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Meeting Room 6 was so bright that on sunny days the sunshine flooded through the floor-to-ceiling windows with such intensity that scripts or notes on the table would visibly fade during a long session. On cloudier days it showcased the postcard-perfect bay opposite. Little candy-coloured sea cottages, built into the rock, were dotted around as far as the eye could see and just beyond the last was a hidden beach, where, if you knew the way in, you could listen to the waves crashing and pretend you were anywhere in the world, not mere feet away from the hustle-bustle of the cast and crew working on one of the most famous location sets in the world.

The bay was the lifeblood of this meeting room. Without the bay, there would be no meeting room. For this was the production office of internationally renowned, globally syndicated soap opera *Falcon Bay*. And it was in Meeting Room 6 that the producers, writers and executives met daily to create and manage the stories designed to keep their millions of viewers tuned in. The secondary purpose of so

much glass was to show the teams outside the building that the creative minds behind *Falcon Bay* were always working and always watching.

A huge white oval table surrounded by neon-pink chairs that were neither too hard nor too comfortable was central. A variety of people occupied the seats and the gentle hum of conversation filled the air, mixed with the sounds of notes being flicked through, laptops being typed on and phone messages pinging. The two walls that bookended the view of the bay were white. One had floating shelves stacked with awards of every shape and size, from traditional golden Emmys to ornate crystal domes and the classic gold-faced Bafta.

The opposite wall held photos of *Falcon Bay*'s current cast, each pinned to a large-scale poster of the set and flecked with Post-it notes which gently flapped in the breeze from the air-con. The room was subtly lit as most of the time the natural light was sufficient. But when storm clouds gathered, the automatic lights faded up so gradually that those in the room never noticed the change.

Meeting Room 6 was, without question, where the magic happened.

The door swung open and all eyes were on Jake Monroe as he strode into the room, ignored the packed table and silently walked towards the storyboard, which was on the wall just by the entrance. He stood frozen, staring at the scant words written there. With his muscular legs clad in tight jeans and his broad shoulders encased in a black leather jacket, he looked much younger than his sixty years. Jake's presence had always been formidable, but having recently

been promoted to controller of drama by the network's new owners, whom nobody else in the room had yet met, he'd acquired an air of even greater untouchability and arrogance. He was at the very top of the food chain and he made sure everyone knew it.

After what felt like hours but was actually less than two minutes, he half turned towards the others. 'Is this it?' he asked, pointing at the board and meeting every person's eyes one by one, sending shivers down their backs as his gravelly voice echoed around the pin-droppingly quiet space.

The last face his gaze rested on was a mousy woman – hair in a bun, thick glasses and a figure that unkind people would say was dumpy. Her chair was directly under the air-conditioner and she was feeling the chill. Or maybe it was the ice emanating from her boss. Whatever the reason, she pulled a beige wrap around her shoulders. The sight of its tassels jiggling infuriated Jake.

'What's the matter with you?' he growled.

The woman's face went pale as she shuffled in her seat, causing the tassels to jiggle even faster. 'I... I was cold... so I—'

Before she could finish stuttering her reply, he closed in on her and was now right next to her chair.

'Damn right you are,' he snarled, then looked over at the rest of the table. 'And you're not the only one.'

Earlier that day, Jake had sent a 'Drop everything – emergency meeting' summons to all writers, producers and casting execs, ordering them to gather in Room 6, and signing it off with the word 'pronto'. Three hours later, here he was, surveying what were supposedly the country's finest creative

minds. But all Jake could see were blank stares and a shivering mouse in cashmere. He glanced out at the angry sea. Waves were thrashing the shoreline boulders. A flash storm was approaching, both outside in the real world and right here in the world of make-believe. Someone was going to drown.

Falcon Bay was approaching its fortieth anniversary, but where once it had won every accolade and award under the sun, now it had lost more than half its viewers. Not only was it being ripped apart on home soil, where they could usually expect a bit of support, but the international press had started hammering the show too, and once they had you in their sights, it was usually the beginning of the end. The network, which made several popular and cheaply put-together reality shows but only one soap opera, had been forced to sell out to an American investment group, and the new owners had promoted Jake with just one thing on the to-do list: get *Falcon Bay* back to the number one spot.

