



‘Excuse me, love,’ said the bearded man in the front row, ever so politely, ‘did you say *naked*?’

Emma Tremayne clutched her folder of proposals tighter and smiled a smile that went no further than her cherry-scented lipgloss. ‘That’s right, Bob. Naked.’

Bob, bald, ruddy-faced and fifty-something, nodded as if she’d just confirmed the price of a cheese scone in the local café.

‘You mean without any clothes on?’ murmured a whippet-like lad whom Emma recognised as a local builder.

‘That’s the general idea of a nude calendar, Jason, yes.’ Smiling sweetly, she fixed her eyes on him, then regretted it as a blush spread to the roots of his hair, competing with his red curls for colour.

Now that was odd, she thought, as a dozen faces tried terribly hard not to look in her direction. If she’d known

how easy it was to turn a roomful of hard-bitten men into quivering jellies, she'd have tried it years ago. Unfortunately, right now it was exactly what she *didn't* want.

In front of her, leaning against fading walls, perched on rickety chairs and peeling Formica tables, were some of the most macho men in England. Tall and short, green and vintage, each of them looked like a nervous schoolboy hauled up before a particularly bossy headmistress. You'd certainly never have known they were a mountain rescue team from the look of them. Or that they'd saved over fifty lives in the past twelve months alone and were expert at abseiling and belaying and all kinds of skills which weren't needed among the sushi bars and coffee houses and mirror-window tower blocks of the city life Emma was used to.

They didn't look extraordinary at all. In fact, they could just as easily have been part of a church choir or, admittedly, a rather fit darts team. Which was exactly why this project was going to be such a huge success. It was a good thing, Emma told herself, that as a seasoned PR person, she had already run through this scenario in her head a dozen times. If she didn't believe in her idea 100 per cent, how on earth could she expect them to?

She smiled even more broadly at Bob Jeavons, as he slouched on a broken chair. As team leader of the Bannerdale Mountain Rescue Team he had the power to crush her project with a single word. Emma wanted to take her jacket off but she didn't dare.

Bob placed his chipped mug, still half full of tea that by

now must have grown cold, on the floor tiles and folded his arms. He studied her for a moment, oblivious to the bead of tea trickling down his beard. 'Correct me if I'm wrong, love, but doesn't that mean everyone in Bannerdale will see us with our kit off?'

'Oh, I do hope so,' she said airily, ignoring the gasp of horror from Jason. 'I really hope so, in fact, because if everyone in Cumbria sees you with your kit off, it will mean that I've done my job properly. It will mean', she carried on, warming to her theme, 'that everyone will want to buy the calendar and that we'll raise heaps of money for a new base. Which, if you don't mind me saying,' she added, eyeing the paint peeling off the window frame, 'you do actually need quite badly.'

'Not that badly,' said a new voice.

Emma peered into the gloom of the room. It was difficult to see where exactly the voice had come from, as the late March evening was drawing in and the strip light had flickered and died shortly after they'd come in.

She looked at a dark figure standing in the door frame. 'Did someone else have a contribution to make?'

This time the response was easier to locate. It was a cross between a snort and a harrumph, rather like a rhino on heat – not that she'd ever met one.

'I'm sorry, but does someone have a cold?' she asked, with more than a trace of irony.

'No. But someone needs their head examining if they think this is a good idea.'

The owner of the voice stepped into the room and her

heart seemed to stop. Will Tennant. She might have known. She'd only met him once before, a few weeks ago when she'd suggested the team get some rather funky promotional merchandise to sell at fêtes and open nights. He hadn't been amused then and he certainly didn't look amused now.

As he rested his six-foot-plus, fourteen-stone frame against a spare patch of wall, Emma felt herself grow even warmer. That super-strength anti-perspirant might be good for trekking through a steamy jungle but it was no protection at all against a man who had all the charm of a grizzly bear.

'I know it seems a bit . . . radical,' said Emma defiantly, trying not to be intimidated. She couldn't quite see Will's face in the dimness, and anyway, she'd forgotten her contacts, but she knew what his expression would be. Patronising, sarcastic or hostile, possibly all three.

'Radical?' said Will, crossing his arms.

God, that man was massive, thought Emma, momentarily distracted by the muscles in his forearms.

'Is that what you call it? I'd have said bloody ridiculous. We'll be the laughing stock of all the teams, you know.'

'*You* might, mate,' laughed Jason, giving Emma a small victory. Hmm . . . she thought, a little phallic competition might not be a bad thing. With all this testosterone around, it could be a very good thing.

'You need the funds for a new base and you need them quickly,' Emma explained patiently. 'Tin shakes and stalls at the village fête are all very well, but you need

to do something really dramatic, these days, to attract attention.’

‘We don’t need that kind of attention,’ growled Will. ‘There are other ways of getting the money without fancy PR gimmicks.’

