

Intriguing Notes

So there I was, sitting at the departure gate of a midday flight, with my thoughts racing in a hundred different directions and my fingers drumming against the armrest in an incessant, restless movement.

God, what a mess! What a bloody awful mess!

My eyes travelled to the LCD information board to check on the time. Eleven thirty and my frustration deepened. Only a few minutes had passed since I last looked.

Damn.

My throat was tight, my stomach a bundle of nerves. I hadn't been able to sleep for two nights straight already, and my head was so heavy, my entire body lingering on the edge of breaking down.

I took several deep breaths to calm myself down before I returned to the book on my lap. But after only a couple of pages, I found myself reading the same paragraphs over and over again.

My eyes met the stares of people seated across from me. One of my fellow passengers flashed me a gracious and polite smile, which I didn't return. Instead, I rechecked the information on the wrinkled page clutched in my hands.

Date: Monday, 16 February 2015

Departure: Madrid Adolfo Suarez Barajas Terminal 4S | 12:05

Arrival: London Heathrow T5 | 13:35

Flight: IB7444

Maybe you should just go back and report in sick...

I folded the page again and used it to mark my place before I closed the book for good. My head pounded, and the ache in my chest was on the verge of rising up and becoming tears at any moment. I sucked in a deep breath and squeezed my eyes closed; I had to gather my wits and force that feeling down.

Hey, you pull yourself together! My ever so critical inner voice gave me a stern, warning finger wag.

All in vain, though. In the end, I couldn't stop the timid tear from making its way down my face.

The announcement of the boarding procedures echoed throughout the crowded lounge, and everyone quickly lined up.

Exhaling slowly to force the tension away, I placed myself at the end of the queue, where I verified my seat number once again. Then I waited my turn and eventually handed in my boarding pass.

After walking down the airplane aisle almost mechanically, I stopped in front of seat 5F and began the struggle with my hand-luggage, which refused to go into the overhead storage compartment.

"Shit!" I cursed under my breath.

“Come, let me help you with that.” A friendly passenger seated across the aisle immediately stood and offered his assistance.

Thankfully.

Already on my last nerve, I gave up the fight, stepping aside so he could tuck my bag neatly away.

Sinking gratefully into my seat, I silently thanked him for the kind gesture with a subtle nod and a nervous smile, and then gazed down at the book in my hand. Dark cover, suggestive Venetian mask, the promise of lots of naughty bits.

Was I even in a reading mood? No, I most definitely wasn't, so I resolutely got up again to shove it over the bag in the overhead bin.

Feeling the warm air in the cabin rising up to my cheeks, I took the opportunity to shrug off my coat – which, apparently, isn't always an easy manoeuvre, especially when you're struggling with it in a packed aisle of an aircraft. To make matters worse, before I could stow it away, my scarf slid off my neck landing in a heap at my feet.

Oh, come on. Seriously?

Letting out a sigh of frustration, I reached to pick it up.

“I got it.” A deep voice reached me one second before our hands met, my senses catching the scent of masculine cologne.

“Oh.” My aisle neighbour had again come to my rescue. *Nice man*, I remember thinking. But I'm not certain if I even thanked him for his politeness.

I probably didn't.

Boarding was finally completed. We were all set to go when I pressed my head against the back of the seat, desperate to shut my eyes and shove it all out of my mind.

“Your seat belt is... insert the metal fitting into the buckle, adjust to fit... with the loose end of the strap–”

Eventually, my thoughts did wander away, and it felt as if I were immersed in water. I heard voices and sounds that seemed to come from a far distance, but everything was so indistinct I couldn't understand a single word.

Turning my head toward the window, I cast a blank look outside and gave up; I couldn't follow any of what was being said.

The plane was already lined up on the runway and the aircraft engines roared. The take-off was definitely imminent. I was so numb I didn't feel the vibration from the wheels, which usually makes me so nervous.

As the plane gained speed and left the ground tilting its nose up, I gripped the armrest firmly. With the events of the past few days swirling in my mind and churning in my gut, I shut my lids tightly, hoping that sleep would come and take me away soon...

The wheels touched the runway, and a small bump brought me back from my dozing. The plane had finally landed in London.

There was the usual sound of seat belts being unfastened, people switching on their mobile phones and rushing to collect their belongings from the overhead compartments.

When I managed to get to the aisle, I also took my coat, scarf, and hand-luggage, and hurried out to claim my suitcase. I caught the Heathrow Express to Paddington, and from there the Tottenham Court Road underground station. I'd stay in Bloomsbury, right off Oxford Street, as I always did.

