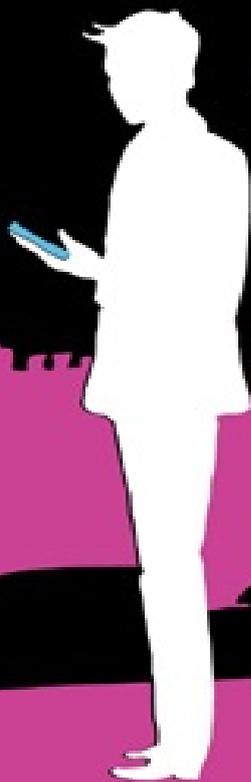


#1 *New York Times* bestselling author

Sophie Kinsella

I've Got Your Number

A Novel



Sophie Kinsella

I've Got
Your Number

A NOVEL



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I've Got Your Number is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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A Note from Sophie Kinsella on footnotes:

Hello!

Thank you for downloading my book. I hope you are reading it on a suitably beautiful and shiny gadget! Before you begin reading, I just wanted to mention that *I've Got Your Number* includes some footnotes. Don't worry, I haven't written an academic treatise!

These footnotes are cleverly linked in this eBook edition and if you've never before got to grips with using them, here is what to do:

- When a small number appears as you are reading, click or tap it and you will jump straight through to the footnote.
- When you've read the footnote, click or tap on the number again and you will jump straight back to where you were to carry on reading.

I hope you enjoy the book!

Love,
Sophie xx

Perspective. I need to get perspective. It's not an earthquake or a crazed gunman or nuclear meltdown, is it? On the scale of disasters, this is not huge. *Not* huge. One day I expect I'll look back at this moment and laugh and think, *Ha-ha, how silly I was to worry—*

Stop, Poppy. Don't even try. I'm not laughing—in fact, I feel sick. I'm walking blind around the hotel ballroom, my heart thudding, looking fruitlessly on the patterned blue carpet, behind gilt chairs, under discarded paper napkins, in places where it couldn't possibly be.

I've lost it. The only thing in the world I wasn't supposed to lose. My engagement ring.

To say this is a special ring is an understatement. It's been in Magnus's family for three generations. It's this stunning emerald with two diamonds, and Magnus had to get it out of a special bank vault before he proposed. I've worn it safely every day for three whole months, religiously putting it on a special china tray at night, feeling for it on my finger every thirty seconds ... and now, the very day his parents are coming back from the States, I've lost it. The very same *day*.

Professors Antony Tavish and Wanda Brook-Tavish are, at this precise moment, flying back from six months' sabbatical in Chicago. I can picture them now, eating honey-roasted peanuts and reading academic papers on their his 'n' hers Kindles. I honestly don't know which of them is more intimidating.

Him. He's so sarcastic.

No, her. With all that frizzy hair and always asking you questions about your views on feminism.

OK, they're both bloody scary. And they're landing in about an hour, and of course they want to see the ring—

No. Do not hyperventilate, Poppy. Stay positive. I just need to look at this from a different angle. Like ... what would Poirot do? Poirot wouldn't flap around in panic. He'd stay calm and use his little gray cells and recall some tiny, vital detail which would be the clue to everything.

I squeeze my eyes tight. Little gray cells. Come on. Do your best.

Thing is, I'm not sure Poirot had three glasses of pink champagne and a mojito before he solved the Murder on the Orient Express.

"Miss?" A gray-haired cleaning lady is trying to get round me with a Hoover, and I gasp in horror. They're Hoovering the ballroom already? What if they suck it up?

"Excuse me." I grab her blue nylon shoulder. "Could you just give me five more minutes of search before you start Hoovering?"

"Still looking for your ring?" She shakes her head doubtfully, then brightens. "I expect you'll find it safe at home. It's probably been there all the time!"

"Maybe." I force myself to nod politely, although I feel like screaming, "I'm not *that* stupid!"

I spot another cleaner, on the other side of the ballroom, clearing cupcake crumbs and crumpled paper napkins into a black plastic bin bag. She isn't concentrating at all. Wasn't she listening to me?

"Excuse me!" My voice shrills out as I sprint across to her. "You are looking out for my ring, aren't you?"

"No sign of it so far, love." The woman sweeps another load of detritus off the table into the bin bag without giving it a second glance.

"Careful!" I grab for the napkins and pull them out again, feeling each one carefully for a hard lump, not caring that I'm getting buttercream icing all over my hands.

"Dear, I'm trying to clear up." The cleaner grabs the napkins out of my hands. "Look at the mess you're making!"

"I know, I know. I'm sorry." I scrabble for the cupcake cases I dropped on the floor. "But you don't understand. If I don't find this ring, I'm dead."

I want to grab the bin bag and do a forensics check of the contents with tweezers. I want to put plastic tape round the whole room and declare it a crime scene. It has to be here, it *has* to be.

Unless someone's still got it. That's the only other possibility that I'm clinging to. One of my friends is still wearing it and somehow hasn't noticed. Perhaps it's slipped into her handbag ... maybe it's fallen into a pocket ... it's stuck on the threads of a jumper.... The possibilities in my head are getting more and more far-fetched, but I can't give up on them.

"Have you tried the ladies' room?" The woman moves to get past me.

Of course I've tried the ladies' room. I checked every single cubicle, on my hands and knees. And then all the basins. Twice. And then I tried to persuade the concierge to close the room and have all the sink pipes investigated, but he refused. He said it would be different if he knew it had been lost there for certain, and he was sure the police would agree with him, and could I please step aside from the desk as there were people waiting?

Police. Bah. I thought they'd come roaring round in their squad cars as soon as I called, not just tell me to come down to the police station and file a report. I don't have time to file a report! I've got to find my ring!

I hurry back to the circular table we were sitting at this afternoon and crawl underneath, patting the carpet yet again. How could I have let this happen? How could I have been so stupid?

It was my old school friend Natasha's idea to get tickets for the Marie Curie Champagne Tea. She couldn't come to my official hen spa weekend, so this was a kind of substitute. There were eight of us at the table, all merrily swigging champagne and stuffing down cupcakes, and it was right before the raffle started that someone said, "Come on, Poppy, let's have a go with your ring."

I can't even remember who that was. Annalise, maybe? Annalise was at university with me, and now we work together at First Fit Physio, with Ruby, who was also in our physiotherapy course. Ruby was at the tea, too, but I'm not sure she tried on the ring. Or did she?

