

Chapter One

“I’m not blocked.” The sound of an igniting lighter followed, providing subtle closure to the statement.

“Daisy.”

She blew the smoke abruptly from her mouth as she repositioned the phone. “What?”

“It’s been six months. You’re not married, you don’t have children, and you’re not dying. Where’s the manuscript?”

“I’m working on it.” Daisy inhaled again and blew the smoke out slowly this time. She closed her eyes as she did it. She hated smoking cigarettes. Cigars were her thing, but for some reason the cigarette tasted really good right now.

“You submitted an outline.”

“It was fake. I pulled it from Google.”

“Daisy.”

“I don’t plot my books, you know that.”

“I’ve been very lenient with you.”

“Stop letting me into your personal life and you won’t have to be, because then I’ll have nothing on you.” Her sarcasm wasn’t threatening; it was just very factual.

The sound of an exasperated exhale came through the earpiece. Daisy knew that exhale. That was her publisher trying to be polite by exchanging any irritated rebuttal for dramatic breathing. After a period of silence between them, Fran adjusted the phone on her shoulder. Daisy easily pictured it in her mind’s eye; the way her publisher repositioned herself when confrontation was close by.

“What’s going on? Give me something.”

“It’s not like I’m withholding anything, Fran. I don’t have a secret arsenal of finished bestsellers just waiting to be emailed to you.” Daisy chuckled at her own cynicism. The conversation paused as she heard the sound of paper rustling on Fran’s end.

“Your logline says, ‘William is a nobleman.’” Daisy heard Fran’s chair as she imagined it spinning around to the view from the tenth floor of the building.

“He is.”

“Daisy, that is not an outline.”

“You only just noticed that?”

“Well, you typically don’t take so long to produce a book and with your track record I admit I have been very lenient in reading them. Perhaps if you had done it properly you wouldn’t be having trouble writing. An outline is supposed to help structure your book.”

“It doesn’t help. You make a living off of me and my idiosyncratic ways, so why does it matter?” She forced the new smoke out of her mouth and sat up straight. “Thirty titles, half of those are bestsellers and you’re going to stop paying me for being - ”

“Blocked?” Fran insisted.

“I told you, I’m not blocked.”

“Then what is it? How does an author just suddenly drop off the grid?”

“I’m very much on the grid.”

“You haven’t replied to any of my emails, and your editor, Rory. Remember her?”

“Vaguely.”

Fran exhaled again. “It’s never bothered me that you’re strange. I can even take your cynicism, but don’t make me guess here. You haven’t kept the terms of your contract and you’ve made absolutely no effort to reply to the numerous letters, telephone calls or emails from my office. I have your cover artist waiting in the wings to attend a photo shoot and Rory had to rearrange her workload two months ago because she was supposed to be working on your manuscript. This is serious, Daisy.”

She sat back as the smoke came out of her nose this time and tried to put on her responsible adult hat, although she wasn’t sure she found the right one.

“Fine. My characters stopped speaking to me. There’s a difference between not being able write one bloody word because I don’t know what they’re saying, and not writing because I can’t think of anything to write.”

“What is the difference, exactly?”

“You wouldn’t understand. You’ve never written a book.”

“No, but I only run a publishing house.” There was a pause and then, “how many words have you written?”

“That’s not important.”

“How many?”

“Nine.”

“Nine!”

“Nine.”

“I heard you.”

“Did you? Because you questioned me.”

“I wasn’t questioning, I was exclaiming.”

“Say that ten times fast.” Daisy’s nonchalance dripped through her words. “My characters stopped speaking to me after the first sentence.” Her publisher’s chuckle was a sharp cross between incredulous and aggravated.

“Look, Daisy, I know you’re a bit eccentric and you have your own very particular way of working; the not showering, or eating, the endless walks around your flat in that figure eight shape you love so much, but this isn’t going to work. We have a production meeting first thing Monday morning and I cannot go in there for the sixth month in a row and buy you more time.

Nine words doesn't cut it. Another month doesn't cut it. You are one of few authors who has the deal you have, but it requires you to produce the work to back it up. I lose money when you don't keep your commitments and I have to reschedule your launch now."

"Commitment. Singular."

"Pardon?"

"You said when I don't keep my *commitments*, but this is the only time I've had trouble finishing a book on time. That makes it singular. Commitment." Daisy stabbed out the cigarette until the bud was satisfyingly crushed. "I'm not a performing monkey, surely you realise that."

"No, but you're an author with a contract and a deadline." The line went quiet for another brief moment. "Daiz, whether we are friends outside of work or not, you have to turn this book in and it needs to be like yesterday. I can't cover for you anymore."

"I didn't know that's what you were doing."

"I didn't either, until the senior leadership team – who are hired to keep me accountable in situations like this – told me that either I give you an ultimatum or I get one."

