived her success.

Chris was pulled out of her reminiscence by the sound of a bottle being plonked firmly on the table, and Tessa similarly plonking herself onto the seat opposite.

“OK, sweetie,” she said, leaning towards her, “what’s up? I can always tell when you’re worried about something. You could never fool me.”

Chris looked into her kind brown eyes and immediately felt more relaxed.

“My boss gave me my first solo assignment today and, although I know I can do it, I’m as nervous as hell. What if I mess up? What if I let him down and he decides that I’m a complete idiot? Half of me is excited at finally having the chance to do something real instead of just shadowing him, but the other half of me is in complete panic mode!”

She said the whole of that statement without pausing for breath and Tessa laughed at her.

“That’s rubbish,” she exclaimed. “You’ll be absolutely fine. You were always far more studious than me and passed all your exams with flying colours. If I can manage to do a good job you certainly can. You just need to keep calm and do what you were trained to do.” She poured out two glasses of wine and pushed the fresh glass towards Chris. “Get that down you and tell me exactly what part of the assignment worries you the most. You never know, I might be able to help.”

TRUTH & REVENGE

Chris picked up her glass and, after downing almost half of it, relaxed into her chair and smiled apologetically at Tessa.

“Sorry about that,” she said, raising her eyebrows. “It’s that bloody art department. I ask them to do a simple job; one that they should be able to do with their eyes shut, and they give me grief! It happens every time I have to go in there. I don’t know why I let them get to me. They’re like sharks smelling blood when I enter the room. So they’ve done some bloody art degree. Doesn’t make them gods.”

Tessa laughed again.

“You need to be firmer, sweetie. You’re good at what you do and they need to learn some respect.” She refilled Chris’s glass, which had almost been drained. “That boss of yours must think you’re ready for the responsibility or he wouldn’t trust you with such an important task. You really need to believe in yourself more.”

“Easier said than done,” Chris sighed.

Tessa burst into more laughter and, eyeing the near-empty bottle of wine on the table, remarked: “Time for some Chapman therapy I think. It’s still early and my flat mates are having a ‘drinks and nibbles’ party this evening. I sort of said I’d be there, but their idea of party guests can sometimes be a bore; they’re so intellectual. At least they like to think they are! You’ll be doing me a huge favour by coming with me and giving me someone normal to talk to. We can sneak into my room with some nibbles and a couple of glasses of wine and dish the dirt. It’ll be fun. What do you say?”

She was already putting her coat on and tugging at Chris’s arm. Tessa was difficult to say no to when she was determined.

Chris thought about the empty flat she could go back to. Another

SHEILA RAWLINGS

night spent on her own watching rubbish TV with a ready-meal was really no competition for a lively evening with her best friend.

“OK,” she replied “but I really can’t stay too long. If I’m late tomorrow Feldman will definitely regret his decision and may even decide to fire me!”

She noted the look of triumph on Tessa’s face, put her coat on and allowed herself be hustled towards the door.

It was then that she first noticed him.

He was on his own, leaning against the bar and staring at the door. It must have been raining outside because his thick dark hair was wet and there were droplets of water on his leather jacket. He abruptly turned back to the bar and picked up his drink. He was tall and of average build, smartly dressed, not bad looking really, Chris thought. But at that moment she heard Tessa calling impatiently to her, so she turned away and walked out into the street.

She thought no more about him.

Outside it was indeed raining, so they decided to take a taxi. It did not take them long to get to the flat in Pimlico as rush hour had long since subsided. Tessa opened the door with her key and ushered Chris in.

“I’m in your debt for this,” she whispered. “Welcome to academia!”

Back at the wine bar the young man finished his drink and returned his gaze towards the door, where he saw a familiar face framed in the doorway. Tim Meyers smiled in acknowledgement and walked over to join him.