It was a task he intended to deliver on, and he didn't care if he had to sack the whole room and start again to achieve it. But having been in the business for a long time, he knew axing one person was usually enough to shock the rest into action. It could have been any of them that day. Unfortunately for her, the Mouse had chosen the wrong moment to catch his attention.

'You're all fucking cold!' he roared.

The room bristled. The sea churned and spat foam and spray high into the sky. Nobody dared to look out the window, but nobody dared to look directly at Jake either.

They knew what was coming, and they knew how to survive. Do not meet his gaze, do not let him single you out.

He shook his head contemptuously. ‘Look at the storyboard – there’s not one decent idea up there, not even one! You truly are a pathetic bunch.’

Mousey girl, who was new and hadn’t been told that stillness was required when Jake’s mood turned, was trembling, clearly feeling even colder now she’d been shouted at. With shaking hands she slowly started tucking the wrap around herself, almost like a comfort blanket. This caught Jake’s eye as he raged on, his handsome face now almost pink with anger.

‘This is supposed to be the “creative zone”, people,’ he yelled, using his fingers to make inverted commas in the air. ‘And none of you lazy fuckers are creating shit. No, actually, that’s not true. All of you are creating shit – shit that no one is watching’

As Mouse began tucking the last edge of the wrap under her leg, Jake could stand it no longer. He clicked his fingers and pointed at her. ‘Get out! You’re fired.’

The room gasped.

With one hand still pointing at Mouse, Jake pulled the door wide open, then stood perfectly still. He knew that in reality he couldn’t just fire her like this. HR would have a field day reminding him he needed written warnings and boring stuff like that. But later he would sit Mousey in his office and lay it out for her: she was new, and she was no longer welcome, so she could either take the nice little payoff he’d offer her to go quietly or spend months fighting for it.

‘But, Mr Monroe—’ she began, her quiet voice squeaking. ‘Save it and get the fuck out.’

Jake was no longer looking at her. He was scanning the

rest of the room, making sure they understood what was happening here. She was the sacrifice that would galvanize their collective creativity, or they'd be joining her.

While she gathered up her things in total silence, a single tear dropped down her cheek. Nobody defended her; no one even looked at her. When the Mouse reached the door, she looked back just once to see if anyone was going to step in, but nobody said a word. Another tear ran down her face as Jake slammed the door behind her. Then she was gone.

Outside, the waves had settled a little – still frothing, but not quite so furiously. The dark clouds parted and a sliver of sun spread across the beach and illuminated the meeting room.

Jake had slammed the door with such force that two cast pictures had fallen off the wall. As the creatives processed what had just happened, he crossed the room and picked up the photos, the leather on his brown Cuban-heeled boots crackling with every step.

One picture was of Jude Roscoe, who was fairly new to the show but incredibly popular with the mainly female audience demographic. He played a handyman who seemed to end up with his top off during every job he did.

The other cast card was Catherine Belle's. Catherine was undisputedly the show's leading lady, having been on *Falcon Bay* since its very first episode in 1980. Her portrayal of Lucy Dean, the owner of the *Bay's* world-famous beachside bar and focal point, had won the show several much coveted best actress awards over the years and against stiff international competition. Somehow, her British accent had captivated audiences from Malibu to Mumbai, the latter network even

paying her the rare honour of subtitled the show rather than dubbing it, as was usual for imported dramas in that terrain.

Jake stared at the photo of Catherine, which he reckoned was at least twenty years old, from when she was still in what he considered the last of her glory days. Momentarily, his face softened as he recalled how fun it used to be sitting round a table at award ceremonies, the cast and crew downing endless glasses of champagne, celebrating early as they were so confident *Falcon Bay* would be called out as a winner, which it had been, time and time again. The speeches, the love from the press, the photos in the entertainment pages, the pats on the back from the network and the fat bonuses. Jake's faint smile disappeared when he realized those times were about as old as Catherine Belle's airbrushed headshot. He missed that popularity, the power it had brought the network, and he wanted it back.