The screech of the chair against the wood flooring and Daisy's bare feet in succession was like the inner-workings of her thought process, which was suddenly very deliberate and concentrated. "I suppose your senior leadership team thinks they will just replace me with another author. Maybe one of those silly little nineteen year old Scottish writers who trickle down from their highland writing cabins in tweed trousers and pastel-coloured brogues and put out ten thousand words a day."

"So you know Fiona MacIntosh."

The sound of her feet slapping the floor provided background noise to what was really going on her mind as she considered the situation and possible outcomes. Her words cut her thoughts short. "Are you dropping me?"

"Not if you turn in a first draft manuscript of at least 80,000 words by Monday morning at 7:00 am."

"I'm putting the phone down. You sound drunk."

"I'm not drunk, Daisy, I'm serious. Strangle your characters if you have to."

"Strangulation doesn't usually help with talking."

"Now *I'm* putting the phone down," Fran insisted. "And I can't make drinks tomorrow. I think it's best we don't see each other until you've handed in your manuscript."

Daisy's chuckle wasn't one of amusement – it was more of incredulity. There was a satisfying prick of delight as her pointer finger touched the big red 'end' button.

"Good. I didn't want to shower for you anyway."

Chapter Two

Daisy wasn't sorry. How could she be? It wasn't her fault. This might have been her story but they had a say. If the characters didn't want to tell it, then they could just float around their fictitious world frustrated with the lack of movement and she would wait for them to stop being stubborn. That was their problem, not hers. Daisy felt her role was to show up and type. Whether she had coffee, smelled nice, or slept in her eyeliner from the night before – this was not a typical job. She was an author.

Authoring was not a typical job and authors were not typical people. Sometimes Daisy even wondered if she was *a people*. What kind of creature chose to be this weird? A tentative glance in the reflection of her laptop proved the eyeliner from yesterday's braving of sunlight and humanity to venture to the shops did something more than make her look alive; she looked typical. She wasn't, but she looked it. Her coffee was cold. So were her feet. Desk time was over. No more working at the desk. Daisy picked up her mug and walked it across the flat. She didn't rinse the mug and reuse it. She placed it beside the sink and a clean mug was taken from the cupboard. The kettle switch was tapped. She considered eating. It would give her something to do whilst the kettle boiled. Daisy didn't like to be idle. She sifted through a month's worth of letters on the desk in the kitchen. Nothing worth looking at before coffee. She wasn't even sure any of it was worth looking at *after* coffee. On second thought, she picked up the pile and threw it all in the bin, unopened.

"I think it's best we don't see each other until you've handed in your manuscript," Daisy repeated Fran's words as she poured the now boiling water over two Lady Grey teabags. "Why don't you come over here and finish it then, smart ass?" She wound a vintage cooking timer for two and a half minutes and wandered to the picture window on the far side of the kitchen. "You just don't get it." Her voice lowered. "They're not speaking to me, and I can't make them."

Daisy's tea steeped until the timer rung. After that, the teabags were left on top of an already-growing pile beside the sink. Eventually she would rip the bags open and empty them over the soil of her houseplants. She usually performed that task in moments when her veins and muscles felt antsy, like when she'd been sitting for too long without producing a word. Or when her characters stopped speaking to her. The teabag pile was now entirely representative of her (lack of) progress. In the past, the pile would often be heaving and leave stains on the countertop from where it would overflow, causing the hot bags to drain over the plate. There were no stains on the counter now. There hadn't been for the last few months. The pile was pathetic.

She carried the steaming mug of black tea with a splash of milk back across the flat and into the sitting room, of which a single corner was known as her office. An antique banker's desk was unashamedly pushed up against a floating wall that created instant author space. That was

where the magic happened – or didn't happen – as of late. The wall to the right of her desk was all windows and snobbish views of London. Behind her 'office' and across the room on the far wall was an inlay fireplace. Daisy sometimes turned it on for ambience, even in summer. Where a third wall would have easily been built in a less modern flat, instead were two sofas facing one another. A low coffee table was situated between them the way a mediator stood between opposing parties.

Daisy chose this flat because it was what she'd referred to as *author ready*. The only thing she had to do was have the furniture delivered and arranged upon move-in. The sparse white walls were a lot like her personality: intermittent and unsure. There was one tall bookshelf with hardcovers: her own. Daisy didn't have time to read *other people's dribble*. She only had time to read her own these days. She also thought the idea that a pre-requisite for an author to have countless shelves of disorderly and irrelevant reading material in order to write her own books was ludicrous. Daisy's personal preferences were far from the somewhat steamy romance novels for which she was famous. She preferred international crime novels with plots about travelling con artists in settings like Albania, Croatia or Monaco. The books she liked to read weren't historical and very rarely were they romantic. Daisy didn't even believe in romance. She made a lot of money convincing people otherwise, but for her it didn't exist.

