
Chapter 1

July

Missy plonked herself into a beige leather armchair, positioning herself so she was tucked away but still with an uninterrupted view of people entering the hotel's chandeliered foyer. Checking the time on her phone for the umpteenth time, she wondered why she was late for appointments that mattered, but early for events that didn't.

I'm here. In the foyer, she texted.

K cya in 10, came back.

With ten interminable minutes to kill, she found a bar and returned to her chair with a gin and tonic. Watching a small crowd making its way in, her eyes picked out Lorelei in a designer dress that looked like a cake decoration, sweeping in on the arm of her current, ridiculously handsome husband. A swathe of jabbering fans attempted to attract the star's attention as she passed, but melted away in humiliation if they ventured closer than was allowed and were rewarded with a furious glare.

Missy's arm moved to wave, but she held it back; she'd have time enough for schmoozing at the party, and at least one cham-

pagne on top of the G&T was needed to loosen her enough to call out across a room, and a good deal more than one to gush over that horrible dress.

She slid her bottom to the edge of the chair and pulled herself up from the waist, set her feet apart and knocked her knees together. If she were the hotel's interior decorator, she'd burn these chairs. They were fit only for men to recline in, one ankle balanced on their other knee, their manly wares on display, and their expensive neat whiskies out of reach on the low, square, grey occasional table that separated them from their business rivals lounging opposite.

If she was to keep her feet on the floor, she had three options, all uncomfortable: lean back, semi-prone, limp and defenceless like a damp tea towel tossed aside by a disdainful, passing waiter; sit up, perched on the edge like a teenager at a first job interview; or lean forward with elbows on knees in a position generally reserved for more private sittings.

Picking her drink up off the table, she slid her legs, encased in white tights, up onto the chair. As she tucked them underneath her pastel rainbow, tutu skirt, she hoped her spiked, black, ankle boots didn't scratch or tear the upholstery. What did they expect, though? She swallowed two big mouthfuls of her drink.

Jenna, David, Lexie, Andrew, that blonde girl, what was her name again? — and the sleazy old guy who didn't deserve to have his name remembered appeared in the foyer after negotiating the revolving door. Watching them check the sign for directions and head off to the lift, Missy used her free hand to fetch her invitation from the square, black bag slung over her head and across one shoulder.

COPS AND ROBERTS SOUP
Invites Melissa Simpson to
CHRISTMAS IN JULY

Black letters on a red background. One small sprig of holly in the top left-hand corner, and three white snowflakes in the bottom right. Minimalist. Understated. Not Missy's usual style, but she loved it. Minimalism could so easily be pretentious, and often was: "Look at me being so tasteful, so modern, so on trend," it screamed. But this was different. It wasn't being anything but itself. Simple. Informative. Aesthetic.

Missy pursed her lips in conflicted and begrudging admiration and anticipation. She loved the invitation, despite its plainness and despite not wanting to, and she loved, loved, loved parties despite not wanting to be at this one which she knew from last year's experience would be anything but plain.

Last year's invitation came with its invisible seal of approval. Being invited to SOUP's Christmas in July, having one's own name on the invitation rather than tagging along with someone else, was the equivalent of being awarded a graduation certificate. *Congratulations, you have now officially made it. You are part of the in-crowd*, it carried as its sub-text. How happy Missy had been last year when it had been hand-delivered to her by a courier. And the party was wonderful. She'd had a ball, got smashed, danced, networked, laughed, and eventually in the wee small hours almost taken some guy home, remembered J.D., and gone home alone. In short, it was everything a fancy, film and theatrical party should be, spoiled only by the disapproving and brooding presence of Charlie Roberts.

Her heart beat a little faster. Not, of course, with pleasurable anticipation. Simply because a man was tall, athletic, gorgeous, dark, successful, wealthy, single, and worshipped by all who knew him didn't mean he was attractive. She hated the way he looked down on her, and she had to look up to him, and not only because he was at least head, shoulders and half a chest taller than her and, at thirty-nine, six years older. After his few rude

remarks, she couldn't remember exactly what they were due to the drunken haze through which she'd heard them but knew he'd treated her like a naughty child, she had avoided him as she would a two-week-old plate of cat meat.