I can't believe how rubbish I am at this. How can I do a Poirot if I can't even remember the basics? The truth is, *everyone* seemed to be trying on the ring: Natasha and Clare and Emily (old school friends up from Taunton), Lucinda (my wedding planner, who's kind of become a friend) and her assistant, Clemency, and Ruby and Annalise (not only college friends and

colleagues but my two best friends. They're going to be my bridesmaids too).

I'll admit it: I was basking in all the admiration. I still can't believe something so grand and beautiful belongs to me. The fact is, I still can't believe *any* of it. I'm engaged! Me, Poppy Wyatt. To a tall, handsome university lecturer who's written a book and even been on the TV. Only six months ago, my love life was a disaster zone. I'd had no significant action for a year and was reluctantly deciding I should give that match.com guy with the bad breath a second chance—and now my wedding's only ten days away! I wake up every morning and look at Magnus's smooth, freckled, sleeping back and think, *My fiancé, Dr. Magnus Tavis, Fellow of King's College London*,¹ and feel a tiny tweak of disbelief. And then I swivel round and look at the ring, gleaming expensively on my nightstand, and feel another tweak of disbelief.

What will Magnus say?

My stomach clenches and I swallow hard. No. Don't think about that. Come on, little grey cells. Get with it.

I remember that Clare wore the ring for a long time. She really didn't want to take it off. Then Natasha started tugging at it, saying, "My turn, my turn!" And I remember calling out, "Careful!"

I mean, it's not like I was *irresponsible*. I was carefully watching the ring as it was passed round the table.

But then my attention was split, because they started calling out the raffle numbers and the prizes were fantastic. A week in an Italian villa, and a top salon haircut, and a Harvey Nichols voucher ... The ballroom was buzzing, with people pulling out tickets and numbers being called from the platform and women jumping up and shouting, "Me!"

And *this* is the moment where I went wrong. This is the gut-churning, if-only instant. If I could go back in time, that's the moment I would march up to myself and say several things. "Poppy, *priorities*."

But you don't realize, do you? The moment happens, and you make your crucial mistake and then it's gone and the chance to do anything about it is blown away.

So what happened was, Clare won Wimbledon tickets in the raffle. I love Clare to bits, but she's always been a tad feeble. She didn't stand up and yell, "Me! Woohoo!" at top volume, she just raised her hand a few inches. Even those of us at her *table* didn't realize she'd won.

As it dawned on me that Clare was waving a raffle ticket in the air, the presenter on the platform said, "I think we'll draw again, if there's no winner...."

"Shout!" I poked Clare and waved my own hand wildly. "Here! The winner's over here!"

"And the new number is ... 4403."

To my disbelief, some dark-haired girl on the other side of the room started whooping and brandishing a ticket.

"She didn't win!" I exclaimed indignantly. "*You* won."

"It doesn't matter." Clare was shrinking back.

"Of *course* it matters!" I cried out before I could stop myself, and everyone at the table started laughing.

"Go, Poppy!" called out Natasha. "Go, White Knightess! Sort it out!"

"Go, Knightie!"

This is an old joke. Just because there was this *one* incident at school, where I started

petition to save the hamsters, everyone began to call me the White Knightess. Or Knighti for short. My so-called catchphrase is apparently “Of course it matters!”²

Anyway. Suffice it to say that within two minutes I was up on the stage with the dark-haired girl, arguing with the presenter about how my friend’s ticket was more valid than hers.

I know now that I never should have left the table. I never should have left the ring, even for a second. I can see how stupid that was. But, in my defense, I didn’t *know* the fire alarm was going to go off, did I?

It was so surreal. One minute, everyone was sitting down at a jolly champagne tea. The next minute, a siren was blaring through the air and everyone was on their feet, heading for the exits in pandemonium. I could see Annalise, Ruby, and all the others grabbing their bags and making their way to the back. A man in a suit came onto the stage and started ushering me, the dark-haired girl, and the presenter toward a side door and wouldn’t let us go the other way. “Your safety is our priority,” he kept saying.³

Even then, it’s not as if I was *worried*. I didn’t think the ring would have *gone*. I assumed one of my friends had it safe and I’d meet up with everyone outside and get it back.

Outside, of course, it was mayhem. As well as our tea, there was some big business conference happening at the hotel, and all the delegates were spilling out of different doors into the road. Hotel staff were trying to make announcements into loudspeakers, and cars were beeping, and it took me ages just to find Natasha and Emily in the *mêlée*.

“Have you got my ring?” I demanded at once, trying not to sound accusatory. “Who’s got it?”

Both of them looked blank.

“Dunno.” Natasha shrugged. “Didn’t Annalise have it?”

So then I plunged into the throng to find Annalise, but she didn’t have it; she thought Clare had it. And Clare thought Clemency had it. And Clemency thought Ruby might have had it but hadn’t she gone already?

The thing about panic is, it creeps up on you. One minute you’re still quite calm, still telling yourself, *Don’t be ridiculous. Of course it can’t be lost*. The next, the Marie Curie stage are announcing that the event will be curtailed early due to unforeseen circumstances and are handing out goody bags. And all your friends have disappeared to catch the tube. And your finger is still bare. And a voice inside your head is screeching, *Oh my God! I knew this would happen! Nobody should ever have entrusted me with an antique ring! Big mistake! Big mistake!*

And that’s how you find yourself under a table an hour later, groping around a grotty hot carpet, praying desperately for a miracle. (Even though your fiancé’s father has written the whole bestselling book on how miracles don’t exist and it’s all superstition and even saying “OMG” is the sign of a weak mind.)⁴

Suddenly I realize my phone is flashing and grab it with trembling fingers. Three messages have come in, and I scroll through them in hope.

Found it yet? Annalise xx

Sorry, babe, haven’t seen it. Don’t worry, I won’t breathe a word to Magnus. N xxx

Hi Pops! God, how awful, to lose your ring! Actually I thought I saw it ... (*incoming text*)

I stare at my phone, galvanized. Clare thought she saw it? Where?

I crawl out from under the table and wave my phone around, but the rest of the team resolutely refuses to come through. The signal in here is rubbish. How can this call itself a five-star hotel? I'll have to go outside.

"Hi!" I approach the gray-haired cleaner, raising my voice above the Hoover's roar. "I'm popping out to check a text. But if you *do* find the ring, call me—I've given you my mobile number. I'll just be on the street."

"Right you are, dear," says the cleaner patiently.

I hurry through the lobby, dodging groups of conference delegates, slowing slightly as I pass the concierge's desk.

"Any sign of—"

"Nothing handed in yet, madam."

The air outside is balmy, with a hint of summer, even though it's only mid-April. I hope the weather will still be like this in ten days time, because my wedding dress is backless and I'm counting on a fine day.

