

Chapter 1

Hello, hello...

There's a good-looking man standing on the pavement outside the window. He's talking on his mobile and his eyes are hidden behind sunglasses, but a slight frown is detectable on his brow.

When he turns toward the window, I see that his short dark hair is longer on top and sun-lightened to more of a caramel shade. It's swept back from his forehead in a retro almost-fifties style.

He ends the call, shoves his phone into his pocket and disappears from view, only to reappear a second later when he pushes open the door to the shop.

'Good morning!' Abbey chirps, and we both sit up straighter as he takes off his sunglasses. 'How can we help you?'

'I have an appointment at eleven forty-five.'

While Abbey checks her desktop screen, he looks my way, a polite smile fixed in place.

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‘Hello,’ I say, tucking a stray lock of hair behind my ear.

‘Hi,’ he replies, his folded sunglasses swinging from between the tips of his thumb and forefinger.

Blue eyes...

‘Sonny Denton?’ Abbey asks, snapping his attention back to her.

‘Yes,’ he confirms.

Sonny? His name is retro too.

‘It’s been over two years since your last eye test?’

‘Must be.’

‘Can I get you to fill out this form and check your details?’

She hands over a clipboard with paperwork attached, before adding, with a nod in my direction: ‘Hannah, our dispensing optician, will be with you shortly.’

I indicate the black leather seat inside the bay window opposite my desk. In the time it takes for him to walk the few metres across the room and sit down, Abbey and I have furtively cast each other cheeky grins.

That’s the last time I’ll dare to look at her for a while. A similarly hot client came in earlier this week and she enthusiastically licked her lips the moment his back was turned. Unfortunately, he spun around to ask her something, catching her in the act. I nearly choked on my tea.

Thankfully, this all went over the boss’s head. Umeko, the optometrist, owns this place. She’s kind and clever and has high standards that, quite understandably, she expects us to maintain. I’ve only been here for a few weeks so I’d rather not lose my job just yet, thanks.

It’s not uncommon for young people to come in here – Umeko’s is a small independent practice with a stylish (albeit

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slightly on-the-pricey side) range of eyewear that tends to appeal to a more designery crowd. We're based in Newnham, a suburb of Cambridge and only a short walk south-west of the city centre. Our road and the ones nearby are lined with neat Victorian terraced houses, but this is a semi-detached red-brick corner building that we share with the pharmacy next door. There's a lovely little delicatessen across the road and a hairdresser a few doors down. It's a nice part of town and only a twenty-five-minute walk from the village of Grantchester, where I'm currently living.

Abbey and I spend most of our working days in the bright and airy front room. Abbey's desk is up against the back wall. My desk is to the right, separated from Abbey by a central corridor and facing the bay window. Glasses displays are dotted all around.

Along the corridor are two consultation rooms, one occupied by Umeko. It's my job to carry out pre-screening tests in the second room before handing clients over to Umeko for their main consultation. It's where we'll be headed as soon as Sonny has finished filling out his form.

'All set?' I ask as he gets to his feet.

'Yep.'

I take the clipboard, giving it a quick once-over before glancing up at him. 'You're a photographer?'

'Yes.'

He's tall, but not toweringly so – six foot? A good head-height higher than me, and he's wearing a denim shirt layered over a white T-shirt with slim-fitting charcoal-grey chinos.

'That's cool,' I comment, noting two other important pieces of information: one, he lives in Barton, which is a

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ten-minute drive away, tops; and two, his date of birth places him at thirty-two. ‘We’ve got a couple of tests to do before you go through to Umeko. I’m sure you remember how it goes from the last time you were here.’

Avoiding Abbey’s gaze – I’m not taking any chances – I lead him down the corridor and into the first room on our right, inhaling a hint of spicy aftershave as he passes by.

‘Are you wearing contacts today?’

‘Yes, monthlies. I brought solution with me.’

‘Great. Can you take them out?’

His eyes are *so* blue. Azure blue, I’d call them. They’re startling against his dark lashes.

‘Have a seat and pop your chin on the rest,’ I say when he’s ready.

After taking pictures of the back of each eye, we switch to a second multifunctional machine so I can do a quick reading of his prescription.

‘Have you worked here long?’ he asks.

‘Only a few weeks.’

‘What happened to Mr Grumpy?’

He’s leaning back in his chair, smirking and gently swivelling from left to right.

‘If you’re talking about Bernard – and I wouldn’t like to presume – then he’s moved up to Scotland to be closer to his ailing parents.’

