

Chapter 2

Edmonton, Alberta

‘Ms Rusch?’ The reflection of a young woman in a fresh charcoal suit, a laptop and file under one arm, walks towards Georgie. Georgie turns away from the still dark window of her new twenty-second floor corporate home to face her. ‘I’m Briana. We’ll be working together on this project, I understand?’ There’s the smell of warm photocopying.

Georgie smiles. *Good to have another woman on the team. They get more done. And ask fewer questions.* ‘Please call me Georgie. How’d you know it was me?’ People were always coming and going in the offices. Maybe Briana had been told to look for someone medium height, with a blonde ponytail, in a navy skirt suit, who looks like she hasn’t had an uninterrupted night’s sleep in about five years.

‘You’ve got a tan,’ Briana says.

Women also cut through the crap. It’s almost eight in the morning and she’d been trying to get some photos of the city for her nephew, Tommy. But there’s no sign of the sun, and all the pictures show is the reflection of her, backgrounded by rows of desks. Not that different from her old office at eight in the evening. Or midnight. Or three am. Still, she’ll Snap him one anyway. At least he’ll know she’s thinking of him.

If only she could find the *Send* button. ‘Hey, um, do you know how to send a Snapchat?’ Georgie turns her phone towards Briana. Tommy showed her how to use the app just before she left. *You’re such a dinosaur, Auntie G*, he’d said, rolling his eyes when she couldn’t get it. Eleven years old, going on forever. Briana taps the screen and generates

a satisfying whoosh, and now the younger woman risks a smile.

‘Any sign of Mr Kuchma yet?’ Georgie asks.

Briana shakes her head, smile faltering. Her long, dark hair has had a curling iron put through it. Georgie remembers when she used to do that, too. Before she was told.

‘Let’s go grab a coffee from the kitchen. I’m sure he won’t be long,’ Georgie says.



Georgie sticks a single-use cardboard cup under the machine, which groans and spits out a coffee-like dribble. The Edmonton West Resources Consulting office kitchen looks just like the Perth one. The ones she’s seen in Brisbane, Dallas, Aberdeen and Singapore. The rest of them, too, she supposes. Bins of cereal, toast and juice, a foosball table, a library with a *Take a book, leave a book!* sign. Fridges full of beer and wine that, come Friday, will be flowing like crude oil down a pipeline. Whatever the team need to make their lives as easy as possible.

But mostly what the corporate floors are stocked with is people like Briana. Thousands apply to join the firm and others like it every year. They have books, websites, YouTube channels dedicated to getting these jobs. The ones who make it tick all the same boxes. Outstanding grades. Top rank in a graduate business program. Aced the rounds of aptitude testing, interviews and weekend test assignments. Of those, a couple of hundred get offered a six-month probationary stint. The cream of the crop – about half of those – will get made permanent. ‘So, look around you,’ one of the senior partners said, the day Georgie started. ‘Everyone here is your colleague. And your competition.’ Confused eyes dashed about the room, trying to work out how to treat everyone around them.

‘How long have you been with West?’ Georgie asks.

‘Three weeks.’ Briana’s bright face belies the early start.

Nose wrinkling, Georgie hands Briana the first coffee and puts a

second cup under the spout. ‘What kinds of things do you get up to outside of work?’

‘I play on a volleyball team, and I’m a volunteer homework tutor for children in foster care,’ she says, as the corporate coffee machine spits out more brownish liquid. The single-use cups are plastered with the firm’s slogan: *More, together!* Last year’s slogan was something about *Confidence!* and *Trust!* Georgie thinks *Change!* might have been in there, too. They update it every year, and trash the old stuff. Like photos of an ex-boyfriend you found out had been cheating on you all along.

‘The firm has some great philanthropy programs. You could talk to the PR people about getting a donation. For the kids. Or your volleyball team.’ West Resources’ commitment to social causes is in all its marketing materials. Apparently young people these days like working for a firm that says it cares.