There are wide shallow steps in front of the hotel, and I walk up and down them, swishing my phone back and forth, trying to get some signal, with no success. At last I head down onto the actual pavement, waving my phone around more wildly, holding it over my head, then leaning into the quiet Knightsbridge street, my phone in my outstretched fingertips.

Come on, phone, I mentally cajole it. You can do it. Do it for Poppy. Fetch the message. There must be a signal somewhere.... You can do it....

"Aaaaaaah!" I hear my own yell of shock before I even clock what's happened. There's a twisting pain in my shoulder. My fingers feel scratched. A figure on a bike is pedaling swiftly toward the end of the road. I only have time to register an old gray hoody and skinny black jeans before the bike turns the corner.

My hand's empty. What the hell—

I stare at my palm in numb disbelief. It's gone. That guy stole my phone. He bloody *stole* it. My phone's my *life*. I can't exist without it. It's a vital organ.

"Madam, are you all right?" The doorman is hurrying down the steps. "Did something happen? Did he hurt you?"

"I ... I've been mugged," I somehow manage to stutter. "My phone's been nicked."

The doorman clicks sympathetically. "Chancers, they are. Have to be so careful in an area like this...."

I'm not listening. I'm starting to shake all over. I've never felt so bereft and panicky. What do I do without my phone? How do I function? My hand keeps automatically reaching for my phone in its usual place in my pocket. Every instinct in me wants to text someone OMG, I've lost my phone! but *how can I do that without a bloody phone?*

My phone is my people. It's my friends. It's my family. It's my work. It's my world. It's everything. I feel like someone's wrenched my life support system away from me.

"Shall I call the police, madam?" The doorman is peering at me anxiously.

I'm too distracted to reply. I'm consumed with a sudden, even more terrible realization. The ring. I've handed out my mobile number to everyone: the cleaners, the ladies' room attendants, the Marie Curie people, everyone. What if someone finds it? What if someone got it and they're trying to call me *right this minute* and there's no answer because hoody gu

has already chucked my SIM card into the river?

Oh God.⁵ I need to talk to the concierge. I'll give my home number instead—

No. Bad idea. If they leave a message, Magnus might hear it.⁶

OK, so ... so ... I'll give my work number. Yes.

Except no one will be at the physio clinic this evening. I can't go and sit there for hours just in case.

I'm starting to feel seriously freaked out now. Everything's unraveling.

To make matters even worse, as I run back in to the lobby, the concierge is busy. His desk is surrounded by a large group of conference delegates talking about restaurant reservations. I try to catch his eye, hoping he'll beckon me forward as a priority, but he studiously ignores me, and I feel a twinge of hurt. I know I've taken up quite a lot of his time this afternoon—but doesn't he realize what a hideous crisis I'm in?

"Madam." The doorman has followed me into the lobby, his brow creased with concern. "Can we get you something for the shock? Arnold!" He briskly calls over a waiter. "A brandy for the lady, please, on the house. And if you'll talk to our concierge, he'll help you with the police. Would you like to sit down?"

"No, thanks." A thought suddenly occurs to me. "Maybe I should phone my own number. Call the mugger! I could ask him to come back, offer him a reward... What do you think? Could I borrow your phone?"

The doorman almost recoils as I thrust out a hand.

"Madam, I think that would be a very foolhardy action," he says severely. "And I'm sure the police will agree you should do no such thing. I think you must be in shock. Kindly have a seat and try to relax."

Hmm. Maybe he's right. I'm not wild about setting up some assignation with a criminal in a hoody. But I can't sit down and relax; I'm far too hyper. To calm my nerves, I start walking round and round the same path, my heels clicking on the marble floor. Past the massive potted ficus tree ... past the table with newspapers ... past a big shiny litter bin ... back to the ficus. It's a comforting little circuit, and I can keep my eyes fixed on the concierge the whole time, waiting for him to be free.

The lobby is still bustling with business types. Through the glass doors I can see the doorman back on the steps, busy hailing taxis and pocketing tips. A squat Japanese man in a blue suit is standing near me with some European-looking businessmen, exclaiming in words that sounds like loud, furious Japanese and gesticulating at everybody with the conference pass strung round his neck on a red cord. He's so short and the other men look so nervous, they almost want to smile.

The brandy arrives on a salver and I pause briefly to drain it in one, then keep walking the same repetitive route.

Potted ficus ... newspaper table ... litter bin ... potted ficus ... newspaper table ... litter bin ...

Now that I've calmed down a bit, I'm starting to churn with murderous thoughts. Does the hoody guy realize he's wrecked my life? Does he realize how *crucial* a phone is? It's the worst thing you can steal from a person. The *worst*.

And it wasn't even that great a phone. It was pretty ancient. So good luck to hoody guy when he wants to type *B* in a text or go on the Internet. I hope he tries and fails. *Then* he'll be

sorry.

Ficus ... newspapers ... bin ... ficus ... newspapers ... bin ...

And he hurt my shoulder. Bastard. Maybe I could sue him for millions. If they ever catch him, which they won't.

Ficus ... newspapers ... bin ...

Bin.

Wait.

What's that?

I stop dead in my tracks and stare into the bin, wondering if someone's playing a trick on me or I'm hallucinating.

It's a phone.

Right there in the litter bin. A mobile phone.

¹ His specialism is Cultural Symbolism. I speed-read his book, *The Philosophy of Symbolism*, after our second date and then tried to pretend I'd read it ages ago, coincidentally, for pleasure. (Which, to be fair, he didn't believe for a minute.) Anyway, the point is, I read it. And what impressed me most was: There were so many footnotes. I've totally got into them. Aren't they handy? You just bung them in whenever you want and instantly look clever.

Magnus says footnotes are for things which aren't your main concern but nevertheless hold some interest for you. So. This is my footnote about footnotes.

² Which, actually, I never say. Just like Humphrey Bogart never said, "Play it again, Sam." It's an urban myth.

³ Of course, the hotel wasn't on fire. The system had short-circuited. I found that out afterward, not that it was any consolation.

⁴ Did Poirot ever say "oh my God"? I bet he did. Or "*sacrebleu!*" which comes to the same thing. And does this not disprove Antony's theory, since Poirot's gray cells are clearly stronger than anyone else's? I might point this out to Antony one day. When I'm feeling brave. (Which, if I've lost the ring, will be never, obviously.)

⁵ Weak mind.

⁶ I'm allowed to give myself at least a *chance* of getting it back safely and him never having to know, aren't I?

I blink a few times and look again—but it’s still there, half hidden amid a couple of discarded conference programs and a Starbucks cup. What’s a phone doing in a *bin*?

