

They met nine years previously. The electricity was instant. The courting process was wonderful. Secretive and thrilling. Neither of them was an out lesbian. Anna was a political journalist, writing a sporadic column for the *Guardian*, with the odd spot on a TV news programme whenever one of the main Westminster correspondents wasn't available.

Sarah was completing her PhD, on the way to becoming a fellow and going straight into a prestigious lecturer's job at her alma mater. She was a political scientist. They had a great deal to talk about when they weren't fucking each other senseless. It seemed to be a partnership made in heaven.

Over time things shifted subtly. Anna could not believe that her brilliant partner was suffering from a cliché seven-year itch. She suggested they marry. After a slight hesitation, Sarah agreed, and they did. *I should have taken note of the hesitation.*

They had a brief, extended weekend honeymoon where, at least, the sex re-ignited, before returning to work.

They lived in Canterbury, near Sarah's campus. It was easy for Anna to work from there. She visited Westminster regularly, but almost always managed to catch the last train back. Apart from wanting to be with Sarah, her instinct told her to sleep in the same bed.

A little more than a year into their marriage, and after nearly eight years of partnership, Anna received a call from the BBC.

"Miss Westlake, would you be interested in fronting a political discussion programme in a new late-night Saturday slot? It will have a new format, which we will of course work on together with you. Your input will be very useful.

"Anna very nearly blurted out, "*Tell Sarah to stop messing around.*"

"Miss Westlake, are you still there?"

"Yes, I'm so sorry. I was considering whether this is an April Fool joke...in July."

"That is my fault. I should have introduced myself properly. Jonathan Smythe, head of current affairs. Didn't my secretary tell you?"

"No. She just put me through."

"I do apologise. We have suffered staffing problems ever since the pandemic. Along with cuts...you know."

"Mr Smythe, I am digesting what you asked. I'm quite bowled over."

"Your infrequent minor broadcasts have resonated well, within and outside the corporation. And I have in front of me a selection of your articles. All excellent. You can take a complex political problem and make it easily understandable, without talking down to your audience. We feel that is exactly what is needed for our new programme. It will be late night, so we don't expect an enormous slice of the viewing quota, but if we select the correct guests and pick the right subjects, we have the feeling we can contribute to the political discourse in a meaningful way."

"I'm immensely flattered. But aren't there more experienced journalists who would jump at the chance?"

There was a brief hiatus. This time, Anna wondered if the line was dead, but she kept quiet.

"I'm now embarrassed, of course. Your physical appearance does play a role in this offer."

"Ah." Anna bit her lip. "What about my sexuality? I married my...wife...a

year ago."

"We are aware of that. It was discussed."

"And?"

"I assume you won't discuss your private life any more than the other political journalists do."

"But if it leaks?"

"I presume it is not in your interest to start carrying a torch?"

"No. I don't think my private life is anyone's business. But I wouldn't deny it."

"We wouldn't expect you to. This is the twenty-first century."

"Mr Smythe, I think we can continue to pursue the subject. May I come up to meet you?"

"I'm very happy to hear that. Tomorrow?"

"I'll be there."

Anna fastened her dark brown, almost black hair, with a clip at the nape of her neck. She always wore it brushed back from her forehead when it was loose, but if it wasn't sprayed, it tended to fall into a left-sided parting, and it didn't suit her. So, she only wore it loose at home or when she knew she was stationary or sedentary and could rely on the spray. Otherwise, she pinned it.

You will expect me to wear pants, so I won't. Reluctantly, she rolled stockings up her slim, shapely legs, zipped her skirt, shrugged herself into her starched shirt and groaned as she pushed into the stilettos. *Yeah. I'm in danger of turning myself on.* It was a look she appreciated on Sarah. She picked up her laptop bag and threw it into her vintage maroon Fiat Spider. She usually took the train but had no desire to risk getting jostled and creased in her outfit. She prayed the car would start. Her brother maintained it, but it was temperamental and occasionally decided it didn't like hot weather, which made the ownership of a sports coupe rather meaningless. Anna loved the design, and despite her periodic exasperation, was loath to part with it. Her brother frequently urged her to sell and buy a more reliable, modern German car. She was almost on the point of doing so, never more so than now. Taking a deep breath, she turned the key. The car started with a satisfying purr, and she used all her strength to turn it out of the garage and onto the road. It did not possess power steering.