As soon as I walked into the hotel lobby, and before talking to the person at the check-in desk, I looked for my

reservation documents. I searched furiously for them in my purse, in my hand-luggage, in my suitcase, but the goddamned papers seemed to have vanished into thin air.

Oh my, when you think it can't get any worse...

I tried to track them down in my mind: the flight and hotel papers, which I'd printed that morning, were folded together and I had them in... I'd tucked them inside the...

Where's the bloody book?

Damn it. I'd left it on the plane!

As for the papers, oh well. Good thing we are living in this wonderfully technological era: I grabbed my phone, accessed my email account, and there they were. All my lost information hanging in cyberspace.

I rushed to my room, unpacked absolutely nothing, threw myself on the bed and closed my eyes; I was a wreck, in a state of extreme physical and mental exhaustion.

Just a few moments later I felt my muscles relaxing, my nervous system giving in, and my consciousness entering suspension mode...

—

My heart rate kicked up when an incessant muffled buzzing sound broke the silence and brought me back from my sleep. Tired and drowsy, I rushed to get my purse, which was on the sofa, hidden under my coat and the handbag.

Shit!

8:10 pm. Three missed calls. All from Alex.

"Christ, what the hell happened?" Alex's voice burst through the phone, immediately after I slid my finger across the screen and clicked on Reply.

I couldn't tell if I sensed anger or concern.

"Sorry. Everything's fine. I lay down for a little while and fell asleep." My tone was flat and even.

“Fuck, Sofía, you landed hours ago! Is it too much to ask that you grab the goddamn phone and—”

“Set things up. I’ll call in five minutes to kiss Charlie Goodnight.” Without further words, I turned off the phone.

After talking with my son via Skype, I checked my e-mail account to see if any schedule adjustments had been made to my meeting the following day. I’d been awarded a mobility grant sponsored by a European Commission exchange programme for higher education, and in the next two weeks, I would be a visiting scholar at King’s College. At a glance, there was nothing new or important in my inbox. Only one message caught my attention:

From: Matthew O’Brian <m.obrian@wpcc.uk>
Sent: Monday, 16 February 2015 18:25
To: Sophie Thompson <soph.e.thompson@gmail.com>
Subject: Book

Dear Ms. Thompson,

I have the book you forgot on the plane. I took the liberty of looking inside and found your name and contact there.

Should I leave it at your hotel desk or do you want me to send it somewhere else?

Sincerely, Matthew O’Brian

That was unexpected, particularly because these days such goodwill is not to be found most of the time. Perhaps it had been sent by someone from the airline company, I reasoned.

I checked the domain name but <@wpcc.uk> rang no bell. Anyway, I was glad there were still some kind souls out there, and replied immediately:

SILENT SIGNS

From: Sophie Thompson
Sent: Monday, 16 February 2015 20:33
To: Matthew O'Brian
Subject: RE: Forgotten book

Dear Mr O'Brian,

Thank you for your email. If it's ok with you, I'd appreciate if you could have it delivered to my hotel.

Yours sincerely,
Sophie Thompson

After another bad night's sleep, I made a quick phone call to say good morning to Charlie and rushed down to have breakfast. I wanted to arrive earlier than scheduled on my first day.

On my way up to get my things and then leave for work, the concierge handed me a big envelope that had just been delivered. I opened it, and there it was – my lost book.

Held to the cover with a paper clip, a handwritten note:

*Dear Ms. Thompson,
As agreed, here's your book.
I also hope you're feeling better this morning.
Kind regards,
Matt O'Brian*

Better? What was that supposed to mean?

I was already running late, so I rushed to my room, grabbed my bag, and headed off to the lift.

Better? What the hell...?

The intriguing note filled my thoughts throughout the entire tube trip, and the question of who had been observing me would not leave me. Damn, how annoying: I couldn't remember a single face from the day before!

Already inside the Virginia Woolf Building, I was received by the colleague who had been appointed to help me integrate into the Faculty. She was very friendly and informal from the beginning, which always helps in such circumstances. She showed me around, took me to the different departments and introduced me to a few people.

After being taken to my temporary office, we sat down and discussed the activities that had been assigned to me for the following two weeks. Basically lecturing, assisting in the preparation of a conference and finishing a paper that I would have to present at one of the parallel sessions of the conference.

I finally settled in and began to work. However, by the middle of the afternoon I ceased making the effort and admitted defeat: I was restless and couldn't stay focused. I couldn't get the damned note out of my head.

It would be polite to thank Mr O'Brian for the book, right? On the other hand, it would also give me the opportunity to ask him about his enigmatic observation...