Helen Gold remembered those days too. An attractive woman in her early sixties, in red glasses, a lemon-coloured Escada suit and with her flame-red hair cut in a stylish bob, she stood out from the other more casually dressed around the table. As head of casting, Helen had been responsible for employing the best actresses and actors on *Falcon Bay*. From villain to vamp, she'd found them all. Including Catherine Belle. Maybe it was because of her age, or her experience, but Helen had never been intimidated by Jake Munroe. Not one little bit. She remembered when he'd been a mere production assistant, bringing everybody's morning coffees and getting them so wrong that he'd have to go back for more. And he hated that she remembered.

'You know she can sue us for that, right?' Helen said of

the Mouse as she casually leaned back in her chair, which creaked under her. Not because she was heavy but because the chair was getting old, was no longer shiny and new. Which was how Helen sometimes felt, although she certainly didn't look it.

Jake locked eyes with her and hesitated. He would have loved to have told her to follow the Mouse right out of the door, but that would have been a step too far. He paused for a moment longer than was comfortable, allowing the drone of the air-con to be the only noise in the room, and then spoke. 'Thank you, Helen,' he replied sarcastically. 'I might not be able to rely on you creatively, but you've got my back when it comes to the dull legalese.'

Helen smarted at this but didn't show it. She liked to think she was very creative, but she was rarely given airtime by the men in power at the network, who all figured her job was as easy as pointing at an actress and saying, 'She'll do.'

'Right then,' Jake continued. 'I'm going to explain this one last time because you don't seem to understand how much trouble our show is in. Our current ratings are the worst in our thirty-nine-year history. Last week we were beaten by every other soap—'

'Continuing drama,' Helen said, cutting in. She wasn't sure exactly when 'soap' had become a bad word in the industry, but she'd become aware that the very shows that had once revelled in their 'Soap Awards' were now calling themselves 'continuing dramas', as if that elevated them above some imaginary threshold. She didn't like to use the term herself but enjoyed correcting Jake. Any chance to catch Jake in an error was worth taking, just for the fun of it.

He rolled his eyes but let it go. ‘So, as well as having our arses kicked by all the other rivals, we were also beaten by *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* reunion show – which was a rerun.’

He let that land and watched as the embarrassment made them squirm. Then he softened a little, put a manicured hand on the table and leant on it, to show that he was flexible, human.

‘The network owners are considering cutting an episode or two. Lessening the output, lessening your burden.’

Now he’d got their attention. If that happened, advertising revenue would be down, meaning everyone’s wages would be cut drastically and, with episodes axed, the media vultures would be out for them in ever greater numbers. Next stop: cancelled. He didn’t have to say any of this. It was the unspoken threat that followed the mere mention of reduced production.

He stayed in that position, with one hand leaning on the table, the other tucked behind him. It was killing his back, but he knew it made him look powerful. He’d read all about that in his pile of management books: how to stand, how to use his body for subliminal messaging.

He definitely had their attention. He casually ran his hand through his hair and began to speak again.

‘But I assured them that wouldn’t be necessary. I said, “I’ve got the best writers, the best producers, the best everybody that a soap”’ – he corrected himself before Helen could – “that a continuing drama could want. *Falcon Bay* will return to the number one spot.” I gave them my solemn vow.’

He met their eyes once more and spread his arms in a

benevolent gesture that also came straight out of a book and was intended to say ‘over to you’. It was met with silence.

He watched and waited.

Finally, one of the writers, a newbie who actually had a pen behind her ear, leaned forward as if about to speak. Before a sound came out of her mouth, Jake halted her with a pausing finger gesture. ‘And I don’t want to hear the words “cancer”, “pregnancy” or “Alzheimer’s”.’

The newbie shrank back down into her chair, cheeks red, silent, no further ideas to share.

A deafening quiet filled the room once more before somebody else finally piped up, ‘How about a siege?’

Jake rolled his eyes, taking in the man’s spectacularly long and full blonde beard, ripped jeans and formal waistcoat. Was this idiot a writer or a Viking? ‘We did that five years ago,’ he said with a sneer. ‘Next!’

‘Death in childbirth?’ someone else shouted, loudly, as if it was such a great idea, she wanted to be certain he knew it had come from her. Her face fell soon enough, when he failed to even meet her eye.

Jake’s shoulders sagged. ‘We’ve already had a stillbirth and twins this year alone, so I think we can avoid ovary-related storylines, thank you.’

‘A crash?’ chipped in a lad wearing geeky glasses and dungarees.