A Snapchat message buzzes on Georgie’s phone. Tommy and two of his mates, Ali and Preston, holding a giant football trophy. The name of the oil company sponsor is in large font. Underneath, in smaller print, the names of the children. *I’ve missed being there*, she thinks, but quickly wipes it from her mind. It’s possible to be productive when you’re sad, but it takes a lot more effort. She should know.

The coffee machine finishes its ablutions a second time. Georgie sniffs at the output and imagines the mutiny that this would bring about in Australia. Still, her brain is foggy with the time difference. It will have to do. Maybe Briana knows somewhere to get a decent long mac topped up, or whatever they drink here. ‘Anything other than this project will have to take a back seat for a while. You understand that?’

‘Oh, of course. It’s so tough to get here – as you know. I just want to learn everything I can and make it through probation.’

‘Don’t worry. I’m sure you will.’ There’s a fifty percent chance, anyway.

Briana leads them to the desks they've been allocated. They're in the Bullpen, one big space full of rows of desks and everyone else in the West team. When Georgie meets Mr Kuchma she'll request a dedicated war room for the project team to bunker down in. Mostly she's learned to tune out the noise of other people's work, but it can be distracting. Anyway, the significance of this project warrants a dedicated space.

'Have you been told who else will be on the team?' Georgie asks. Probably another senior associate, maybe a manager if they're lucky. The new graduates are good. The competition to stay makes them almost terminally eager to please. But they have so much to learn.

'Oh, uh ...'

'It's okay, they're probably still working out resourcing.' Georgie waves away a slight annoyance that Briana hasn't found out. She points to the papers in Briana's coffee-free arm. 'I'm going to guess you haven't seen a request-for-tender document before?' Briana will have been up all night memorising every word of the document, Georgie would bet.

'No, but I've looked over it, of course. The Alberta government wants a new risk advisor for the resources industry for the next five years?'

'Yes. That document sets out what they're looking for. We have to respond to everything they want. Write everything we know about Alberta oil and gas – and coal and uranium and whatever else you've got, too. Who will be on the team. Where we've done similar work before. The stakeholders we'll consider, the IT platforms we'll use, our quality control mechanisms. There will be all kinds of tricks. Maximum font size. Required number of decimal points in the paragraph-numbering system. If there's something in there about red M&Ms, we need to serve it up with red M&Ms. Because we are about to spend three months of our lives on this. If they don't choose us,

it will all have been for nothing. Kind of like a five-hundred-page Tinder profile. If that's helpful.'

Georgie connects her laptop. Every West office is set up exactly the same, down to the computer plug in exactly the same place. When you move desks, that saves a second or two you might otherwise spend finding the plug. Might not seem that much. But there are twenty-two of these banks of desks on the floor, that's four hundred and forty risk analysts. Multiply a second or two by four hundred or so analysts, times offices in fifty-four countries, times three hundred and fifty workdays, and that's millions a year. That's why people pay firms like theirs. They see the big picture.

'Who are we competing against?' Briana asks.

'Good question.' Georgie tries to say this a few times early on to the new grads, whether they've asked a good question or not. It's easy to get psyched out by how competent everyone else here seems. 'Mostly other international firms like ours. Probably one out of Dallas. That will be something I'll get you to do some early investigation of. The last, say, five years of operations of our main competitors here, along with relevant legislation and policies. There's a lot I know, Briana, but I'm going to be relying on you for a lot of the Canadian stuff. Not just you, of course,' Georgie rushes to add, 'the whole team, I mean.'

Briana's jaw tenses like she might say something, but she doesn't. Everyone is allowed one photo on their desk. Briana's is of a young man, with long brown hair and a dark beard, against white hills, white sky, white frozen lake. Georgie thinks about asking who it is, but the buzz of her phone distracts her. She draws a centring breath, ready to start impressing Mr Kuchma. But it's just Nico. He's left the access pass she organised on the bedside table. Can she come and get him from the lobby?