From: Sophie Thompson
Sent: Tuesday, 17 February 2015 15:40
To: Matthew O'Brian
Subject: Thank you

Dear Mr O'Brian,
I am pleased to acknowledge receipt of...

God, what a horrendous line. It sounds like a frigging letter sent by the IRS Service Centre! I deleted everything and started again.

I am writing to inform that I have received...

Bugger! This is not getting any better! I pressed on Delete again. Well, damn it. In the end, I stuck to my usual half-serious-half-teasing way:

Thanks for not keeping my book. It was very kind of you. I will also take the liberty of asking you: what do you mean by *better*?

Sincerely,
Sophie Thompson

Before I left work, I checked my inbox, but there was no reply. The anticipation was killing me; I felt I was being put on hold and found myself huffing in annoyance – crazy, right?

Back in the room I took a long shower and prepared myself a red tea, my favourite. The TV was on, and I zapped between channels; the BBC was reporting on the severe weather across the UK and the hundreds of schools that had had to be shut. I left it there.

After talking to Charlie, I opened my email account and, finally, I found the reply I had been waiting for all day:

From: Matthew O'Brian
Sent: Tuesday, 17 February 2015 20:10
To: Sophie Thompson
Subject: RE: Thank you

Dear Sophie,

I apologize if I seem intrusive. The thing is, I couldn't help noticing you at the gate, and you didn't seem that well. I helped you with your bag on the plane, remember? Anyway, you're indeed a very lucky person. Apparently, your book didn't fall into the wrong hands :-)

And besides, no, I don't think I want to keep it. And I'm glad I can help you return to such – well, let's call it *inspiring* – readings.

Regards, M.

I remembered being helped, of course, but no, I couldn't picture the man's face. My memories from that particular morning were rather fuzzy.

You don't think you want to keep it? *Inspiring* readings? I glanced almost offended at the erotica best-seller lying on the desk. What a witty sense of humour you think you've got Mr O'Brian! And without giving it any thought, I reacted:

From: Sophie Thompson
Sent: Tuesday, 17 February 2015 20:35
To: Matthew O'Brian
Subject: RE: RE: Thank you

Are you by any chance making fun of me? What do you find so amusing?

I regretted it immediately. I was definitely overreacting. My mouth sometimes gets ahead of my head, the filter simply doesn't seem to work, and there I was, scolding a complete stranger, someone who had actually helped me. Twice.

Well, I'd had a momentary psychotic break, I'd completely lost it, I admit. Done. Gone. Forget and move on.

Shortly after that bizarre moment, the telephone rang. It was from the reception front desk.

“Good evening, Ms Thompson. You’ve got a call on hold, shall I put it through to you?”

“Yes, of course.” It was probably someone from work. Though they had my personal number. Odd. I waited a few seconds. “Evening, Sophie Thompson here.”

“Hi there, Ms Thompson. How are you?” On the other side of the line, an unknown, breathy deep male voice.

“Fine, thank you. Yourself?”

“It’s really nice to finally hear your voice.” His words were threaded with a hint of amusement.

“Who’s calling?”

“It’s me. Matthew O’Brian.”

My heart fell straight to the pit of my stomach. “Ah.”

“No, Sophie, I am not making fun of you. I apologise if I gave you the wrong impression. I was just—”

“Just a moment, please.”

I covered the receiver with my hand and quickly tried to put my thoughts together.

Oh good Lord, what is this?

How should I know? Probably some loony...

What’re you going to say?

No idea. No bloody idea.

Is this guy insane?

Probably.

Why is he calling?

Is there ‘psychic’ written on my forehead or something?

What a nerve! And you’re so screwed!

No shit?

Now go! Get it over and done with the guy!

Sure, but how?

“Yes, Mr O’Brian, thank you once again. It was really kind of you, you know, take the trouble of coming here and all

that. Very much appreciated. Well, I must really go now," I babbled so foolishly.

"But, Ms Thompson—"

"Yes, it was nice to hear you too. Have a pleasant evening, Mr O'Brian. And goodbye." And I hung up on him, just like that.

Well, if he had any doubt that I might have a screw loose, that I was not quite right in the head, I guess his worst suspicions had just been confirmed. He certainly must have run for the hills the moment I put the receiver down.

But that was the least of my worries, really. Gradually, as my erratic heartbeat slowed down, the bitter realisation dawned on me again: after what had happened that weekend things would never be the same. Which was sad, overwhelming, and scary at the same time.