I look around to see if anyone’s watching me—then reach in gingerly and pull it out. It has a couple of drops of coffee on it, but otherwise it seems perfect. It’s a good one too. Seems quite new.

Cautiously, I turn and survey the thronging lobby. Nobody’s paying me the slightest bit of attention. No one’s rushing up and exclaiming “*There’s my phone!*” And I’ve been walking around this area for the last ten minutes. Whoever threw this phone in here did it a while ago.

There’s a sticker on the back of the phone, with *White Globe Consulting Group* printed in tiny letters and a number. Did someone just chuck it away? Is it bust? I press the *on* switch and the screen glows. It seems in perfect working order to me.

A tiny voice in my head is telling me that I should hand it in. Take it up to the front desk and say, “Excuse me, I think someone’s lost this phone.” That’s what I should do. March up to the desk right now, like any responsible, civic member of society ...

My feet don’t move an inch. My hand tightens protectively round the phone. Thing is, I *need* a phone. I bet White Globe Consulting Group, whoever that is, has millions of phones. And it’s not like I found it on the floor or in the ladies’ room, is it? It was in a bin. Things in bins are *rubbish*. They’re fair game. They’ve been relinquished to the world. That’s the rule.

I peer into the bin again and glimpse a red cord, just like the ones round all the delegates’ necks. I check the concierge to make sure he’s not watching, then plunge my hand in again and pull out a conference pass. A mug shot of a stunningly pretty girl stares back at me under which is printed: *Violet Russell, White Globe Consulting Group*.

I’m building up a pretty good theory now. I could be Poirot. This is Violet Russell’s phone and she threw it away. For ... some reason or other.

Well, that’s her fault. Not mine.

The phone buzzes and I start. Shit! It’s alive. The ring tone begins at top volume—and it’s Beyoncé’s “Single Ladies.” I quickly press *ignore*, but a moment later it starts up again, louder and unmistakable.

Isn’t there a bloody volume control on this thing? A couple of nearby businesswomen have turned to stare, and I’m so flustered that I jab at *talk* instead of *ignore*. The businesswomen are still watching me, so I press the phone to my ear and turn away.

“The person you have called is not available,” I say, trying to sound robotic. “Please leave a message.” That’ll get rid of whoever it is.

“Where the fuck *are* you?” A smooth, well-educated male voice starts speaking and I nearly squeak with astonishment. It worked! He thinks I’m a machine! “I’ve just been talking to Scottie. He has a contact who reckons he can do it. It’ll be like keyhole surgery. He’s good. There won’t be any trace.”

I don't dare breathe. Or scratch my nose, which is suddenly incredibly itchy.

"OK," the man is saying. "So, whatever else you do, be fucking careful."

He rings off and I stare at the phone in astonishment. I never thought anyone would actually leave a *message*.

Now I feel a bit guilty. This is a genuine voice mail, and Violet's missed it. I mean, it's not my fault she threw her phone away, but even so ... On impulse I scrabble in my bag for a pen and the only thing I've got to write on, which is an old theater program.⁷ I scribble down: *Scottie has a contact, keyhole surgery, no trace, be fucking careful.*

God alone knows what *that's* all about. Liposuction, maybe? Anyway, it doesn't matter. The point is, if I ever do meet this Violet girl, I'll be able to pass it on.

Before the phone can ring again, I hurry to the concierge's desk, which has miraculously been cleared.

"Hi," I say breathlessly. "Me again. Has anyone found my ring?"

"May I please assure you, madam," he says with a frosty smile, "that we would have found it if you know if we had found it. We *do* have your phone number—"

"No, you don't!" I cut him off, almost triumphantly. "That's the thing! The number I gave you is now ... er ... defunct. Out of use. Very much so." The last thing I want is him calling me a hoody guy and mentioning a priceless emerald ring. "Please don't call it. Can you use another number instead?" I carefully copy the phone number from the back of the White Glove Consulting phone. "In fact, just to be sure ... can I test it?" I reach for the hotel landline phone and dial the printed number. A moment later Beyoncé starts blasting out of the mobile phone. OK. At last I can relax a little. I've got a number.

"Madam, was there anything else?"

The concierge is starting to look quite pissed off, and there's a queue of people building up behind me. So I thank him again and head to a nearby sofa, full of adrenaline. I have a phone and I have a plan.

It only takes me five minutes to write out my new mobile number on twenty separate pieces of hotel writing paper, with *POPPY WYATT—EMERALD RING, PLEASE CALL!!!!* in block capitals. To my annoyance, the doors to the ballroom are now locked (although I'm *sure* I can hear the cleaners inside), so I'm forced to roam around the hotel corridors, the tearoom, the ladies' rooms, and even the spa, handing my number out to every hotel worker I come across and explaining the story.

I call the police and dictate my new number to them. I text Ruby—whose mobile number I know by heart—saying:

Hi! Phone stolen. This is my new mobile number. Can u pass to everyone? Any sign of ring???

Then I flop onto the sofa in exhaustion. I feel like I've been living in this bloody hotel all day. I should phone Magnus too and give him this number—but I can't face it yet. I have this irrational conviction that he'll be able to tell from my tone of voice that my ring is missing. He'll sense my bare finger the minute I say "Hi."

Please come back, ring. Please, PLEASE come back...

I've leaned back, closed my eyes, and am trying to send a telepathic message through the ether. So when Beyoncé starts up again, I give a startled jump. Maybe this is it! My ring.

Someone found it! I don't even check the screen before pressing *talk* and answering excitedly.
"Hello?"

"Violet?" A man's voice hits my ear. It's not the man who called before; it's a guy with a deeper voice. He sounds a bit bad-tempered, if you can tell that just from three syllables. He's also breathing quite heavily, which means he's either a pervert or doing some exercise.
"Are you in the lobby? Is the Japanese contingent still there?"

In reflex, I look around. There are a whole bunch of Japanese people by the doors.

"Yes, they are," I say. "But I'm not Violet. This isn't Violet's phone anymore. Sorry. Maybe you could spread the word that her number's changed?"

I need to get Violet's mates off my case. I can't have them ringing me every five seconds.

"Excuse me, who is this?" the man demands. "Why are you answering this number? Where's Violet?"

"I possess this phone," I say, more confidently than I feel. Which is true. Possession is nine tenths of the law.⁹

"You possess it? What the hell are you—Oh Jesus." He swears a bit more, and I can hear his distant footsteps. It sounds like he's running downstairs.¹⁰ "Tell me, are they leaving?"

"The Japanese people?" I squint at the group. "Maybe. Can't tell."

"Is a short guy with them? Overweight? Thick hair?"

