

chapter one

The day is prickly hot and the nylon shirt sticks to her body as she heads up the side path.

‘Miss, miss, this is a private area, this is not part of the property.’ There is an agitation in the real-estate agent’s voice as he ushers Kate out, almost shooing her back into the courtyard where Cameron is waiting for her.

‘Where did you disappear to?’ Cameron asks, one eyebrow raised.

‘I just went up the side for a bit,’ Kate says, casually, affecting nonchalance.

Cameron leans up against the side fence and plucks at a hanging cactus plant. ‘Is that part of the place, too?’

The agent is still by her side, like a shopkeeper tailing a suspected shoplifter. ‘No,’ she says, glaring at Cameron to be quiet, ‘actually, it’s not. My mistake.’ Her face is hot and she can feel her hands sweating.

‘So what’s down there?’ Cameron continues brightly.

‘Don’t know.’ She smiles with her teeth clenched. ‘Private area.’

The agent jingles his key ring impatiently. There must be forty keys on it. ‘It is a private area,’ he confirms, his accent suddenly stronger. German, she thinks.

‘The landlord’s place?’ queries Cameron.

‘Correct.’ The agent nods. ‘It is here a duplex situation. The landlords are living on the south side, and the property for lease is

on this northern side.’

‘And the car space?’ Cameron adds. ‘Does that come with the flat?’

The agent shakes his head. ‘That is reserved for the landlord.’

‘And the courtyard?’

‘Common area.’

‘Uh-huh.’

Kate tugs at Cameron’s T-shirt. ‘Perhaps we should take a look inside,’ she says, too loudly.

There is a stream of people walking towards the front door and, as they join them, she can feel her stomach lurch with the fear of missing out.

‘Although I’ve probably stuffed it already,’ she mutters to herself.

Cameron puts his arm around her waist and leans into her. ‘What did you say?’

‘Nothing. I don’t think the agent likes me much.’

Cameron kisses her forehead. ‘Cause you got sprung snooping?’

She straightens up, bristling. ‘I’d hardly call it snooping, looking around a rental property.’

‘Come on, sweetie pie, be honest. You didn’t really think it was part of the rental, did you?’

Kate blushes slightly. ‘To tell you the truth,’ she says defensively, ‘I didn’t really know.’

They are standing in a small kitchen that looks out onto the courtyard.

‘Come on, beautiful,’ Cameron whispers, rubbing his stubbled cheek up against hers. ‘Let’s look around.’

‘That hurts.’ She frowns at him. ‘You know, no one would ever believe you’re a lawyer.’

‘That’s the idea.’

‘Well, you could have tried to look a bit conservative—at least you could have worn something other than those stupid red gym shoes.’

He chuckles. ‘But you said you loved them.’

‘Not for a bloody interview,’ she retorts but can’t help smiling a bit. ‘You know, if we don’t get this, we’ll never get anything, unless it’s that mouldy little number you found by the stormwater drain.’

He laughs out loud. ‘You know what I think, darling,’ he murmurs. ‘I think’—and he takes a deep breath as he raises an eyebrow at her—‘I think that you should just calm down.’

She whacks him on the arm. ‘Don’t you ever’—and at this point he joins in, too—‘ever, ever, ever tell me to calm down.’

‘You’re such a loser,’ she says and turns to put her arms around his neck. As she rests her head against him, she can feel someone looking at them, and she turns to see an old man in a faded black baseball cap who has stopped outside the window to watch them. As he meets Kate’s eye, he flushes and hurries towards the real-estate agent, who is waiting in the courtyard.

Kate manoeuvres herself out of the embrace and smooths down her ponytail. Whatever she does, coils of hair escape from the band and fall into her face.

Outside, the old man is talking to the real-estate agent. The man, who might be seventy years old, towers over the agent. Wisps of white hair show under his cap and his eyes are a pale blue. He nods to Kate as she walks back into the courtyard and she nods back coolly as though this is their very first encounter.

‘Good afternoon,’ he says. He, too, speaks with a German accent. He must be the landlord. Bingo.

She takes a punt on wowing them both—agent and landlord—with her close-to-fluent German. ‘Guten Tag. Sie haben hier ein sehr schönes Haus.’

It works a treat, as she’d suspected it would.

‘Und wo haben Sie so gutes Deutsch gelernt?’

She is used to the compliment and has her answer prepared.

‘In der Schule und ich habe ja auch in Deutschland studiert.’

‘Und wo?’

‘In Bayern—Nürnberg.’

‘I’m not familiar with that part of Bavaria.’

‘Are you from the north then?’

He gives a short laugh.

‘No. I’m not German. From Czechoslovakia—only fleetingly part of the Fatherland, so I don’t think it really counts.’

No. She knows next to nothing about Czechoslovakia and can’t think what to say.

He smiles at her and calls out to the agent. ‘I want these two. These are who I want.’

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The agent gives them the keys early and they decide to move in bit by bit. When they open the front gate for the first time, the Czech is reading in the courtyard, sitting at a wrought-iron garden setting, his newspaper covering most of the table. As Kate and Cameron walk in, he looks up in astonishment. Clearly he hasn’t been told they would be arriving so early. As she begins to apologise, Kate feels herself blush. Flustered, she starts to stammer, her words tripping over each other.

‘I’m sorry,’ she says. ‘I’m sorry ... the agent ... he said it would be okay, that we could start bringing our stuff over, just start bringing it in slowly.’

As the Czech nods, a voice calls out from the small area behind the car space. But the words aren’t in any language Kate can recognise.

The Czech clears his throat and stands up, the wrought-iron chair scraping against the tiles as he pushes it backwards. ‘We have guests,’ he calls out, in English.

An elderly woman emerges from behind the sliding door that separates the laundry area from the courtyard.

‘Vera,’ the Czech calls again, ‘we have guests.’

The woman limps a little as she walks over to them, buttoning