Hoping that mix of pain and anger would soon morph into numbness, I crawled into bed, pulled the comforter up over my head and cried until I could cry no more. In a desperate attempt to make some sense out of it, to sort out where I had failed to read the silent signs, I played everything all over again in my mind...

Valentine's

Google search: Midlife crisis

About 1,650,000 results (0.35 seconds)

Midlife Crisis: Transition or Depression?

WebMD. What's a midlife crisis? It's the stuff of jokes and stereotypes – the time in life when you do outrageous, impractical things like quit a job impulsively, buy a red sports car, or dump your spouse (...) A midlife crisis might occur anywhere from about age 37 through your 50s.

Thirty-seven? Well, bugger me!

Top 40 signs of a midlife crisis revealed

The Telegraph. The top 40 signs of a midlife crisis include going to Glastonbury, listening to BBC 6 Music and buying an expensive bicycle, a study reveals (...) The male midlife crisis lasts between three and ten years.

Ten bloody what?

Typical signs include looking up ex-partners on Facebook, taking vitamin pills and taking out a direct debit for a charity...

4. Realise you will never be able to pay off your mortgage...
11. Take up a new hobby...
27. Think about quitting your job...
34. Can't sleep because of work worries...
38. Take up triathlons or another extreme sport.

Triathlon? Oh, dear God.

A deep sigh and I shut the laptop down.

My back arched against the soft fabric of the swivel chair, and my eyes steered to the large window. Thick clouds blanketed the sky that Wednesday morning and an unusually cold wind kept blowing the trees back and forth. The cadence of the branches scraping almost rhythmically against the shed roof in the garden filled the silence that reigned over the house.

My eyes returned to the desk, to the open calendar.

Oh my, time does fly, it'd be Julia's birthday the following week already. On February 21. Sadly, this year we wouldn't be able to celebrate it together; I'd be leaving for London in just a few days.

The steadily increasing rain began to beat harder against the windows, sounds that played along with the impatient tapping of my pen against a pile of books and the swirling thoughts running through my mind.

February.

Valentine's Day was only a few days away.

Another sip from my coffee cup.

No, I'm not particularly fond of this holiday. Honestly, I think it's totally overrated. I find it silly and completely unspontaneous to have a pre-established date to go to packed restaurants, get flowers because everyone else does, or go

watch some sappy Lifetime movie. Not to mention, it's a headache for those who are in a relationship with all the planning involved, and a sucky day for those who aren't. Who the hell likes to be reminded they aren't loved? And shouldn't undying love be expressed every day?

Alex wasn't exactly the passionate, incredibly romantic kind of man, but on this date, he'd always brought me flowers – usually the traditional stupidly expensive red rose bouquet – which tragically ended up in a waste bin some days later.

Anyway, I suspected his gesture was only the mere observation of a social rite, probably influenced by the female hysteria at his office. What would he tell them the next morning? That he was a shitty husband who didn't get me anything?

Letting go of my absolute V-Day antipathy, I thought I could do something for a change this year. I felt I should try to rescue him from what seemed a never-ending dark sea of whining and self-pity he'd plunged into since last spring.

Lately, Alex hated his work, his superiors, his subordinates, all the paperwork, the endless hours of useless meetings. He said he felt suffocated and wanted to quit, get out of there and do something else. He complained all the time that he'd had it up to here with the government, the darned crisis, the financial assistance programme, the IMF, the markets, the politicians – both the corrupt and the other ones likewise – and, oh well, pretty much with the entire world.

I truly didn't know if his exhaustion and constant irritation were the outcome of stress or if he was unstable and emotional because he was nearing his forties. Maybe he was struggling with the transition, or facing the alleged midlife crisis. I couldn't tell.

After thoughtful consideration, I came up with a plan: we should do something different, something we hadn't done in years, something like, what the hell, going out to watch a movie! Only the two of us.

It doesn't seem anything special, I know, but have your own children and you'll see what will probably happen to you: your once regular visits to the cinema will be reduced to a couple of animated Disney movies, usually around Christmas time. And that's it. No more, no less. It's pointless for you to slouch in your chair and twitch your nose in disagreement.

So, we were going out – but that wasn't really the bold move I had in mind. We weren't going to just any movie theatre!

Before I thought too much about my resolution and considered it completely crazy and hasty, I booked a flight to Lisbon and made a reservation at the Bairro Alto Hotel. Alex loved the years he'd spent working in the Lisbon branch, and having to return to the headquarters in Madrid was a harsh blow he still hadn't digested. I was certain he would be thrilled with the idea.

Besides, I thought it might be fun to embark on all the *Fifty Shades* hype and get on a plane to watch it somewhere else. There was such a big fuss about it, and the trailer had constantly been running on the TV that week. I had no real clue about the story, but it didn't matter. That was just a mere excuse for a weekend getaway.