Emma’s blood approached boiling point. At this rate the idea of a nude calendar would be thrown out without a meaningful debate and she’d worked so hard on the proposals – for nothing, too. Helping the local mountain rescue team with their fund-raising wasn’t exactly in the remit for her new job with the tourist board. She was here out of the goodness of her heart and, she might have added, was offering them a free consultancy that back in London would have cost them hundreds of pounds.

As the water tank in the old slate roof gave a temperamental shudder, she sighed.

She definitely wasn’t in London now.

‘It would all be very tasteful, of course,’ she went on breezily, feeling very exposed herself. ‘No one would actually see anything.’ She halted, not quite knowing how to put it. ‘Well, I mean, you’d have things to cover your decency, of course.’

‘What things?’ asked Phil, a wiry-looking guy with a ponytail.

‘Well . . . props. You know, tools of the trade. Helmets . . .’

Emma didn’t get any further. As the room erupted, she caught the eye of the only other woman in the room and wished she hadn’t. Suzanne Harley, the squad doctor, was

visibly shaking, and Emma could see her trying to stop herself from spluttering biscuit crumbs all over Bob. Emma frowned hard at her. She needed all the allies she could get and if even Suzanne wouldn't take her seriously, there was no hope.

'It's entirely up to you, of course, but I have put together some proposals. Here's the design we did for an air ambulance charity,' she said, holding up a glossy calendar. The cover had a shot of twelve men posing in front of a helicopter. Granted, they didn't leave much to the imagination but it was all very classy and stylish. In fact, she was rather proud of it.

Suzanne giggled. Jason's mouth drooped cavernously. Will shook his head in despair.

Emma ignored them and held up an Excel spreadsheet. 'Actually, I've also brought a detailed breakdown of the money we raised. With the calendar sales, corporate sponsorship, fees from magazine interviews and the extra cash from the ensuing publicity it came to over fifty-six thousand pounds. That should make up the difference between the donations you've already accrued and the total required for the new base.'

Suddenly, people sat up straighter in their seats. Eyebrows were raised. Someone let out a low whistle. Only Will looked unmoved.

'And you're sure about this?' asked Bob, after a pause. 'You're sure people will want to look at a bunch of hairy blokes? I mean, some of us are well past our sell-by dates.'

'Speak for yourself, Bob,' said Jason. Emma wanted to

hug him and mentally put him down for Mr January. She handed him a calendar to look at.

‘I know they will. Believe me, there is absolutely nothing more appealing than seeing a pillar of the community laid bare,’ she said, crossing her fingers. ‘Hairy or not.’

Emma knew she sounded far more confident than she looked. Even though her charity campaign for the helicopter medics had been a huge success, she had to admit that her recent track record had been . . . well, barely short of disastrous. Which was why she was up here, working as public relations officer for the tourist board, not directing a glitzy campaign from the lofty heights of Rogue Communications, the London PR consultancy.

Not that anyone knew that. Not yet, anyway.

Someone passed Will a calendar. He rifled through it for a nanosecond and shook his head. ‘So it’s come to this. A serious organisation made a mockery of.’

Emma felt all trembly and terribly close to hating him. Which wasn’t good. She’d hated quite a few people recently and it was getting to be a habit.

‘Actually, I respect a man who speaks his mind, so perhaps you should discuss it amongst yourselves and then put it to the vote,’ she said, keeping her voice neutral. ‘You might feel less inhibited with me out of the way and’, she stared right at Will, whose designer stubble made him look more like a grizzly than ever, ‘more able to say what you really feel.’

He stared back at her, his brown eyes cold. ‘*Actually,*

Emma,' he said sarcastically, 'I think you'll find we've always been able to speak our minds up here. In fact, we were managing perfectly well before you came.'

'Now Will. I know I'm one for plain talking, lad, but that's a bit much. I think it's a cracking idea, lass. It's just a bit of a shock, that's all,' cut in Bob, smiling at Emma. 'You need to give us a bit more time to get used to it. Ignore Will. He's just a miserable bugger.'

Emma would very much have liked to ignore Will, but right now he was making it pretty difficult. 'I'll leave this stuff with you and you can let me know your decision later,' she said, picking up her untouched mug from the table. 'Now, shall we all have another cup of tea? I'll make it.'

Alone in the tiny kitchen, Emma poured out the last of the tea into a cup with no handle, wincing at the sight and smell of the rusty liquid. This was only her second visit to the base but she already knew they liked their tea as up-front and plainly spoken as everything else. She'd been terribly careful not to talk too much about spin and profiles and target audiences. She'd even wondered if she should have turned up in something more casual than her work suit, but that would have been going too far. She liked looking smart, even if everyone else lived in a fleece. Besides, she could no longer afford a whole new wardrobe, so sticking out like a sore thumb would have to do for now.

'They'll come round, you know.'

Looking up from her undrinkable tea, she found Suzanne Harley carrying a tray of empty mugs.

‘Well done, Emma. You’ve really got them going. That joke about the tools and helmets was a masterstroke.’