Her imagination had always been very active and when she was child she used it to escape to everything from castles and underground bunkers, to different eras and even visiting those places as a different person. Daisy never analysed whether or not her deprived childhood was the reason for the talent, because she scarcely recalled it. There was a large black hole in place of ages seven to fourteen. She remembered only going to school, but nothing much beyond that. Her imagination made her a living and that was really all she need be concerned with. Rather, her imagination had been earning her a living, but Fran made a threat on that. Daisy wasn't entirely surprised. She refused to do her editing sessions in the office like all the other agreeable authors and when she had to go in, she avoided conversing with anyone except Fran or her editor. Daisy didn't like all the other stuff that went along with writing books. She only liked the writing books part. Being like that didn't make her entirely marketable but Daisy wrote well, sold phenomenally, and also liked to remain hidden from public view. What could they say about it?

For the past three years, Daisy was one of the hottest selling romance novelists and as she was barely thirty-five, she was certain she had a lot of time to continue developing her career. Books used to pour out of her the way water poured from a tap. It was rare for the flow to be disturbed, even when Daisy turned her brain off for the day and went to sleep. When she woke, she could pick up right where she left off as if there had been no interruption. In the last six months she found it harder and harder to produce word count. It was a strain just to get the cursor to move and, figuratively speaking, she spent more time polishing doorknobs than her manuscripts. She would get cold, hungry, or uncomfortable and off to stroke the intrusion she

would go. Daisy never had those issues with her previous heroes; it was only since William the Nobleman became her newest protagonist. Although, she was very much doubting his existence.

“Bloody mind-numbing dystopian author bullocks is what it is,” Daisy said aloud. She also talked to herself.

She hit ‘save’ on the nine words and took her mug of tea to the sofa. She used a coffee table book as a coaster and then laid out flat on the modern herringbone three-seater. The mug was too hot to handle, which was the complete opposite of her current work in progress. Yes, it was unlike her to take so long on a book. No, she wasn’t blocked. Her characters went quiet ever since ... actually, she didn’t know. Why had it been so long since she got out of bed and started her word count before ten o’clock in the morning? Her waking hours were getting less and less. She wondered if she was burnt out. Thirty titles in the last three years meant that Daisy averaged one every five weeks. She worked for a publisher that predominantly published eBooks with a specialist division for her niche market. It also meant that those authors who wrote mainstream (i.e. boring) fiction – void of the dashing buccaneers of the seven seas or rugged highland rogues in their steamy primeval huts – only published once a year and their contracts only expected as much. Their books were on the shelves of Waterstones and those authors did book signings. Daisy and her clan of inequity were a rare breed of authors on the raised-eyebrow end of Francine & Foley Publishing, but no less successful, and their paperbacks came out only after a threshold of digital downloads were reached. A select few of the authors with a particular art for words in tasteful contemporary romance also found their books in Waterstones, but mostly, they were found only on Mummy’s Kindle.

Daisy was one of the few who walked a fine line between romance and erotica. She liked it that way because without having a specific branding she could dabble in any sub-genre as long as it had the underlying themes that caused a woman to fan her face in delight. Her books were anywhere from 70,000 words to upwards of 100,000. The larger ones were in paperback and hardcover, which was exactly where F&F Publishing wanted her to be now. She had an offer someone of her age and disposition (eccentric, cynical, awkward) required in order to make a living. No other industry would hire her. She wasn’t good for any other line of work. Stories had been writing themselves and her sales were phenomenal, so F&F made her a deal. Be exclusive, carry on writing, carry on selling, and get a regular income. For an author, that was pretty damn amazing. She’d accepted the offer but soon after, it was as if the tap had been turned off. Not by her. She didn’t know what happened. She’d written about pirates, she’d done time travel and she’d graced the categories of historical fiction. There were so many varying plots and circumstances that had brought a hero and heroine together that she wondered if even she was sick of it. She didn’t quite believe in all of it, which was fine. It was fiction. She didn’t have to believe in it. She just had to make it believable. Daisy thought back to the day she remembered her first bout of struggle during the process of her latest title.

One day last winter she sat down at her laptop with her silver tray of French press coffee, a jug of cream and the matching cup and saucer, but the words didn’t come when she rested her

hands on the keys. She pressed the coffee, poured the cream, stirred it up and took a sip. Nothing. She sat back in the chair and furrowed her eyebrows. She readjusted her always-slouchy posture to an upright one, just to test the atmosphere. Still, the words didn't come. Daisy drank the entire French press in portions appropriate for the size of the china cup and yet there the cursor had remained, blinking. There wasn't a single word typed before or after it. Daisy eventually walked around the flat in the figure-eight shape in order to stir her imagination. The thing was, she had a title but she didn't have a plot or a story, or characters. That was perfectly normal. She had to meet the characters just like the reader – as they went along with the story. But this was different. Typically, her books were born from one line, or word, or even an image in her mind and then off she went with the entire book. That's how she'd written thirty and that's exactly how she intended to continue. She had indeed submitted an outline with a working title and a half-assed logline to keep Fran at bay until she could work out the details. Pantsers always lived on the edge like that.