Anyway, it was done. The documents with the flight details, the hotel voucher, the cinema tickets – everything was secretly hidden in the brown paper envelope I stashed in the middle of teaching notes and student assignments in my briefcase.

In the end, I couldn't contain a chuckle. We were returning to Lisbon!

The excitement was such I almost began to fancy Valentine's Day.

Seats Not Taken

“Oh my God, so it’s true! I just couldn’t believe, I had to hear it from you. But what the hell happened?”

Julia’s early call had woken me up on my second day in London. Alex had told Santiago, her husband, and now she was surprised at the whole thing and worried about me.

What could I tell her? I myself was utterly confused and didn’t know what to say, or what to think. The only thing I knew was that I was both hurt and furious with Alex, because he had accepted embarking on the whole thing, flying to Lisbon and spending the weekend there, and then dropped a bombshell in the shape of that sudden, shattering announcement.

Apparently, he’d not revealed his reasons even to them, our best friends.

“That dumbass prick! He’s been cheating on you, hasn’t he?”

“I don’t know, Julia...”

“You sure he’s not seeing someone else? Have you noticed anything suspicious?”

“He said he wasn’t. But even if he were, he wouldn’t tell me, I’m certain.”

“Look, a man never leaves his wife unless there’s another pair of knickers available for him to jump into!” she said in an angry tone, not bothering to control her fiery temper.

I didn’t contradict her. That remark wasn’t just about Alex anymore. My current situation awakened her old ghosts, painful memories she was still trying to work through.

“Look, they’re all a bunch of useless motherfuckers, *esos cabrones!* They can’t do anything on their own. They don’t know how to be alone and don’t want to. They have no idea how to take care of themselves and be independent. Even if they feel miserable, they don’t have the balls to walk away and stand on their own two feet. They’re all shitheads, mama’s boys who only have the guts to leave when there’s already a whore available to suck their dicks and do their laundry. *Hijos de la gran puta!*”

I picked up the remote, switched on the TV and turned to the news channel. 7:25, I checked in the right-hand corner of the screen. “Look, I must get ready for work...”

I don’t think she even heard me.

“Don’t you fret, my dear. I’ll rip Santiago’s *cojones* off if he does not bring me the name of the bitch he’s been rolling in the hay with! And when you return, we go there and have a very serious talk with the lady! Then you wait, give Alex some time. I’m sure he’ll come back to his senses.”

What?

“No, Julia, I’d never go after any woman. And besides, I’m not like you, I don’t think I could ever forgive him that. Or maybe for the sake of the marriage, I could try, but I know

it'd be a living hell. I'd throw the whole thing in his face for the rest of our lives."

"Have you tried talking to his mother?"

"No, I didn't have the opportunity to. And, besides, that would be a total waste of time. You know María. She's his mother, she'll always say he's right, even if he's not. And I don't think he's told them anything yet anyway. Listen, I have to go now. I'll call later this evening, okay?"

—

After a quick shower and a barely coordinated choice of clothing out of the still unpacked suitcase, I was on the mezzanine level, entering the busy breakfast room, taking in the sweet smells wafting through the air and the aroma of fresh coffee.

In desperate need of caffeine, I served myself a cup of the hot brew first and only then scanned the room for an available table. There was only a small one, for two people, in one of the corners of the room, not far from the window that overlooked Bedford Avenue.

Almost mechanically, with my thoughts racing over the events of the weekend and the conversation I'd just had with Julia, I headed there and set my coffee cup down. Next, I went to get something to eat – not that I was hungry as my stomach was in knots – but because I knew I needed to.

I was already sipping my coffee and flipping through the newspaper when someone approached the table.

"Excuse me, is this seat taken?"

My eyes glanced from the opposite chair to up along the man's figure, and finally around the room. Indeed, there were no seats available.

A flicker of irritation must have crossed my face. Honestly, couldn't the man have waited a couple of minutes? There were a lot of people about to finish!

I did hesitate for five or six seconds, but I couldn't just leave the man standing with a cup of coffee in his hand, could I?

"No, it's not. Please, go ahead." I forced a smile. I wasn't in the mood for pleasantries, but neither did I want to sound rude.

The man sat down, and I finally brought myself to look at him. I immediately thought he looked somehow familiar and wondered if we had met before. Despite the mental effort, I couldn't place him anywhere. So no, I quickly concluded, I had never seen the man. Maybe it was his scent, fresh and masculine? Or perhaps someone I knew wore the same cologne, I thought.