'Uh-huh.' She hangs up. Briana still looks like she wants to say something. Is she feeling nervous about succeeding here? It wouldn't

be unreasonable. Georgie's been here fifteen years and still worries one day they're going to realise they made a mistake in hiring her and walk her out on the spot.

'Look, I'll let you in on a secret,' Georgie says, leaning in. 'Any of the firms that have been given the opportunity to apply could do the job. More than that, we're all pretty much the same. The bids will all look the same. How they really decide is this: We'll get two in-person meetings with them. One before the bid, one after. They'll make ninety percent of their decision in that room, based on one thing. Do they like us. So all we really have to do is be likable. Twice.'

'Uh-huh.' Briana's smile makes it halfway across her mouth. She's saying the right things, but Georgie's risk radar is *blip-blip-bipping*.

'You know, Bri – can I call you Bri? – we Australians, we like to shorten everything. Bri, we're about to spend a lot of time together. We have to trust each other. So, whatever happens, I want you to be honest with me and I promise I'll do the same. Okay? So, is there something bothering you about this? Something that means you're not going to give it your whole attention, maybe? Or some other problem? Because I'd rather know now.'

Briana glances at the photo. 'Well, it's just that Mr Kuchma told me that it was just you and I doing this. The two of us. I don't think there's anyone else.'

The job needs about six people. Everything is always stretched, so she was expecting a team of three, hoping for four. But two? One a new grad? That must be a misunderstanding. Georgie takes stock, and in the end decides to just smile. *The greater the doubt, the more confident we need to look*, as Nico always says. 'Thanks for letting me know. I'll talk to Mr Kuchma and clear that up.'

A text with just a single question mark comes through from Nico. Shit, he's still stuck downstairs. Briana is chewing her bottom lip.

Oh God. Women are actually better at the job. But they need a lot of

reassurance. ‘All good, don’t worry. I’ll sort it out,’ she says, as Nico buzzes her again. ‘Hey, I’ve got to go let Nico in. Another Australian. But then maybe we could grab a proper coffee?’ She breaks into a trot.

‘What do you mean he texted you and told you he wasn’t coming in until later?’ Georgie says as Nico dumps his computer at the desk across from Georgie’s. She feels groggy from lack of proper sleep.

‘He texted. And said he wasn’t coming in. Until later. That was the whole message,’ Nico has his computer out and fired up in a nanosecond.

‘But Nico—’ A growing red orb breaches the horizon, and the world outside comes into view for the first time. City buildings, grey and beige, releasing clouds of steam like cartoon snoring bubbles. A frozen river snaking under two bridges. All under a blanket of snow. Beyond that, endless flat and featureless plains as big and empty as the Pilbara desert she’s left behind. Fifteen thousand kilometres and seventy degrees Celsius away. Or do they say Centigrade here? Shit, please don’t let it be Fahrenheit. She’ll ask Briana.

It’s magical. If only Josh were here. She reaches for the cool, hard glass. Pulling away, she leaves a cold hand shadow. She turns, noticing that Briana already has a list of competitors up on her screen. ‘Hey, Bri,’ she says. ‘Let’s go get that—’

The glint from Briana’s engagement ring makes Georgie’s chest suck. Her first thought: *Oh, she’ll make a beautiful bride.* Quickly leapfrogged by the second: *Fuck.* The only thing worse than a sad staff member is one who’s getting married. From a productivity point of view, that is. Is *this* what she’s being cagey about? On impulse, Georgie goes to say, ‘Great question,’ before realising no one asked her anything. ‘Oh, you’re engaged? When’s the wedding?’ She pushes down the panic. *If she says any time before the end of May, I’m getting someone else subbed in right now.*

‘Oh,’ Briana shuffles her left hand out of view. ‘It’s in August. Most of the planning is done, we’ve just got a few last-minute things to sort out. I assure you, this job will be my top priority.’