He grins. ‘Can’t say I’ll miss his halitosis.’

‘You haven’t got up close and personal with me yet.’

No, no.

No, no, no, no, no.

Those words did not just leave my lips.

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Except, from the look on his face, it appears that they did. His eyes have widened, not to mention his grin.

‘I did *not* mean that the way it sounded.’

He laughs with delight, and despite my embarrassment, the sound makes me feel jittery.

‘One last test,’ I say through gritted teeth.

‘Is this the videogame one?’ he asks hopefully, sitting up straighter.

‘You’re thinking of the visual fields test.’

‘Yeah, you press a button every time a wiggly line appears around the edges.’

‘All the boys like that one,’ I say with a smile. ‘But no, I’m afraid it’s the pressure test.’ It assesses for risk of developing glaucoma. I lower the machine into its tonometer setting. ‘We’ll start with your right eye. Keep looking straight ahead with your eyes wide open.’

He flinches as three puffs of air are blasted into each eye. The procedure doesn’t hurt, but it’s not particularly pleasant either.

‘That’s me done for a bit.’ I gather together the print-outs with the retinal images and test results. ‘I’ll go and see if Umeko is ready for you. Are you okay to wait here for a moment?’

‘Yep.’

Umeko is sitting at her desk, tapping away at her keyboard.

‘Sonny Denton is here to see you,’ I tell her.

‘Aah, Sonny,’ she says with a smile, taking the paperwork from me.

‘Has he been a client for long?’ I try not to sound too interested.

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‘Since he was a teenager,’ she replies, scanning the information before her. ‘His father does our accounts,’ she adds.

Umeko has been living in the UK for going on forty years now, but her Japanese accent has not faded much with time. Though she’s in her early sixties, she looks a good ten years younger with smooth, unlined skin and barely a grey strand to be found amongst her jet-black locks. She always wears her hair in a sleek topknot at work, but I’ve seen her socially on many occasions and when it’s loose it comes halfway down her back.

It’s like mine in that respect, except where her hair is as straight as a pin, mine is wavy: light-brown and streaked with natural highlights. I also wear it up for work, but it’s a messy bun at the best of times. Sleek topknot it ain’t.

After listening to Sonny and Umeko greet each other like old friends, I head back to my desk and flash Abbey a grin. She picks up a magazine and fans her face, making the wispy strawberry-blond strands that have fallen out of her high ponytail fly away from her round cherub face.

‘How hot?’ she whispers.

‘Shh,’ I reply, but I’m grinning. ‘Apparently he’s been coming here for years. You’ve not seen him before?’

‘No.’

She’s only been here for twelve months so that figures.

Umeko’s previous practice manager was a bossy matronly type who took retirement at the age of fifty-three. She trained Abbey up before she left. Abbey worked alongside Bernard and wasn’t sad to see the back of him. She thinks it’s no coincidence that Umeko went on to hire me, a second younger, livelier member of staff – Abbey’s twenty-six and I’m twenty-seven.

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I continue filing NHS forms, but it's hard to get stuck into it when I know Sonny won't be with Umeko for long.

Sure enough, he's done in fifteen minutes.

Umeko sees him to the front room. 'Have a wander, see what you like the look of,' she encourages.

'Can I get you a tea or coffee?' I ask him. 'Latte? Cappuccino?'

We have a fancy coffee machine in the kitchen.

'A latte would be great,' he replies.

Umeko and I have a quick handover chat while I make his drink. It's all very straightforward – he mostly wears contact lenses but prefers to use glasses when he's photo editing at his computer, sometimes late into the night.

When I return, Sonny is trying on a pair of metal-framed glasses in front of the mirror.

'I like those,' Abbey says as I place his coffee on my desk.

'They're a bit light in colour, I think,' he replies. 'A bit too bling.'

'Are you after metal frames?' I ask.

'Yeah, but I'd prefer more of a mid-gunmetal shade.'

'Have a look at the Kilsgaards,' I suggest, directing him towards a stand hosting several of the Danish brand.

'This is exactly the colour I was talking about.' He picks up a pair and puts them on, checking his reflection.

'They look great,' Abbey remarks admiringly.

'They do,' I agree. 'You should try these too.' I pass him a pair, not wanting him to feel pressured into deciding too quickly.

We encourage him to peruse the other stands, but he ends up going back to the Kilsgaards, settling on the first pair he tried on.