Dunga-fucking-rees! This was *Falcon Bay*, not a hardware store. Jake fleetingly considered bringing in a dress code, but when he realized he’d be asking all the women to wear little black numbers, he was momentarily self-aware enough to let it go.

‘Been done to death. Including by us for the millennium special. Have you even looked through the archive, you lazy moron?’

His blood was boiling now. If he didn’t get out of the room soon, he would really lose it, and somebody would get hurt. He’d been given a written warning from HR for throwing a chair at a runner once and hadn’t enjoyed the ticking-off one bit. He didn’t want to show them how intense his rage was, it would make him look weak, so he’d use his voice instead of his body.

‘Is that it?’ he shouted. ‘Where’s the blue-sky thinking?’

‘A shooting?’ Viking Beard tried a second time.

‘1999 and 2015,’ Jake replied.

‘A jilting at the altar?’ a redhead in glasses tentatively offered.

Helen could see that Jake was close to furniture-related explosiveness. She’d had enough of his tantrums for one day and didn’t want anyone to get injured, so even though storyline was not her department, she decided to throw the old Rottweiler a bone.

‘I know exactly what *Falcon Bay* needs,’ she said, leaning across the table enticingly, enough to get everybody’s attention.

‘Well, do tell us, Helen.’ Jake smirked, ready to rip apart whatever pathetic idea she’d dredged up.

After a short pause – long enough to create tension but not so long as to give Jake the chance to say something else – Helen poured herself some sparkling water from the bottle in front of her, enjoying the sound of the bubbles popping in the glass. Then spoke slowly and deliberately.

‘*Falcon Bay* needs a Grade A, evil-to-the-core, would-do-anything, will-hurt-anyone-to-get-what-she-wants... bitch.’ She stretched out the word ‘bitch’ for maximum effect.

The whole room looked at Jake expectantly.

He was surprised by Helen’s quite good suggestion. The show’s female characters tended to be kind-hearted rather than backstabbing; it was *Falcon Bay*’s male stars who’d always been the villains. He suddenly had a *Killing Eve* vibe floating around his head and as much as it pained him to admit it, and he certainly didn’t want to show it, he was interested. ‘I’m listening,’ he said casually, gesturing for her to continue.

All eyes were on Helen now. She knew he was on the hook, so she took her time.

‘But not just your average bitch who comes in to stir things up with one or two characters,’ she continued. ‘This bitch wants to take on everybody in *Falcon Bay*. Which she’ll do, one by one. Unbeknownst to them, she’ll have a backstory that connects her to all our characters’ histories, so she’ll have scores to settle with everybody. And we’ll cast someone who’s instantly recognizable but who hasn’t been seen for a while, so viewers will come flocking back just to see who she is and what she’s going to do to the residents of *Falcon Bay*.’

Fuck! thought Jake, and then double-checked he hadn’t said that out loud. He was both furious and excited. Why hadn’t he come up with this instead of Helen? He was temporarily lost for words.

‘Well?’ Helen said, and smiled. She knew she’d landed a bullseye because Jake was never quiet. But then her heart sank as she realized her victory would last no longer than

those few seconds. She wouldn't be able to own the idea. They'd talk about it some more in the room, it would go from writer to writer, exec to controller and finally it would come back to her to cast as if she'd never even known about it in the first place.

Eventually Jake responded, pulling Helen from her spiralling thoughts.

'I like it,' he said lightly.

'Oh, I am pleased.' Helen raised an eyebrow, deciding to at least relish this moment – it was all she'd get. She wanted to add, *You're welcome to it – which is handy, because in an hour you'll be claiming it was yours anyway.* But she liked her job, so she said nothing.

Jake looked across at the board, scanning the cast's faces. 'So, she's hot? Like, twenty-one? A fresh face? Finally we can win a sexiest female award. No more losing out because all our women are so past it—'

'No.' Helen shook her head. 'It will only work if she's at least fifty.'

Jake laughed. 'In her fifties! Don't be ridiculous. Who the hell is going to want to watch some old mutton tramping her way around the bay? What we need is a lamb.'

Undeterred, Helen continued calmly. 'If she's too young, she won't have the gravitas. This is the only way it will work. Lucy Dean was fifty when her wedding episode gave us our highest ever ratings.'