Georgie’s wedding was in March. Frangipanis, warm breezes and promises on a beach. *She* was a beautiful bride. Everyone said so. Pity she was such a terrible wife.

But, *FUCK!* Georgie knows what ‘this job will be my top priority’ means. Until there are dress fittings, and venue viewings, and photographers who cancel, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

Somehow, she has to make sure Briana *does* make this her top priority. ‘Tell you what, if you stick this out and we win, which of course you will and of course we will, I’ll make sure you get a cut of the bonus. That should help with those wedding costs.’

Briana looks overwhelmed by how wonderful this firm is turning out to be, and can only mumble something including the word *amazing*, while Nico throws a raised eyebrow Georgie’s way, slurping his single-use cup of tepid disappointment.

Georgie rolls her eyes. *You taught me everything I know.*

Briana coughs. ‘Um, did you want to get a coffee?’

The sky has turned clear and blue now, the buildings are waking up. People are out on the streets. They’re wearing boots and coats like the ones that one of the assistants had stocked her hotel apartment wardrobe with, along with a selection of beanies, gloves and scarves. Given the heated corridor that leads from her hotel to this office, she may never need them.

And Josh isn’t here.

‘Sorry, what? Oh, yeah, nah.’ She ignores Briana’s apparent confusion at whether she means yes or no. ‘We have plenty to be getting on with.’ She downs the coffee, grimaces, and heads back to the kitchen for another.



A refill on her desk, Georgie pulls up the internal messaging system, hits Nico's name, and sends him a single word.

Fuck.

Then, How can I do this if all I've got is a new hire who's been here all of three weeks and who's getting married?

Sounds like you when we met.

Thought you didn't remember?

The one-time confession he made – that he didn't remember meeting her – that she throws at him every couple of years. Their eyes meet playfully over a bank of powerboards. She wants to laugh, but then it might seem like they were sharing a joke, and someone might come and check out their IM log.

His head falls to one side, tiredly. You'll get it done. You always do. You're a superstar.

She waits for the confidence his words usually give her, but today she feels like an addict chasing that first high. The one they say you can never get again. A headache has set up shop in her frontal lobe. She needs another forty-eight hours to feel human again. It's at least seventy-two before superstar kicks in.

Suddenly she feels every kind of tired. Her eyes feel like they're full of sand, but if she rubs them she'll need to redo her mascara. She puts her head down on the desk and closes them, just for a moment.



The laptop case lands on the desk next to her with a thud. Georgie jolts up, the shadow of a bear-like figure now looming in front of her. From the pieces she pulls together, that bear is connected to the hand that's connected to the laptop bag that's made the thud, and ...

'Randy Kuchma.' Nico's voice comes from behind her, but she already knows. Her heart has been pumping extra blood to her head, trying to get it to pay attention for a few moments now. 'This is Georgia Rusch.'

'Mr Kuchma.' Finally, Georgie's brain catches up. She jumps to attention and shoots out a trembling hand.

He pumps it like an oil derrick on a prairie. ‘George?’

‘Georgia. Like the state. Please feel free to call me Georgie. Everyone does.’

He looks her up and down. ‘You’re not a man,’ Randy states.

Their hands are no longer pumping, although he hasn’t let go of hers. She can feel his pulse, she swears. Unless it’s her own? His thumb moves across the back of her hand. Presses delicately. Unless she’s mistaken?

‘Nope, ’fraid not,’ she laughs. Fuck, she needs to be on her A game and she feels drunk.

‘Must have been some mix-up, hey?’

Is that a question? His version of a joke? Should she answer? His handshake lingers and it’s starting to feel weird. Is this how they shake hands in Canada? *Shit, shit, shit*. Her heart is racing, a mix of the shock of the wake-up call plus the mess she’s making of this first impression.

‘Georgie has been with us for a dozen or so years now. Some great successes under her belt. We’re all looking forward to seeing what she can do here,’ Nico says.