I gave up. I'd never been good with faces anyway.

He was about my age, maybe a little older. I couldn't tell.

The usual things I notice in a man caught my instant attention: eyes, incredibly green. Smile, warm and inviting. Hands, wide and strong. My tall, broad-shouldered guest also had short wavy hair and a – quite sexy – two-day stubble. His light brown hair had a sprinkling of grey which added to his charm.

In short, he was a very handsome man. And suddenly, a tiny shiver might have run along my spine, and I felt terribly awkward.

We talked for a good half-hour. I told him what I was doing in London, how long I was going to stay, that I'd moved to Spain five years before, that I enjoyed life in the southern corner of Europe. He told me he was a doctor from Boston, how much he appreciated his job, how much he liked Europe, and about his Irish descent. It was small-talk

between strangers and didn't include significant personal details.

I glanced at my watch. "I must go now." Time seemed to have flown, and I should already be on my way to work.

"Yes, me too. I'll go up with you if you don't mind."

I nodded and smiled. After having shared my breakfast table with another guest, why wouldn't I share the lift ride with him?

We walked out together to the lobby, and he pressed the lift call button. The doors immediately slid open, and both of us stepped in.

"So which floor are you on then?" he asked, his hand already hovering over the panel.

"Fourth."

The lift began to ascend.

"I guess we haven't introduced ourselves. My name's Sophie." I reached out my hand.

He took it, smiling. "Yes, you're absolutely right, we should introduce ourselves. And perhaps we could also continue our conversation later this evening. Maybe, during dinner? Here in the hotel?" His smile turned serious for a moment. "Or maybe you already have other plans for tonight, so I'm sorry if—"

I gave him a half shrug. "I don't, actually."

It's a fact. The thing I like least about travelling is spending several lonely nights in front of the TV or computer. Yes, I could use some company.

He still held my hand. His grip was firm and warm. "Well then, Sophie, perhaps we could meet in the lobby at—"

"Seven?"

Good Lord, you agreed so promptly, it almost seems you are flinging yourself at him! Get a grip, girl!

He still hadn't let go of my hand, and his eyes were glinting with mischief. "Seven o'clock seems fine." The lift

stopped, and the doors slid open. “It was really nice meeting you, Sophie.”

I freed my hand and stepped out. But before the doors closed again, I had time to ask one last question. “And your name is...?”

“Matthew. Matthew O’Brian.”

Allowing me no opportunity to demand an explanation, he winked and threw me a naughty smile right before the doors closed again.

Butterflies

It was almost seven, and I was on my way down to the hotel lobby. Damn it, I'd spent all day with such fluttering sensations in my stomach, I'd sometimes thought I was going to throw up. A sense of nervous anticipation was driving me insane.

I guess it was the ancient fight-or-flight physical response: my already screwed-up brain perceived a potential life threat and increased alertness. Adrenaline was now taking care of the rest. Sending those bloody butterflies up to my gut to remind me I was entering into a dangerous situation, from which I should immediately withdraw.

It wasn't a pleasant feeling, true, but it was also not as bad as having to cope with my real problem...

With my gaze fixed on the lift panel, absentmindedly watching it moving from floor to floor, my mind wandered away to the last conversation I'd had with Alex. It had been that last Sunday after we'd both tucked Charlie into bed.

All I got were frustrating platitudes, though. He needed space and room to breathe, or so he said. He was getting older and felt miserable. His life hadn't turned out the way he had planned, and it was now or never, he had to take a leap before it was too late. He had to think about himself first.

"How about if we tried counselling?"

"You should stop watching so many films," he replied, his tone flat and unemotional.

As usual, we ended up fighting over last summer, me accusing him of being an egotistical bastard. And as usual, too, silence fell after less than five minutes.

"Please," he asked, fixing me with narrowed eyes. "Let's just handle this the civilised way?"

Of course.

So now, for lack of a better survival strategy, I tried to sweep all those painful feelings under the rug and went to meet a complete stranger.

Matthew O'Brian.

I found him in the guest lounge, standing, with his hand in his pocket, looking through the window while talking on his mobile phone.

I kept some distance, waiting until he finished, observing him. Unlike that morning, he wasn't wearing jeans and a V-neck jumper; instead, he wore a very elegant navy blue suit, which made him look ridiculously hot.

Eventually, he turned around, acknowledged my presence with a small nod, and finished his telephone call shortly after. He then flashed me a surreptitious smile before he picked up the long coat he had left on one of the lounge chairs, and came towards me.

"Ms Thompson."