'That was twenty years ago, Helen. Youth is where it's at, these days.'

She ignored him. 'The fact that people still talk about the wedding ep tells you how effective it was. Fifty is an incredibly

powerful age for a woman nowadays, Jake. Our bitch has to be a woman, not a girl, and of course she'll be attractive.'

Despite being sixty himself, Jake found it hard to conceive of women of a similar age being considered attractive. But after many years of working in soap, he'd come to understand that he wasn't the *Bay's* target audience, so perhaps Helen had a point.

'She'd better have had work done. If she's that age, she better not look it.' He eyed Helen knowingly. She was a living, breathing example that Botox and fillers could disguise the birth date on a woman's passport. And he knew her date, he'd looked it when he took over, just so he could bring it up every now and then, which he knew fucked her off.

His mind flashed back to when Joan Collins was brought into an ailing *Dynasty* in the eighties. She had both helped the show stay on the air and ensured it was the world's number one syndicated series for nearly a decade and she must have been about fifty at the time. *So, yes*, he mused, *this could work*.

He cracked his knuckles and faked a yawn, trying not to look as excited as he felt.

'As this is the only idea to come out of today, and if we're to rely on one woman being so watchable that every lost member of our audience returns, she better be one damn fine actress.'

'Oh, she will be. And they will return. It's what I do. Casting,' Helen said, signalling to Jake that she already knew he would claim her idea as his own. And then, mirroring what he'd said to the new owners, she added, 'I give you my solemn vow.'

He smiled. She'd cornered him verbally. But actually she'd cornered herself too. If he failed the new owners, it would be his neck on the line, his job, and now the same would also be true for Helen. If she cast this bitch perfectly and the show won back its lost plaudits, audience numbers and awards, that would be a win for him too. But if Helen got it wrong, he'd finally be able to show the door to 'the sack of silicone', as he liked to refer to her whenever she wasn't present.

Slowly he nodded, liking the odds. 'Okay, Helen. You work your magic. Cast us the best bitch you can find. But you better get a move on, 'cos I want her revealed in the Christmas special.'

'What?' Helen's brain whirred as she tried to figure out how long that gave her to see all the best actresses, screen-test them, pick one and get the contracts sorted.

'That's right,' Jake said. 'It's the first of September today, so you've got just under four months. Chop, chop.'

Relishing the panic that he was leaving behind in the room, Jake figured he could enjoy one more little surprise before the even bigger one. He held up the cast cards that had fallen to the floor earlier. The cards' faces were turned towards him, so the rest of the room could only see the back of them.

'As you all know, I'm a big believer in fate,' he said, flipping the cast cards round and holding the faces of Catherine and Jude up high for all to see. 'So, to pave the way and help pay for our new arrival, Helen, we'll be axing one of these two cast members from the show.'

Helen's face went white.

Jake put the photos behind his back. ‘I’ll let you choose. Left or right?’

‘Don’t be so ridiculous.’ Helen got out of her seat and walked towards him. ‘Catherine *is* Falcon Bay and Jude is our most popular actor.’

Jake smiled. ‘Left or right? It’s got to be one of them.’

Helen stared at him in disbelief. He’d always been a prick, but this was insane.

‘So indecisive, Helen. Tut, tut. Okay, I’ll choose for you. Catherine gets to remain as our current leading lady – for now – which means Topless Wonder here can get the chop.’

He placed Jude’s photo in her hand and walked away. ‘I’ll leave you to work on his exit as well as our incomer’s new entrance – while I’m with the new owners.’

He swaggered towards the door. When he reached it, he looked back. Now he would drop the big bomb. If Helen thought playing Russian roulette with a cast photo was bad, she should wait for this beauty. ‘Oh, and one final thing. Our Christmas ep... As it falls on our fortieth anniversary, we’re going to go live.’

There was a collective sharp intake of breath from each place around the table.

Helen stood clutching Jude’s photo. ‘On Christmas Day? An actual live episode? With just months to prepare for it and all these changes?’ She was almost breathless.

Jake was loving the sense of shock in the air. But most of all, he was loving the fact he’d just wiped that smug smile off Helen Gold’s face.

‘That’s right! Ho, ho, ho,’ he boomed and left the room.