His words give her the kick she needed. She pulls her hand away and wipes at a non-existent strand of hair in the general vicinity of her mouth, hoping that looks natural. ‘Yes, thank you, Nico. Mr Kuchma, I’m excited to be here. We just flew in yesterday and I’m still a little tired, sorry, but by tomorrow I’ll be up and—’

‘What’s the name of the city you’re from?’

‘Perth, Western Australia. Not sure if you’ve ever—’

‘Perth. Huh.’ He’s tall. Broad. Steel-grey hair. What comes first? Those ruggedly handsome features? Or the confidence they seem to buy people who have them? ‘Who’s famous from there?’

‘Ah, well.’ Georgie stops assessing his handsomeness and scans her Perth knowledge department. ‘There’s Bon Scott, from the group AC/DC, not sure if you—’

‘AC/DC? They’re not American?’

‘No, common misconception that one.’ Can he please start asking her about mining or resources or oil and gas? She knows a lot about those things.

A bespoke pinstripe jacket enhances his breadth. She recognises the cut of the in-house tailors. They fly them in quarterly from Hong Kong. ‘So, time is tight on this, obviously, so I’ve taken a look at the specs and I’ve got some—’

‘You’ve met Briana?’

She takes a breath, wishing she could get a whole sentence out. ‘Yes, she’s going to be a great asset to the—’

‘You two should get yourselves out and about. Take a few trips. Up to Fort Mac. Heart of the Patch. You know that’s what we call the oilfields here? The Patch. That’s where all the action happens.’

‘Yes, that would be a good idea. I had already thought about getting up to the Athabasca oilfields, get a feel for some of the stakeholders there, and—’

‘You could do some shopping.’

Silence, until a microsecond later, Randy’s laugh bursts out, as vast as the prairie outside. ‘Just a joke,’ he winks. ‘You’re not going to be one of these women who can’t take a joke. Are you?’

She smiles brightly, letting him know she most certainly is not. ‘Well, obviously there is a lot to do here, so I imagine we’ll be seeing a lot of these desks, but I had already been thinking it would be good to meet some of the environmental groups up there, and Calgary too, I understand there are some reclamation projects and—’

Randy turns away. ‘She’s quite the go-getter, isn’t she?’ he says to Nico, before turning back. ‘Great to have you on board, George. Don’t forget to make some time for a little fun though, will you?’ His custom-suited broad shoulders turn away.

Fun? What kind of fun? ‘Ah, Mr Kuchma? Sorry,’ she says to his back, ‘I was hoping to get some time with you today about staffing for this bid. I’ve got some ideas for how we can put our best foot forward.’

Randy swivels, and the silence that follows Georgie's first complete sentence is sucked into the air-conditioning system. He seems alert – but not alarmed – to find that she's still there.

He looks at Nico, before he looks back at her. 'Give me twenty minutes. I need to make a few calls.'

'Fine. And Mr Kuchma?' He's every bit as intimidating as everyone has ever said. But she needs to show she's up to this. 'My name is Georgia. Like the state. Feel free to call me Georgie. But not George. Thank you.' There was one person who called her George. He's not around anymore.

He gives her a smile that doesn't reach his cobalt eyes. 'And I'm Randy.' In other circumstances, she might be rolling around on the floor, laughing. In these ones, she could cry. Or just be done with it and drop dead. 'Of course.'

She turns to her computer and pretends to read the screen. Her fingers clench in irritated anger at herself. Any of the four hundred and forty analysts here would have cut off their right hand to have had five minutes with Mr Kuchma. Sorry, Randy. What does she do? Handed the opportunity on a plate? She catches Nico's frown across the desks.

As Nico said, there are a conga line of others waiting in the wings for this opportunity. Why out of all of them does he still trust her? Maybe she should let one of those others have it. She could head back down the highway she came up last night from the airport, muttering something about *family emergency*. With her family, it will just be a matter of time.