"You mean the man in the blue suit? Yes, he's right in front of me. Looks pissed off. No, he's putting on his mac."

The squat Japanese man has been handed a Burberry by a colleague. He's glowering as he puts it on, and a constant stream of angry Japanese is coming out of his mouth, as all his friends nod nervously.

"No!" The man's exclamation down the phone takes me by surprise. "He can't leave."

"Well, he is. Sorry."

"You have to stop him. Go up to him and stop him leaving the hotel. Go up to him now. Do whatever it takes."

"What?" I stare at the phone. "Look, I'm sorry, but I've never even met you—"

"Nor me you," he rejoins. "Who are you, anyway? Are you a friend of Violet? Can you tell me exactly why she decided to quit her job halfway through the biggest conference of the year? Does she think I suddenly don't *need* a PA anymore?"

Aha. So Violet's his personal assistant. This makes sense. And she walked out on him! Well, I'm not surprised, he's so bossy.

"Anyway, doesn't matter," he interrupts himself. "Point is, I'm on the stairs, floor nine, the lift jammed, I'll be downstairs in less than three minutes, and you have to keep Yuichi Yamasaki there till I arrive. Whoever the hell you are."

What a nerve.

"Or what?" I retort.

"Or else a year of careful negotiation goes down the tubes because of one ridiculous misunderstanding. The biggest deal of the year falls apart. A team of twenty people lose their jobs." His voice is relentless. "Senior managers, secretaries, the whole gang. Just because I can't get down there fast enough and the one person who could help won't."

Oh, bloody hell.

"All right!" I say furiously. "I'll do my best. What's his name again?"

“Yamasaki.”

“Wait!” I raise my voice, running forward across the lobby. “Please! Mr. Yamasaki? Could you wait a minute?”

Mr. Yamasaki turns questioningly, and a couple of flunkies move forward, flanking him protectively. He has a broad face, still creased in anger, and a wide, bullish neck, around which he’s draping a silk scarf. I get the sense he’s not into idle chitchat.

I have no idea what to say next. I don’t speak Japanese, I don’t know anything about Japanese business or Japanese culture. Apart from sushi. But I can’t exactly go up to him and say “Sushi!” out of the blue. It would be like going up to a top American businessman and saying “T-bone steak!”

“I’m ... a huge fan,” I improvise. “Of your work. Could I have your autograph?”

He looks puzzled, and one of his colleagues whispers a translation into his ear. Immediately, his brow clears and he bows to me.

Cautiously, I bow back, and he snaps his fingers, barking an instruction. A moment later, a beautiful leather folder has been opened in front of him, and he’s writing something elaborately in Japanese.

“Is he still there?” The stranger’s voice suddenly emanates from the phone.

“Yes,” I mutter into it. “Just about. Where are you?” I shoot a bright smile at Mr. Yamasaki.

“Fifth floor. Keep him there. Whatever it takes.”

Mr. Yamasaki hands me his piece of paper, caps his pen, bows again, and makes to walk off.

“Wait!” I cry desperately. “Could I ... show you something?”

“Mr. Yamasaki is very busy.” One of his colleagues, wearing steel glasses and the white shirt I’ve ever seen, turns back. “Kindly contact our office.”

They’re heading away again. What do I do now? I can’t ask for another autograph. I can’t rugby-tackle him. I need to attract his attention somehow.

“I have a special announcement to make!” I exclaim, hurrying after them. “I am a singing telegram! I bear a message from all Mr. Yamasaki’s many fans. It would be a great discourtesy to them if you were to refuse me.”

The word *discourtesy* seems to have stopped them in their tracks. They’re frowning and exchanging confused glances.

“A singing telegram?” says the man in steel glasses suspiciously.

“Like a Gorilla Gram?” I offer. “Only singing.”

I’m not sure that’s made things any clearer.

The interpreter murmurs furiously in Mr. Yamasaki’s ear and after a moment looks at me.

“You may present.”

Mr. Yamasaki turns and all his colleagues follow suit, folding their arms expectantly and lining up in a row. Around the lobby I can see a few interested glances from other groups of businesspeople.

“Where *are* you?” I murmur desperately into the phone.

“Third floor,” comes the man’s voice after a moment. “Half a minute. Don’t lose him.”

“Begin,” the man in steel spectacles says pointedly.

Some people nearby have turned to watch. Oh God. How did I get myself into this

Number one, I can't sing. Number two, what do I sing to a Japanese businessman I've never met before? Number three, *why* did I say singing telegram?

But if I don't do something soon, twenty people might lose their jobs.

I make a deep bow, to spin out some more time, and all the Japanese bow back.

"*Begin*," repeats the man in steel spectacles, his eyes glinting ominously.

I take a deep breath. Come on. It doesn't matter what I do. I only have to last half minute. Then I can run away and they'll never see me again.

"Mr. Yamasaki ...," I begin cautiously, to the tune of "Single Ladies." "Mr. Yamasaki. Mr. Yamasaki. Mr. Yamasaki." I shimmy my hips and shoulders at him, just like Beyoncé.¹¹ "Mr. Yamasaki, Mr. Yamasaki."

Actually, this is quite easy. I don't need any lyrics—I can just keep singing "Mr. Yamasaki" over and over. After a few moments, some of the Japanese even start singing along and clapping Mr. Yamasaki on the back.

"Mr. Yamasaki, Mr. Yamasaki. Mr. Yamasaki, Mr. Yamasaki." I lift my finger and waggle at him with a wink. "Ooh-ooh-ooh ... ooh-ooh-ooh ..."

This song is ridiculously catchy. All the Japanese are singing now, apart from Mr. Yamasaki, who's standing there, looking delighted. Some nearby delegates have joined in with the singing, and I can hear one of them saying, "Is this a flash mob thing?"

"Mr. Yamasaki, Mr. Yamasaki, Mr. Yamasaki ... Where *are* you?" I mutter into the phone, still beaming brightly.

"Watching."

"*What?*" My head jerks up and I sweep the lobby.

Suddenly my gaze fixes on a man standing alone, about thirty yards away. He's wearing a dark suit and has thick black ruffled hair and is holding a phone to his ear. Even from that distance I can see that he's laughing.

"How long have you been there?" I demand furiously.

"Just arrived. Didn't want to interrupt. Great job, by the way," he adds. "I think you won Mr. Yamasaki round to the cause, right there."

"Thanks," I say sarcastically. "Glad I could help. He's all yours." I bow to Mr. Yamasaki with a flourish, then turn on my heel and head swiftly toward the exit, ignoring the disappointed cries of the Japanese. I've got more important stuff to worry about than arrogant strangers and their stupid business deals.