"Hey, girl."

"Hey, Bobo."

Her thoughts about Charlie Roberts and how she planned to spend the evening avoiding him were interrupted. Jumping up, she was enveloped in a hug, then pushed back so she could be scrutinised.

"Damn, Missy MooMoo. That is one hot outfit. A little bit Goth. Oh those spiked boots! I'm dying. And a little bit wicked princess. A tutu dress teamed with a sexy bodice? Are you for real? I'm dead."

Missy laughed. "I know you're only saying that so I'll ask what on earth you are wearing. A brown suit? Brown, Bobo? Isn't that some kind of monumental fashion crime?"

"It is, my darling. Just call me the smooth criminal." They both laughed. "I'm practising for the audition you set up for me. A conservative, middle-aged, straight, mousey guy. Bless your cotton socks; what were you thinking? I don't know, but you are genius, of course. I'm lucky you didn't dump me when you switched careers. I'm not sure any other agent would have got me an audition, and I never would have thought to try out for Mr Phillips on my own. I'm a natural, though, aren't I?"

"It might be a little more authentic without the hand flapping by your ear with its pinkie up."

Bobo dropped the offending hand and clasped it with his other to keep it under control. "Okay. Fair call, but I might give that hand permission to party tonight, and a hand can have a good time on its own, can't it?" he asked grinning and winking.

Missy slapped his arm, sat down again with her drink, gesturing for him to join her.

"You are very wicked, Bobo. That's why I adore you. And

don't worry about your audition. You'll be amazing, and they won't be able to sign you up fast enough. You are the best actor in town by a million miles, and I'm going to make sure they pay you accordingly."

Bobo flicked non-existent hair behind his shoulder and tossed his head. "Ah, you're too kind, pet. Right, of course, but too kind anyway. You're drinking already, dear? Is that wise?"

"Alcohol is the greatest wisdom I know." Missy finished her drink and stood up.

"So, is it away, away and into the fray?" Bobo asked, joining her.

"Yep. I can hear the champagne calling my name." She waved the card at him and pulled him toward the stairs. "Here's my invitation. The party room is on the next floor, and remember you promised to save me from Charlie Roberts if you see him even so much as look in my direction, not that there's much danger of that. He thinks I'm a complete waste of time, if he thinks of me at all, that is. But I'm still terrified of him."

"No-one but a monster could be mean to little you in your little-girl skirt. You look utterly adorable and not at all like the hard-bitten, throw-'em-under-the-bus, walk-all-over-them casting couch I know you to be."

Missy slipped her arm from his and slapped him again before taking hold of the stair rail and skipping up the steps. "If I didn't know you better, I wouldn't like you at all. You're even meaner to me than grumpy Mr Roberts," she called back as he followed her in a more dignified manner.

Reaching the top of the stairs, they were caught up in a group of primed, poufed and powdered entertainment industry people of all persuasions exiting the lift and also heading for the glass doors in front of which was a sandwich board announcing Cops and Roberts SOUP's Christmas in July—"invitation only". Missy and Bobo recognised their fellow travellers, and they all greeted each other effusively. At this party, everyone, including

strangers, was a potentially useful ally, and no one could be dismissed out of hand without the possibility of missing a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. By evening's end, hands and arms would be aching from shaking, cheeks from smiling and laughing, and legs from dancing, standing and prowling around the room.

"Drinks first, Bobo," Missy said, having flashed her invitation and gained admission for them both. "And then I guess we'd best part company for a while and work the room before too many champagnes start slowing me down. We can exchange info whenever we bump into each other."

"Sounds like a plan, sugar plum. Ah, here we go." Bobo helped himself to two cold flutes of champagne from a passing waiter, and handed one to Missy. He held his glass up for her to clink. "Here's to a fun *and* successful night." He winked. "Whatever you are defining success as tonight. I know what I am." His eyes swept the room, leaving no doubt as to his meaning.

"*Sucksex*, I think you mean," Missy said with a laugh. "Well, you look utterly splendid and I might have to fight my way through your suitors if I want to talk to you later. I'm not here for any of that, though, believe me. I hate men. They are nasty, two-timing, horrible..."