Twenty minutes or so later, Randy waves her into his office. He continues typing words into a screen facing away from her for another minute or so, giving her time to take everything in. His MBA from the University of Alberta in a gold frame, just above his head. The clear view of her desk and Briana's, just a few metres away from his chair.

The credenza behind him with three pictures – partners get an extra two. He's chosen one of him with a fish. Him in ice hockey gear. Him and another man in a suit. If he has a family, they didn't make the cut.

Another minute or so passes before he pulls a monogrammed sleeve back to check a gold watch. Just long enough for her to start second-guessing everything she thought she would be able to come in here and say.

'George. I mean Georgia. What can I do for you?'

But Nico has brought her here because he believes in her. She manages to salvage something like confidence from the thought. 'Yes, thank you for your time. We'll get to know each other over the next few months of course, and I appreciate you're busy, but Briana mentioned she thought the staffing might be just the two of us. In my experience, for a job like this, West would typically invest—'

'You married, Georgia?' The light catches the frame of his degree. It glows like a halo.

'Married? Sorry, I'm not sure how that's—'

'Just making conversation. Getting to know each other. As you said. No harm in that? No ring, I see?'

Why was he looking? She feels it, hanging against her chest, and something makes her glad it's hidden. 'No. I'm not married.' That's the answer he wants, isn't it?

'Good. Don't need you having any more distractions while you're here. Do we?'

More than what? He gets photos of fish and hockey players and no one questions his commitment to work, but she can't have a relationship? What is it about men and photos of fish, anyway? Her few depressing post-Josh forays into the dating world suggest men on Western Australian dating apps think it's the way to attract a mate. It just makes her imagine they'd smell.

'Anyway, Mr Kuchma. I mean Randy. I think to do justice to this we

need another two or three people on this bid. If we had, say, a manager and ideally a couple of data analysts—’

‘I’ve got to say,’ Randy leans back in the black leather chair. His hands go to either side of his head, locking behind it. ‘Nico led me to believe you were exceptional.’

She does a rapid-fire risk assessment. *Does he know about them? Could he?* But no, like Nico said, she wouldn’t be here if anyone knew. She pulls herself up straighter, before calmly stating the situation. Nico listens to her. She’s sure Randy will too. ‘I don’t think it’s possible to win this project with the staff you’ve given me.’

‘If I’d been put off every time I was given something to do and told it was hard, do you think I’d be where I am, Georgia?’

‘I’m not saying it’s hard. I’m saying it’s not possible. If we are going to do this, we want to win. That’s what we both want. Isn’t it? Mr ... Randy?’ If Georgie doesn’t win, she’ll get dropped by Kuchma, and disappoint Nico. Her stomach lurches. ‘Right, so I can talk to the HR team about—’

He leans forward, and already she knows that means she should stop talking. ‘You know, Georgie, I’ve looked at your assessments. Some people are saying you’re ready for partner.’

‘Partner? Well, it’s something I’ve talked to some of the seniors about. In general terms.’ Talking to Randy about getting promoted makes her feel like a preschooler being asked what she wants to be when she grows up.

‘But do you want it, Georgia?’

What she wants is for him to give her some staff. Why can’t he just do that? But she doesn’t know, yet, how to read him. All she knows is that he’s incredibly successful and influential and powerful, and she is supposed to not be messing this up. She matches his lean. ‘Hockey man, I see?’ Men love talking about sport.

He softens. As she expected. He turns to one of the photos. ‘You

know who that is, Georgia? Wayne Gretzky. The Great One. Led the Oilers to the nineteen ninety-three Stanley Cup finals. And do you know who that is?' He points to the next photo. She doesn't. She really hopes fish identification isn't next.

He says a name. 'Premier of Alberta. Progressive Conservatives. You know how long the Progressive Conservative Party has been in power here, Georgia?'

No. She also doesn't know what a progressive conservative is. If that's on the test, she's done for.

'Forty-four years. Since before you were born. Know what that tells you? We don't like change. Around here. Women partners? That would be a change.'