"Wait!" The man's voice follows me through the receiver. "That phone. It's my PA's."

"Well, she shouldn't have thrown it away, then," I retort, pushing the glass doors open. "Finders keepers."

There are twelve tube stops from Knightsbridge to Magnus's parents' house in North London, and as soon as I resurface from the underground I check the phone. It's flashing with new messages—about ten texts and twenty emails—but there are only five texts for me and none with news about the ring. One's from the police, and my heart leaps with hope—but it's only to confirm that I've filed a report and asking if I want a visit from a victim support officer.

The rest are all text messages and emails for Violet. As I scroll down them, I notice that *Sam* features in the subject heading of quite a few of the emails. Feeling like Poirot again, I check back on the *numbers called* function and, sure enough, the last number that called the

phone was *Sam Mobile*. So that's him. Violet's boss. Dark-rumpled-hair guy. And to prove it her email address is samroxtonpa@whiteglobeconsulting.com.

Just out of the mildest curiosity, I click on one of the emails. It's from jennasmith@grayassetmanagement.com, and the subject is *Re: Dinner?*

Thanks, Violet. I'd appreciate you not mentioning any of this to Sam. I feel a little embarrassed now!

Ooh. What's she embarrassed about? Before I can stop myself, I've scrolled down to read the previous email, which was sent yesterday.

Actually, Jenna, you should know something: Sam's engaged.

Best, Violet

He's engaged. Interesting. As I read the words over again, I feel a strange little reaction inside which I can't quite place—surprise?

Although why should I be surprised? I don't even know the guy.

OK, now I *have* to know the whole story. Why is Jenna embarrassed? What happened? I scroll down still farther, past a couple more exchanges, and at last find a long introductory email from Jenna, who clearly met this Sam Roxton at a business function, got the hots for him, and invited him to dinner two weeks ago, but he hasn't returned her calls.

... tried again yesterday ... maybe using the wrong number ... someone told me he is notorious and that his PA is always the best route to contact him ... very sorry to bother you ... possibly just let me know either way ...

Poor woman. I feel quite indignant on her behalf. Why didn't he reply? How hard is it to send a quick email saying, no, thanks? And then it turns out he's engaged, for God's sake.

Anyway. Whatever. I suddenly realize I'm snooping in someone else's in-box when I have a lot of other, more important things to be thinking about. *Priorities*, Poppy. I need to buy some wine for Magnus's parents. And a welcome-home card. And—if I don't track down the ring in the next twenty minutes—some gloves.

Disaster. *Disaster*. It turns out they don't sell gloves in April. The only ones I could find were from the back room in Accessorize. Old Christmas stock, available only in a small.

I cannot believe I'm seriously planning to greet my prospective in-laws in too-tight reindeer woolly reindeer gloves. With tassels.

But I have no choice. It's that or walk in bare-handed.

As I start the long climb up the hill to Magnus's parents' house, I'm starting to feel really sick. It's not just the ring. It's the whole scary prospective in-laws thing. I turn the corner—and all the windows of the house are alight. They're home.

I've never known a house which suits a family as much as the Tavishes' does. It's older and grander than any of the others in the street and looks down on them from its superior position. There are yew trees and a monkey puzzle in the garden. The bricks are covered

ivy, and the windows still have their original 1835 wooden frames. Inside, there's William Morris wallpaper dating from the 1960s, and the floorboards are covered with Turkish carpets.

Except you can't actually *see* the carpets, because they're mostly covered in old documents and manuscripts which no one ever bothers to clear up. No one's big on tidying in the Tavish family. I once found a fossilized boiled egg in a spare-room bed, still in its eggcup, with a desiccated toast soldier. It must have been about a year old.

And everywhere, all over the house, are books. Stacked up three deep on shelves, piled on the floor, and on the side of every lime-stained bath. Antony writes books, Wanda writes books, Magnus writes books, and his elder brother, Conrad, writes books. Even Conrad's wife, Margot, writes books.¹²

Which is great. I mean, it's a wonderful thing, all these genius intellectuals in one family. But it does make you feel just the teensiest, weensiest bit inadequate.

Don't get me wrong, I think I'm pretty intelligent. You know, for a normal person who went to school and college and got a job and everything. But these aren't normal people—they're in a different league. They have superbrains. They're the academic version of *The Incredibles*.¹³ I've met his parents only a few times, when they flew back to London for a week for Antony to give some big important lecture, but it was enough to show me. When Antony was lecturing about political theory, Wanda was presenting a paper on feminist Judaism to a think tank, and then they both appeared on *The Culture Show*, taking opposing views on a documentary about the influence of the Renaissance.¹⁴ So that was the backdrop to our meeting. No pressure or anything.

I've been introduced to quite a few different boyfriends' parents over the years, but hands down this was the worst experience, ever. We'd just shaken hands and made a bit of small talk and I was telling Wanda quite proudly where I'd been to college, when Antony looked up over his half-moon glasses, with those bright, cold eyes of his, and said, "A degree in physiotherapy. How amusing." I felt instantly crushed. I didn't know what to say. In fact, I was so flustered I left the room to go to the loo.¹⁵

After that, of course, I froze. Those three days were sheer misery. The more intellectual the conversation became, the more tongue-tied and awkward I was. My second-worst moment was pronouncing *Proust* wrong and everyone exchanging looks.¹⁶ My very worst moment was watching *University Challenge* all together in the drawing room, when a section on bones came on. My subject! I studied this! I know all the Latin names and everything! But as I was drawing breath to answer the first question, Antony had already given the correct answer. I was quicker next time—but he still beat me. The whole thing was like a race, and he won. Then, at the end, he looked over at me and inquired, "Do they not teach anatomy at your physiotherapy school, Poppy?" and I was *mortified*.

Magnus says he loves *me*, not my brain, and that I've got to ignore his parents. And Natasha said, think of the rock and the Hampstead house and the villa in Tuscany. Which I'll think of for you. Whereas my own approach has been as follows: Just don't think about them. It's been fine. They've been safely in Chicago, thousands of miles away.

But now they're back.

Oh God. And I'm still a bit shaky on *Proust*. (Proost? Prost?) And I didn't revise the Latin names for bones. And I'm wearing red woolly reindeer gloves in April. With tassels.

My legs are shaking as I ring the bell. Actually shaking. I feel like the scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz*. Any minute I'll collapse on the path and Wanda will torch me for losing the ring.

Stop, Poppy. It's fine. No one will suspect anything. My story is, I burned my hand. That's my story.

"Hi, Poppy!"

"Felix! Hi!"

I'm so relieved it's Felix at the door, my greeting comes out in a shaky gasp.