"I think you mean that low-life parasite J.D. was all those things, but not all men, darling." He grinned and she couldn't help smiling back.

"Yeah. You're right, Bobo. You're none of those things. Maybe it's only straight men."

"Or maybe it's only turds like J.D.," Bobo persisted, straightening his suit and running his hand over his almost bald head. "Don't let that prick colour your judgement of other men. How long is it now? Six months at least, isn't it?"

"Nearly eight. I can't believe it's already that long. But we were together for nearly ten years remember."

"How could I forget when I spent almost every second of that toxic, on-again-off-again, part-time excuse for a relationship

wishing you would come to your senses and dump his sorry arse.”

“It wasn't like that at the beginning. You didn't know us then.”

Bobo looked unconvinced. “The ‘beginning’ can't have been long then because I met you only a couple of weeks in, if I remember correctly.”

Missy shrugged in surrender. “I should have listened to you, shouldn't I?”

“Of course, darling. You should always listen to me. Like now. You have been mourning that jackass altogether too long. And if you want to know something else for the price of nothing, I don't think even you liked him that much. You were pretending you were in a relationship so you didn't have to put yourself out there to find someone who deserves you. Now you have no such excuse, and it's time...”

He paused mid-sentence, distracted by a good-looking waiter carrying a tray of full champagne flutes who caught his eye and held it. “Mmm, hello, darling,” he said. The man stopped. “Can we have two of those, please, and could you be an angel and take our empties?” He took Missy's empty glass from her and put it on the tray with his, took two full ones and handed one to Missy.

“Certainly, sir,” the waiter replied. “Would you like me to bring you another drink in a little while?”

“Indeed I would.” Bobo tipped his glass to him with another smile and after an extended look into each other's eyes; the waiter disappeared into the steadily growing crowd. Bobo sighed happily. “Well, with a bit of luck it looks like I've accomplished what I came for.”

“What you will come for, I think you mean,” Missy said. “That was some pretty hot chemistry.”

“Nasty child,” Bobo replied after sipping his drink. “But, yum, I fear you are right. It's going to be a long evening waiting

until I can get that waiter out of here and into the sack without getting him sacked by not waiting long enough.”

“Oh, Bobo,” Missy said with a laugh. “How you do go on when you’re about to fall in love. No. No,” she put her hand up to prevent him from denying her words. “I can see all the signs. And I saw him with my own eyes. What’s not to fall in love with? He’s drop-dead gorgeous. If I didn’t hate men, I might have wasted my entire evening forlornly following those brown eyes, swarthy complexion and tight bum around the room all night myself.”

“What about this one?” Bobo suggested, stopping another passing waiter to again swap Missy’s empty glass for a full one.

Missy shook her head and then nodded to the man’s left hand holding the tray. Bobo followed her gaze and nodded as well. “Wedding ring. Damn.”

Missy drained her glass and handed it to Bobo. “I’m going to leave this with you to deal with and go and satisfy my yearning public.”

“All right, treasure. I might follow my new true love around and make sure no-one steals him from under my nose.”

“Okay. If we don’t see each other again, we should meet up when Santa arrives to distribute the gifts.”

“Do you know who’s doing it?”

“Richard Dawson, I think. He did it last year. He’s a nice man. Makes a perfect Father Christmas.” She scanned the crowd. “I haven’t seen Charlie yet. Have you?”

“No. He mustn’t be here. I’m sure the crowd would part like the Red Sea if he wished to walk through it. Or on it.”

Missy laughed again, a little louder than before. Her head was buzzing nicely. “Look there’s Carmen. Carmen!” she called out, three-champagnes and a G&T making her oblivious to and not caring about the heads that turned in response as she pushed her way towards a familiar face. “How are you, my darling? It’s so good to see you. What a fabulous frock. You were superb in

that ad, hey? That's going to make them sit up and take notice." She kissed the woman on the cheek, then turned to her companion. "And, oh my God, is this Andrea Frost? Hi, Andrea. I'm Missy, Melissa, Simpson. I caught you at the Brovino last week in "*The Cherry Orchard*". You were fantastic. Can I get fresh drinks for you lovelies?"

Work had begun for the evening.