Oh, okay. Now she knows what she's dealing with. Plain old-fashioned ... old fashion.

'Well, West does have a target for female partners, of course. We're hoping to get to ten percent.' She doesn't mention that they've had the same target for the last three years, and missed it each year. They write a report every year on the reasons. She knows every page of that report back to front. They always get the senior women to present it. As the report says, there aren't that many to share the job with. She can even see it on his shelf. Still wrapped in plastic.

'If women were up to being partners, there'd be more of them. I mean, am I wrong? I'd be happy to buy a steak and a bottle of wine for anyone who could explain it to me,' he says.

From Randy's graduation certificate, she calculates he's about fifty. Nico's vintage. Georgie should give Nico more credit sometimes. For never using her age or gender against her. For only ever seeing what she has the potential to be. 'Well, that's possibly a conversation for another day. What I can say now is that Nico suggested me for this job because he knows I can do it. But ultimately, this is your call, so if I don't have your confidence then maybe it's time to talk alternatives. Particularly as Briana is getting married, which shouldn't affect her

job, but it's always good to be prepared, so just in case—'

'See, you women, you just quit, and wonder why you don't get promoted.'

Okay, that was just annoying. Her first reaction when Nico told her there was a job in Canada was right. This was a terrible idea. Add *and likely a suicide mission*. But what's the real alternative? Now that she's here? Let's face it. It's succeed, or it's back to a shared rental house and first dates with men and their fish.

'Tell you what,' she says. 'I'll stay and run this project. But if we win, I want the promotion to partner.' It feels like an audacious thing to think, let alone say. If he hadn't brought it up, she would never even have thought to suggest it. Luckily there's no way he will agree. *Just kidding*, she's already about to say.

'Deal,' he says.

'Deal?' *Shit. What?* Outside, the sky has clouded over and white flakes are fluttering down. In Perth, it's night-time and probably still thirty-eight degrees. All of a sudden she feels all turned around. It's the point where they'd normally shake. But the press of that thumb on her skin. Its slight movement, over her knuckle. She shifts in her seat and grasps her hands behind her back.

'I will need to be back in Australia for the eighth of April. I have a ... commitment on that date. But that shouldn't be a problem, should it?' she says. The bid's due on the twenty-eighth of March, the oral presentation is the next day. The twenty-ninth. Her trip home is already booked for April first. So she doesn't know why she's posed that as a question. An early April Fool, maybe?

'That should be fine. We'll have this in the bag by the end of March.'

That commitment isn't negotiable, she wants to say. Instead, she just says, 'Thank you, Randy. I won't let you down.'

She'd better not. Because at the beginning of the meeting, she had no home. Now if she messes up, she could end up with no home and no job. But wait, why is she thinking that? She just won. Didn't she?

He gives her a smile that she finds deeply unsettling. ‘We’ll see.’
She walks out, forgetting she wanted more staff.



‘Oh. Right,’ Briana says, when Georgie breaks it to her that she was correct. It will just be them.

If Briana had any real idea how much work they were about to have to do, she’d be crying right now. Part of Georgie wants to. But a bigger part of her has started to mull the opportunity over. In three months, she could be a partner. *Young for it*, people will say. Even if she’d had the foresight to be born a man. There will be a signing bonus and a pay rise, and she’ll finally be back in front. Make up for what’s happened. Tommy will be so proud. And – since she’s dreaming – even her sister Tara would be. Josh, of course, would have been proudest of all.

Georgie wipes at a tickle at the side of her eye. She’s tempted to tell Briana about the promotion. It would be nice to share it with someone. But maybe later. ‘Hey, Bri.’ How should she tell her? The same way Georgie was told. On day three. By a female partner she never saw again. ‘You should tie your hair back. We don’t get taken seriously when we wear our hair out.’

Briana dives into her bag for a hair tie and in seconds her hair is up in a neat ponytail that matches Georgie’s.