When she'd gone to bed after wasting an entire day waiting for the words to come, Daisy was far from amused. The next morning she repeated her routine but with expectation. Silver tray, French press, jug of cream, matching cup and saucer. Gold teaspoon. She sat at her desk, cursor blinking and coffee slowly being consumed. Then, there it was.

His name was William. Her fingers had typed the words the way a ravenous schoolchild inhaled a snack after an entire day of lessons - with desperation. It was the first of any progress in twenty-four hours and Daisy wasn't used to such infrequency.

Aside from the very, her fingers slammed into the appropriate letters as more words flooded her mind, but then it stopped. *Aside from the very... very what?* She'd stared at the cursor for another bout of panicked silence and then pulled her hands from the keyboard.

"Aside from the very big wanker that William was," Daisy said as she stood up from the desk. She spoke out loud as she stalked across the flat, "he was also a very damn stubborn protagonist who'd better bloody come up with the rest of the sentence by the time I get back from the loo! And he better be handsome because ugly heroes don't sell books!" Daisy scolded the fictitious character as if he were floating around the flat in defiance.

When she returned from the loo, the cursor kept blinking, as if waiting for her to make it move. She tried to finish the line to encourage some kind of progress, but it sounded stupid. The line was ridiculous. What was more, there was absolutely no natural flow or follow-up. Daisy eventually forced one thousand words just to try to get the story moving, but it physically felt wrong. None of it sounded right and she deleted it all. She didn't even bother cutting and pasting those thousand words into a document for future use, she just wanted it off the page. The days between then and now were a lot like that: Daisy sipping coffee as she waited for inspiration or even for her protagonist to get his lazy self out of whatever time warp he was in and offer a little help. Eventually, she stopped trying to write because she was getting nowhere. She transferred attention to the title, which she reconsidered. "When She Was Mine" had been decided before she even knew her protagonist was named William. Daisy always had a title before she had

anything else and it was completely non-negotiable to do it any other way. That was why she didn't speak to people about her works in progress. She didn't want anyone telling her she had to plot it all out, blah blah blah, and the title came last. No. It didn't. The title came first. The plot came last. The characters came as she wrote. The stuff in the middle fell into place and when it didn't fit, she sorted it out during editing, and she had a flat with a view of Tower Bridge to prove it.

Daisy rolled her head over and looked at the white mug of steaming tea on the table beside her. She didn't want tea anymore. She wanted port. And a cigar. Six months of this stupid routine of nothingness was making her eccentricity itch. This wouldn't do.

The hero from her eighth book liked port and cigars. Fabio. He was a Spanish buccaneer who had his own ships attacked in order to get the loot and take the girls captive. Daisy had rolled her eyes writing every one of the 90,000 words that was "The Seven Seas" because Fabio's gums had flapped all day and all night in her head. The fictional hero had found his way into Daisy's dreams and when she woke in the morning she often tripped over the duvet trying to get out of bed and over to the laptop to record whatever it was he was going on about before she was barely conscious. He just never shut up, so that was an easy book to write.

"Not like William," she blurted out, "who never says a bloody word."

On the sundeck in the middle of rain-threatened London, she lit the *Churchill* and let it rest between her teeth as she poured a hefty glass of Dow's reserve port. It was cheap, but it was sweet. That was how she liked her alcohol. She rarely drank, so her tolerance was low and it meant she wanted any and all of it to taste like dessert because a) who didn't like dessert? And b) who didn't like the idea of 750 millilitres of *liquid dessert*? The views of Tower Bridge were best seen through binoculars, which she held up to her eyes as the cigar exuded a patient, white curling trail of smoke.

"It's just a bridge," Daisy mumbled with the cigar blocking her vowels rather humorously. She never understood why tourists made such a fuss at the landmark. Even from there she would see tour groups and people posing for photographs. She put the binoculars down on the glass-topped table beside where she was reclining on her sundeck. It wasn't nearly warm enough to be lounging about but that's what the port was for. Growing hair on chests and keeping grumpy people warm since 1798. Cheers.

"I love my publisher, I love my publisher, I love my publisher," she recited as she poured a mug full of the burgundy liquid. It was two o'clock in the afternoon and there she sat overlooking the appropriately named Tower Bridge Wharf, alone, spying on people through her binoculars with the same pessimistic charm that kept her in such a cycle, raising a glass to the fictional hero of her latest book.

"William the protagonist, I am going to sit here and drink until you show up. So, you bastard, here's to you."