Her journey to Broadcasting House was uneventful. The car stuttered only once. *That's it. I can't go on getting these near heart attacks. Maybe I can afford a second car. I don't want to lose you from my life.*

She was an hour early. She parked in a nearby multi-story and found a small table outside a cafe. She drank a cappuccino and used the cloakroom. As she had made heads turn all morning, she presumed either she still looked good, or had lip gloss all over her teeth. Anna satisfied herself it was the former and walked slowly over to the glass-fronted building which housed the BBC TV studios. Despite arriving at the current affairs suite exactly to the minute, Jonathan Smythe was waiting for her in the outer office and shook her hand, smiling. *I'm in...if I want to be. No power games here. For the moment at least.* It was a refreshing change. Anna liked the man immediately.

They went into his office, which was smaller than she expected. "I can see what you're thinking. We are terribly cramped here since the move from White City. Although you are probably too young to remember Television Centre."

"I admit I was too young to have visited it in a work capacity, but I remember the legendary building well. Didn't it have an athletics track around the corridors painted on the floor?"

"It did. British eccentricity at its best."

"There isn't a lot to laugh about in Brexit Britain."

"Indeed. Which brings me neatly to the show we want to present."

"Eccentric politicians?"

"They've died out too, with very few exceptions. And those remaining are to the right of Genghis Khan. No, we want the programme to be hard-hitting, but in a climate where politicians, journalists and experts can be relaxed and open up. To be able to talk honestly to each other. We think you are the right person to create this atmosphere."

"I'm flattered. A lot would depend on the studio ambience. No live audience, I hope."

"No. The asinine questions and comments are uncontrollable."

"I imagine as soft lighting as possible. Comfortable chairs and sofas."

"Exactly. We are very obviously on the same wavelength."

"When would the programme begin?"

"Shortly before the party conferences. Late September."

"Baptism by fire."

"Yes. But audiences take more note of politics at that time. Are you onboard?"

"Yes."

The meeting continued for another half an hour. Her fee was discussed. It was far more than she had ever earned, but Anna knew they were trying to get her cheaply. She managed to increase it slightly.

They agreed on a contract for one series, with an option for continuation. Anna insisted on her right to re-negotiate her fee with each new season. Jonathan Smythe balked before agreeing.

They shook hands, and she left the suite. She was grateful to see a cloakroom off the corridor. Although she felt she was burning, she was surprised to see only the faintest blush on her cheeks through the foundation. Under her armpits, her starched shirt was damp. *I'm glad I didn't do a rain dance in the office.* But the sweat could not have been visible. It felt good to dry herself with a paper towel. She walked purposefully to the lift at the end of the corridor, although her legs were a little wobbly. It was half full. She stepped inside and remained at the front. As it stopped at the next floor, it juddered slightly. The doors opened, and a tall, heavily pregnant woman squeezed in. Anna looked at her sideways. She had long, dark brunette hair caught up in a tight high ponytail. The severe hairstyle only served to emphasise her high cheekbones, long face and stunning soft-skinned forehead. Her eyes were huge and a dark grey. Their eyes met, and the woman smiled. Her mouth was large and full of perfectly white teeth. Anna caught her breath as she looked up at her slightly. Their height difference was

about three inches, which made the woman five feet ten. The lift skipped two floors, and Anna was vaguely aware that it seemed to have sped up. Then it stopped, and the impact threw everyone in the lift sideways. The sensation was similar to the sudden and terrifying drop on an intercontinental flight Anna once experienced. She was disoriented for a split second until she saw the look of horror on the pregnant woman's face. Instinctively, she put herself between her and the wall of the lift, which had a handhold at waist level. She would have thumped into it with her swollen belly. The woman put her arms around Anna, and they clung to each other as the doors opened. Two other people in the lift were on the floor looking dazed. A man still standing had the presence of mind to stop the doors from closing.

"Everyone out immediately."

Two people waiting tried to push past them into the lift.

"Are you crazy?" Anna shouted at them. "Can someone do something? This lift is out of order."

She saw a woman reach for her phone. Another ran over to the reception desk. Anna still clutched the pregnant woman and helped her out of the lift cabin, the floor of which moved as they climbed out. She helped her into a chair in the reception area.

"Wow. I can't thank you enough. Little madame here would not have appreciated that knock. You are very much softer."

Anna now realised her lower back hurt where it had taken the full force of the railing. She rolled her shoulders. "Do you need medical attention? Shall I call someone?"

"I'm fine. Now getting over the shock. Don't worry." They smiled at each other. "I'm sure you're in a hurry."

"Alright. If you are sure. Um...good luck...with...um...little madame."

"Thanks."

Anna walked across to the main entrance. She felt the woman was looking at her and turned as she put her hand to the door. The woman smiled her radiant smile and waved. Anna walked out.