I stretched out my hand to greet him. "Mr O'Brian, huh?" My lips twisted into a teasing little smile.

“I’m so happy to see you. How was your day?” The corners of his mouth twitched as if he was trying not to laugh. “To be more accurate, I’m actually relieved to see you. I was pretty much convinced you’d get your revenge and leave me standing here like a fool!”

He was still holding my hand, and I couldn’t stop looking at his naughty boy smile, feeling somehow overwhelmed by his charm.

“It crossed my mind, I must say.”

No, it didn’t. I was lying through my teeth and playing hard to get.

“Shall we go then? There or there?” He pointed in the direction of the two restaurants located in the hotel. “Or do you prefer to go somewhere else?”

“Oh, no, I’d rather stay here. I’d go for Hudson’s if it’s okay with you.”

Hudson’s is a restaurant and lounge bar with a quite cosy atmosphere. The entrance for guests is adjacent to the concierge desk, so we went straight from there.

I ordered a grilled chicken salad, and Matthew asked for a Hudson’s mixed grill. We both had red wine, which I actually don’t like that much. I’m more of a white wine person, but it was his suggestion and out of politeness I had a glass.

“So, Mr O’Brian, when did you first become a stalker?” I asked straight out even before dinner was served, leaping over the normal polite conversation about nothing that social occasions usually require.

He had a sip of his wine and gave me a sheepish grin. “Believe it or not, just last Monday. Still not very good at it. Crazy move this morning, right? Hope you’re not upset.” He loosened his tie. “I’m sorry, I came directly from work...”

“Well, *upset* wouldn't be the correct word, maybe puzzled. Honestly, you don't look like the kind of man who'd run after a perfect stranger just because of some stupid book.”

He rubbed his jaw, a crooked smile on his face. “Appearances are often deceiving, aren't they?”

I thought better of questioning him and tried to steer the subject to something less tricky before we became uncomfortable. “And what were you doing in Madrid anyway?”

He shrugged. “Just business.”

“I don't get it, you told me this morning you were a physician. Oh, I see. That was part of your little act, right?”

Suddenly his face became serious, his gaze intense. “No, I was telling you the truth. I'm a paediatrician.”

Over dinner, he told me about the private clinic where he worked, which specialised in all aspects of paediatric medical care. He talked enthusiastically about the challenges of running it, its mission and goals, and some of the corporate social initiatives. And he named almost all the different specialisations in alphabetical order, allergies-audiology-cardiology-dentistry-ear, nose and throat, endocrinology...

I interrupted him before he could get to f. “And why did you come to see me this morning?”

I was simply too curious; I had to go back to questioning him.

He leant back in his chair, relaxed and easy, his fingers drumming softly on the wooden table. “I don't know if it happens to you, but sometimes when I'm waiting somewhere, like at an airport departure gate, for example, I like to look at people and try to guess their story just from observation. I try to read their body language, imagine their lives, what they do, if they have a family, if they're happy or have miserable lives, their hopes, and dreams...”

I laughed. “That sounds a bit creepy, you know?”

“I know, right?” He grinned. “But no, it’s a very harmless thing. Just consider me an amateur social scientist with nothing better to do.”

“And so you were observing me last Monday?”

He looked at me over the rim of his glass as he took a sip of wine. “Yes. The whole time,” he said after he put the glass down on the table. His voice was thick, and his features unreadable.

I swallowed hard.

His eyes kept studying me, and those damn butterflies began to throw a huge rave party in my stomach, with booze, strobe lights, glow sticks and the whole paraphernalia.

However, I managed to keep my composure. “And what were your conclusions, scientist?”

“Inconclusive.” He shook his head and sighed, amused. “Quite frustrating, I must say!”

“Oh, really? What went wrong? You picked yourself a useless guinea pig, is that it?”

Matthew let out a genuine laugh and continued. “Well, I was already there when you arrived. Very classy woman, I thought. Then you sat down, straight back, head high, not slouching.”

“Mm-hmm. And then what?”

“I observed you checking something in one of Edward T. Hall’s books and writing a few words on a post-it note. It’s not the type of book people usually carry around so I concluded you must be somehow related to an educational area.”

“Correct.”

“I also saw you stroking a little boy’s head when his toy fell to the ground; you picked it up and talked to him. You had the natural, instinctive reaction of a mother.”

“Yes.”

“But then what followed aroused my curiosity, it really intrigued me. Well, first you began reading from a book that most women wouldn’t read in public, maybe only secretly on their Kindle.”

“Yes...”

“And then, well, you know, you became nervous and cried.”

That was startling. “Was that so obvious?”