Felix is the baby of the family—only seventeen and still at school. In fact, Magnus has been living in the house with him while his parents have been away, as a kind of babysitter, and moved in after we got engaged. Not that Felix needs a babysitter. He's completely self-contained, reads all the time, and you never even know he's in the house. I once tried to give him a friendly little "drugs chat." He politely corrected me on every single fact, then said he'd noticed I drank above the recommended guidelines of Red Bull and did I think I might have an addiction? That was the last time I tried to act the older sister.

Anyway. That's all come to an end, now that Antony and Wanda are returning from the States. I've moved back to my flat and we've started looking for places to rent. Magnus was all for staying here. He thought we could continue using the spare bedroom and bathroom on the top floor, and wouldn't it be convenient, as he could carry on using his father's library?

Is he nuts? There is no way I am living under the same roof as the Tavishes.

I follow Felix into the kitchen, where Magnus is lounging on a kitchen chair, gesturing at a page of typescript, and saying, "I think your argument goes wrong here. Second paragraph."

However Magnus sits, whatever he does, he somehow manages to look elegant. His suedebrogued feet are up on a chair, he's halfway through a cigarette,¹⁷ and his tawny hair is thrown back off his brow like a waterfall.

The Tavishes all have the same coloring, like a family of foxes. Even Wanda hennas her hair. But Magnus is the best-looking of all, and I'm not just saying that because I'm marrying him. His skin is freckled but tans easily, too, and his red-brown hair is like something out of a hair ad. That's why he keeps it long.¹⁸ He's actually quite vain about it.

Plus, although he's an academic, he's not some fusty guy who sits inside reading books all day. He skis really well, and he's going to teach me too. That's how we met, in fact. He sprained his wrist skiing and he came in for physio after his doctor recommended us. He was supposed to be seeing Annalise, but she switched him for one of her regulars and he ended up coming to me instead. The next week he asked me out on a date, and after a month he proposed. A month!¹⁹

Now Magnus looks up and his face brightens. "Sweetheart! How's my beautiful girl? Come here." He beckons me over for a kiss, then frames my face in his hands, like he always does.

"Hi!" I force a smile. "So, are your parents here? How was their flight? I can't wait to see them."

I'm trying to sound as keen as I can, even though my legs are wanting to run away, out the door and down the hill.

"Didn't you get my text?" Magnus seems puzzled.

"What text? Oh." I suddenly realize. "Of course. I lost my phone. I've got a new number. I'll give it to you."

“You lost your phone?” Magnus stares at me. “What happened?”

“Nothing!” I say brightly. “Just ... lost it and had to get a new one. No biggie. No drama.”

I’ve decided on a general policy that the less I say to Magnus right now, the better. I don’t want to get into any discussions as to why I might be clinging desperately to some random phone I found in a bin.

“So, what did your text say?” I quickly add, trying to move the conversation on.

“My parents’ plane was diverted. They had to go to Manchester. Won’t be back tomorrow.”

Diverted?

Manchester?

Oh my God. I’m safe! I’m reprieved! My legs can stop wobbling! I want to sing the “Hallelujah” chorus. *Ma-an-chester! Ma-an-chester!*

“God, how *awful*.” I’m trying hard to twist my face into a disappointed expression. “Poor them. Manchester. That’s miles away! I was really looking forward to seeing them too. What a pain.”

I *think* I sound pretty convincing. Felix shoots me an odd look, but Magnus has already picked up the typescript again. He hasn’t commented on my gloves. Nor has Felix.

Maybe I can relax a notch.

“So ... er ... guys.” I survey the room. “What about the kitchen?”

Magnus and Felix said they were going to clear up this afternoon, but the place is a bomb site. There are takeaway boxes on the kitchen table and a stack of books on top of the hob and even one in a saucepan. “Your parents will be back tomorrow. Shouldn’t we do something?”

Magnus looks unmoved. “They won’t care.”

It’s all very well for him to say that. But *I’m* the daughter-in-law (nearly) who’s been living here and will get the blame.

Magnus and Felix have begun talking about some footnote,²⁰ so I head over to the hob and start a quick tidy-up. I don’t dare remove my gloves, but the guys aren’t giving me the slightest glance, thankfully. At least I know the rest of the house is OK. I went over the whole place yesterday, replaced all the old manky bottles of bubble bath and got a new blind for the bathroom. Best of all, I tracked down some anemones for Wanda’s study. Everyone knows she loves anemones. She’s even written an article about “anemones in literature.” (Which is typical of this family—you can’t just enjoy something, you have to become a top academic expert on it.)

Magnus and Felix are still engrossed as I finish. The house is tidy. No one’s asked me about the ring. I’ll quit while I’m ahead.

“So, I’ll head home,” I say casually, and drop a kiss on Magnus’s head. “You stay here, keep Felix company. Say welcome home to your parents from me.”

“Stay the night!” Magnus sweeps an arm round my waist and pulls me back. “They’ll want to see you!”

“No, you welcome them. I’ll catch up tomorrow.” I smile brightly, to distract attention from the fact that I’m edging toward the door, my hands behind my back. “Plenty of time.”

“I don’t blame you,” says Felix, looking up from the typescript and blinking at me.

“Sorry?” I say, a bit puzzled. “Don’t blame me for what?”

“Not sticking around.” He shrugs. “I think you’re being remarkably sanguine, given the reaction. I’ve been meaning to say so for weeks. You must be a very good person, Poppy.”

What’s he *talking* about?

“I don’t know—what do you mean?” I turn to Magnus for help.

“It’s nothing,” he says, too quickly. But Felix is staring at his older brother, a light dawn in his eyes.

“Oh my God. Didn’t you tell her?”

“Felix, shut up.”

“You didn’t, did you? That’s not exactly fair, is it, Mag?”

“Tell me what?” I’m turning from face to face. “What?”

“It’s nothing.” Magnus sounds rattled. “Just ...” He finally meets my eyes. “OK. My parents weren’t exactly wild to hear we’re engaged. That’s all.”

For a moment I don’t know how to react. I stare at him dumbly, trying to process what I’ve heard.

“But you said ...” I don’t quite trust my voice. “You said they were thrilled. You said they were excited!”

“They will be thrilled,” he says crossly. “When they see sense.”

They *will* be?

My whole world is wobbling. It was bad enough when I thought Magnus’s parents were just intimidating geniuses. But all this time they’ve been *against us getting married*?

“You told me they said they couldn’t imagine a sweeter, more charming daughter-in-law. I’m trembling all over by now. “You said they sent me special love from Chicago! Was *that* a *lie*?”