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'I've got to nip to my sister's,' Abbey reminds me. Her sister is having work done on her house nearby and Abbey promised to let one of the tradesmen in. 'Can I get you another coffee before I go?' she offers as Sonny and I head over to my desk together.

'No thanks, this one is still warm,' he replies, taking a sip.

'Do you want to put those on again,' I suggest when Abbey has left, turning the small mirror on my desk towards him. 'They really suit you,' I reiterate. Most of what he tried on did, to be fair. 'Can I check the fit?'

'Sure.'

He leans closer to me across the narrow desk space. He smells *amazing*.

There's the slightest trace of abrasion under my thumbs as they rest on his cheeks and give the frames a wiggle.

The corner of his mouth tilts up, but he hastily presses his lips together, trying to suppress a smile.

I bite my lip, trying to straighten my own face. His humour is having a contagious effect.

'Sorry,' he apologises.

'It's okay,' I murmur, running my fingers along the length of the arms of the glasses to make sure they're long enough to sit properly on his ears.

Once again, his lips twitch.

'Sorry, sorry,' he mutters adorably as we full-on grin at each other.

'Lots of people get the giggles,' I reassure him as I complete my checks.

'I didn't get the giggles with Bernard,' he comments drily and a thrill darts through me.

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‘Right, now I need to take some measurements.’ I pick up a marker pen. ‘Look at me again.’

He stares straight into my eyes as I mark the spot where the centre of his pupil aligns with the lenses. I am far more aware than usual of this particular client’s close proximity, but I’m focused on the task – it’s important that the strongest part of the prescription marries up with his eyeline.

‘You have very unusual eyes,’ he says in a low voice as I finish with his second eye.

‘Do I?’ I reel back slightly as I reply, but in truth, I know I do. They’re a strange, almost-golden colour, flecked and circled with green.

‘Yeah, you do.’ His gaze is unwavering.

I raise one eyebrow at him. ‘You can take them off now.’

I am pulse-racingly aware of him watching me as I measure the dimensions on his glasses with a ruler and input the relevant information into the computer. By the time we’re ready to discuss lens options, my heart rate has thankfully been restored to normal.

‘Who makes the lenses?’ he asks.

‘Zeiss,’ I reply. It’s an astute question for a photographer. ‘Do they do your camera lenses?’

He nods. ‘I’ve got a few by them.’

‘What sort of photography do you do?’ I ask conversationally.

‘Fashion, mostly.’

‘Where? Here?’

‘No, all over. Amsterdam, London, New York. I live in Amsterdam,’ he explains, then, noting my look of confusion, adds: ‘I used my parents’ address on my form.’

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‘Aah, okay.’ So he’s *not* local. *Interesting.* ‘One of my friends moved to Amsterdam a few months ago. I need to get over there this summer.’

‘You should. It’s an easy weekend break.’

‘When do you go back?’

‘Two weeks tomorrow. Hopefully these will be ready in time.’

‘You leave Saturday the twenty-fifth?’ I check my online calendar.

‘Yep.’

‘That should be fine. Shall we make you an appointment to come in the day before you go?’

I’ll need to fit his new glasses and make any adjustments, so it’s not simply a case of him dropping by to pick them up.

‘Sure.’

‘Same sort of time?’

‘Perfect.’

‘Not that I’m suggesting you should go anywhere other than this excellent establishment, but why don’t you get your glasses in Amsterdam?’

‘I like Umeko. I’ve been coming here for years. Even Bernie Bad Breath couldn’t keep me away,’ he adds with a smirk.

I laugh and turn the computer screen towards him. ‘Okay, so we’re looking at a total of...’

He doesn’t balk at the price.

‘What are you up to while you’re here?’ I ask casually as he gives me a credit card. ‘On holiday or working?’

‘Catching up with my family for Easter, then back to work.’

‘Do you come home often?’ I ring up the amount.

‘Not as much as I should.’

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I wonder if he has a girlfriend in Amsterdam. He's not wearing a wedding ring.

'That's us all done,' I say with a smile, handing him his card. His fingers brush mine as he takes it, causing a strange heat to prickle up my arm.

'Thanks. Guess I'll see you in two weeks.'

'I guess you will.'

We're both still grinning as he walks out the door, and then he casts one last look over his shoulder at me before disappearing from view.

I bring my hands up to my face and find that his after-shave has lingered from where I touched him. I'm strangely reluctant to wash my hands, but the next client will be here at any minute and I'll have to go through that entire process all over again.

I have a feeling it won't be as memorable.