“Well, not really, but like I said, I had my eyes on you.”

“To sum it all up, the bipolar freak here messed up your pastime game, right?”

He looked at me with narrowed eyes. “Did you know a person only needs sixty seconds to create a first impression, and if it’s a positive one, that’s the one that prevails? That was the case, I guess.”

I offered him a smile.

“And I must confess something else.” Matthew paused, poured some more wine into his glass, gazing at me intently. “I found your book when I was taking my bag out. You were no longer there, but I could actually have returned it to you, you know?” He stopped to take a sip and then began to play with his glass, twirling it on the coaster. “I saw you again by the luggage belt. But I’d already seen your name on it and chose not to.”

I let his confession sink in for a little while.

“You’re not trying to seduce me, are you?” I asked abruptly.

My damaged brain filter was to blame. That or some social inadequacy syndrome enhanced by the fact I wasn’t used to having nice-looking guys – or just any guy, for that matter – flirting with me.

“I don’t know. Am I?”

I glanced up at his teasing smile. “Look, Matthew–”

“Matt. Call me Matt.”

“Matthew.” I rested my arms on the table, leant in and looked him straight in the eyes. “Let’s stop the chatter and cut to the chase: you’re losing your time and energy with me. Neither of us is a stupid teenager anymore, we’re grown up people, with responsibilities, and this is actually insane. I shouldn’t even be here in the first place. Now, tell me, what do you think your wife is going to say if she finds out you’re hitting on a strange woman you just met at the airport?”

“Wow! Are you always so upfront?” His lips twisted into a boyish grin. “I’m not worried, I don’t have a wife. What about you, are you still married?”

“Still? I beg your pardon?”

“Well, it’s quite obvious you used to wear a ring on this finger here.” He stroked the clear line around the ring finger in my right hand. “You must have taken it off recently.”

“So, you’re telling me a good-looking, charming man like you isn’t in some sort of relationship? And you expect me to believe it? C’mon, I’m not a naïve, inexperienced young girl, still falling for that... Look, let’s be sincere, guys like you are all taken!”

He raised his eyebrows with apparent surprise and then let out a loud laugh. “And that’s what you and your girlfriends think?”

“Pretty much, yes. At this stage, I regret to inform you that you can only be placed in one of the following categories: A, you’re gay, but considering the circumstances I’m inclined to think you’re not. B, you’re married, and you’re cheating on your wife, which is plain wrong. Or you belong to category C, the pervert slash sociopath division.”

He grinned broadly and asked me the question I’d been dreading. “And you, Ms Sophie Thompson, do you have a husband waiting for you when you return?”

Shit. Shit. Shit. You’re so not going to share the recent events in your life with a complete stranger!

“I’ve got a son, his name’s Charlie. Great kid, he’ll be ten next month. Look, it’s getting late” – and it was getting slippery too, I had to retreat – “and I should go now. Thank you for the lovely evening.”

It took him a moment to say politely, “You’re welcome. I’ll accompany you back to the lobby.”

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Finally, the lift had arrived.

I reached out my hand for a handshake. “Well, good night, Matthew.”

“Good night, Sophie.” He took my hand, and his eyes took a mischievous glint. “I’m so sorry, where are my manners?” Gently he pushed me inside. “I’m supposed to walk you home, aren’t I?”

What? Don’t you let him do this! Are you brain damaged or something?

I simply froze. I don’t know why.

We didn’t exchange a single word as the lift went up, we just stood right in front of each other, so close that I could almost feel his breath, the scent of his cologne drifting through my senses, making my pulse quicken.

I didn’t step back, though. And then I felt a strange warmth crawling up my back, an enormous tension that was scary and exciting at the same time.

A ding and the doors slid open.

We walked along the corridor, in silence, his hand on the small of my back as if guiding me. And my butterflies weren’t tipsy anymore. I guess they were fully drunk and had lost total control of their faculties.

As we approached my room, I took the door key card out of my purse.

After the light flashed green and the lock clicked, I turned immediately around, blocking the way in. “So, I guess I’m *home*, it’s time for you to go now. Thanks again for the lovely evening, Matthew. I had a wonderful time.”

He held my hand in his and brushed a light kiss across my knuckles.

My heart thumped so fast I feared I was going to have a stroke, right there in the middle of the corridor.

He looked deeply into my eyes before he leant in to whisper in my ear, “Right, it’s time for me to leave now.” His thumb circled my knuckles, his warm breath caressed my neck. “But if you want, and only if you do – because that pervert division isn’t my thing either – I’d really like to see you again.”

And he gave me one last smile before he walked away.