“I didn’t want to upset you!” Magnus glares at Felix. “Look, it’s no big deal. They’ll come round. They simply think it’s all a bit fast.... They don’t know you properly.... They’re idiots,” he ends with a scowl. “I told them so.”

“You had a row with your parents?” I stare at him, dismayed. “Why didn’t you tell me any of this?”

“It wasn’t a row,” he says defensively. “It was more ... a falling-out.”

A falling-out? A *falling-out*?

“A falling-out is *worse* than a row!” I wail in horror. “It’s a million times worse! Oh God, I wish you’d told me.... What am I going to do? How can I face them?”

I knew it. The professors don’t think I’m good enough. I’m like that girl in the opera who relinquishes her lover because she’s too unsuitable and then gets TB and dies, and good thing too, since she was so inferior and stupid. She probably couldn’t pronounce *Proust* either.

“Poppy, calm down!” Magnus says irritably. He gets to his feet and takes me firmly by the shoulders. “This is exactly why I didn’t tell you. It’s family nonsense and it’s got nothing to do with us. I love you. We’re getting married. I’m going to do this and I’m going to see through whatever anyone else says, whether it’s my parents or my friends or anyone else. This is about us.” His voice is so firm, I start to relax. “And, anyway, as soon as my parents spend some time with you, they’ll come round. I know it.”

I can’t help giving a reluctant smile.

“That’s my beautiful girl.” Magnus gives me a tight hug and I clasp him back, trying as hard as I can to believe him.

As he draws away, his gaze falls on my hands and he frowns, looking puzzled. “Sweets ... why are you wearing gloves?”

I’m going to have a nervous breakdown. I really am.

The whole ring debacle nearly came out. It would have, if it weren’t for Felix. I was halfway through my ludicrous, stumbling hand-burning excuse, expecting Magnus to become suspicious at any moment, when Felix yawned and said, “Shall we go to the pub?” and Magnus suddenly remembered an email he had to send first and everyone forgot about my gloves.

And I chose that opportunity to leave. Very quickly.

Now I’m sitting on the bus, staring out into the dark night, feeling cold inside. I’ve lost the ring. The Tavishes don’t want me to marry Magnus. My mobile is gone. I feel like all my security blankets have been snatched, all at once.

The phone in my pocket starts to emit Beyoncé again, and I haul it out without any great hope.

Sure enough, it’s not any of my friends calling to say “Found it!” Nor the police, nor the hotel concierge. It’s him. Sam Roxton.

“You ran off,” he says with no preamble. “I need that phone back. Where are you?”

Charming. Not “Thank you so much for helping me with my Japanese business deal.”

“You’re welcome,” I say. “Anytime.”

“Oh.” He sounds momentarily discomfited. “Right. Thanks. I owe you one. Now, how are you going to get that phone back to me? You could drop it round at the office or I could send a bike. Where are you?”

I’m silent. I’m not going to get it back to him. I need this number.

“Hello?”

“Hi.” I clutch the phone more tightly and swallow hard. “The thing is, I need to borrow the phone. Just for a bit.”

“Oh Christ.” I can hear him exhale. “Look, I’m afraid it’s not available for ‘borrowing.’ It’s company property, and I need it back. Or by ‘borrowing’ do you actually mean ‘stealing’? Because, believe me, I *can* track you down, and I’m not paying you a hundred pounds for the pleasure.”

Is that what he thinks? That I’m after money? That I’m some kind of phone-napper?

“I don’t want to *steal* it!” I exclaim indignantly. “I only need it for a few days. I’ve given the number out to everyone, and it’s a real emergency—”

“You did *what*?” He sounds baffled. “Why would you do that?”

“I lost my engagement ring.” I can hardly bear to say it out loud. “It’s really old and valuable. And then my phone was nicked, and I was absolutely desperate, and then I passed this litter bin and there it was. In the *bin*,” I add for emphasis. “Your PA just chucked it away. Once an item lands in the bin, it belongs to the public, you know. Anyone can claim it.”

“Bullshit,” he retorts. “Who told you that?”

“It’s ... it’s common knowledge.” I try to sound robust. “Anyway, why did your PA walk out and chuck her phone away? Not much of a PA, if you ask me.”

“No. Not much of a PA. More of a friend’s daughter who never should have been given the job. She’s been in the job three weeks. Apparently landed a modeling contract at exact

midday today. By one minute past, she'd left. She didn't even bother telling me she was going. I had to find out from one of the other PAs." He sounds pretty pissed off. "Listen, Mi—what's your name?"

"Wyatt. Poppy Wyatt."

"Well, enough kidding around, Poppy. I'm sorry about your ring. I hope it turns up. But this phone isn't some fun accessory you can purloin for your own ends. This is a computer phone with business messages coming in all the time. Emails. Important stuff. My PA runs my life. I *need* those messages."

"I'll forward them." I hastily cut him off. "I'll forward everything. How about that?"

"What the—" He mutters something under his breath. "OK. You win. I'll buy you a new phone. Give me your address, I'll bike it over—"

"I need *this* one," I say stubbornly. "I need this number."

"For Christ's—"

"My plan can work!" My words tumble out in a rush. "Everything that comes in, I'll send you straightaway. You won't know the difference! I mean, you'd have to do that anyway, wouldn't you? If you've lost your PA, then what good is a PA's phone? This way is *better*. Plus you owe me one for stopping Mr. Yamasaki," I can't help pointing out. "You just said so yourself."

"That *isn't* what I meant, and you know it—"

"You won't miss anything, I promise!" I cut off his irritable snarl. "I'll forward every single message. Look, I'll show you, just give me two secs...."

I ring off, scroll down all the messages that have arrived in the phone since this morning and quickly forward them one by one to Sam's mobile number. My fingers are working like lightning.

Text from *Vicks Myers*: forwarded. Text from *Sir Nicholas Murray*: forwarded. It's a matter of seconds to forward them on. And the emails can all go to samroxton@whiteglob consulting.com.

Email from *HR Department*: forwarded. Email from *Tania Phelps*: forwarded. Email from *Dad*—

I hesitate a moment. I need to be careful here. Is this Violet's dad or Sam's dad? The name at the top of the email is davidr452@hotmail.com, which doesn't really help.

Telling myself it's all in a good cause, I scroll down to have a quick look.

Dear Sam,

It's been a long time. I think of you often, wondering what you're up to, and would love to chat sometime. Did you ever get any of my phone messages? Don't worry, I know you're a busy fellow.

If you are ever in the neighborhood, you know you can always stop by. There is a little matter I'd like to raise with you—quite exciting, actually—but as I say, no hurry.

Yours ever,

Dad

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