Emma thought of admitting it was a slip of the tongue but decided against it. Didn’t she look enough of an idiot already?

‘Thanks for the vote of confidence, but I think some of them are going to take a lot more persuading before they buy into the idea.’

She handed Suzanne her cup but the doctor shook her head and wrinkled her freckled nose.

‘Thanks, but no thanks, Emma. And I shouldn’t think you have anything too serious to worry about, given the reaction from young Jason. In fact, he seems worryingly enthusiastic about getting his clothes off. And you have Bob on your side which counts for a lot.’

‘What about Will Tennant? He seemed unreasonably annoyed at the whole idea of a calendar. Somehow, I feel like I’ve wronged him in a previous life.’ And why should he bulldoze her idea when the others seemed almost ready to come round, she thought. Just who did he think he was?

Suzanne sighed. ‘Will is always happiest when he has something to be angry about. He’s not that bad, really, Emma, underneath the sarcasm and the rudeness and the bloody-mindedness . . .’

‘You make him sound so charming.’

Suzanne let out a laugh of derision ‘No one in their right mind could ever describe Will as charming – though he doesn’t seem to have any problems with the opposite sex. Look, give him time to come round. Don’t try and

persuade or push him. Just leave him to stew for a while. You never know, he might be more receptive than you think.'

Emma pulled a tissue from her bag and blew her nose. The dust really was terrible in here and she didn't believe Suzanne for a moment. 'I don't think he'll ever be receptive to a fancy PR guru from the evil fleshpots of the metropolis,' she sniffed.

'Hmm. It must be a bit of a shock for you, moving up here,' said Suzanne with a wry smile. 'There's hardly much action beyond the local pubs and the Conservative club.'

'It's not too bad,' said Emma. 'There's a talk by the Herdwick Sheep Society next week and the community hall is showing old Bond films on Saturday nights as long as there isn't a Young Farmers' do. It says so in the parish magazine.'

Suzanne feigned shock. 'The parish magazine, eh? Well, even though I'm supposed to be a pillar of the community, I haven't resorted to that for entertainment. What on earth made you leave your job and move to Bannerdale?'

It was the question Emma had been dreading. And one that, in the past few months, she'd been lucky to avoid. Fortunately, like the professional she was – correction, once was – she had her answer prepared.

'It was a fantastic opportunity, a unique environment, new challenge . . .'

Suzanne raised her eyebrows. Emma took a deep breath and made a decision. It was no use, she told herself. From what she'd seen from their few meetings so far,

Suzanne seemed like a genuine person and, unlike some people, she also had a sense of humour. Emma decided she deserved the truth. Besides, she felt she'd tasted enough deception and spin over the past few months to last a lifetime. Most of it from her ex, Jeremy Forbes.

'My boss was shagging my boyfriend. I threw something at her and she sacked me,' she said, straight-faced.

Suzanne laughed out loud. 'Sounds like a perfectly good reason to me.'

Emma realised with a start that Suzanne thought she was joking. Maybe it was just as well, after all. Maybe her new friends weren't quite ready for the whole truth just yet.

'Don't feel you have to resort to the parish mag again,' said Suzanne, leaning back against the worktop. 'Why don't you come out for a drink after the meeting? I doubt the Black Dog could produce a mojito but they do have a half-decent glass of red wine. And, if you're very lucky, you might get chatted up by Silas from the dominoes league.'

'Is he hot?'

'In 1947, I'm sure he was.'

Emma grinned. 'Then I'll definitely come.'

Just then, a swell of voices drifted in, signalling the door of the meeting room had opened.

'Ah. The moment of truth. I believe my vote is required – are you coming, Emma?'

'I think I'll stay here. It might be less embarrassing. Tell them I'm washing up and come and fetch me when you know the result.'

‘OK. But I shouldn’t worry. They’ll go for it. Money always talks.’

As Suzanne was half out of the door, Emma had a sudden thought.

‘Suzanne, if we can’t get enough guys to agree, is there any chance you would pose for one of the shots?’

The doctor stopped, turned and smiled. ‘Emma, I know how much the rescue team need a new base and I’m willing to help you in any way I can. But pose naked on a calendar with that bunch? Not unless I was drugged, tied down and certified insane. You’ve got more chance of getting Will to do it.’

Well, that was plain enough. But she didn’t blame Suzanne. Being the only woman made things a bit awkward and being a local GP probably made it much worse. It was no use moping, she’d better get on and do something while the team was discussing her idea and putting it to the vote.

She turned on the tap, hoping that the heater might produce enough warm water to at least give the dirty mugs a cursory rinse. If she could only find a drop of washing up liquid, that would be a big help. She smiled. Back in London, they’d never dreamed of making their own tea. Her boss, Phaedra, had very few virtues, but indulging herself was one of them. If there wasn’t a pot of Blue Mountain bubbling somewhere in the office, there was always some assistant willing to fetch a Starbucks coffee or a smoothie. Emma shivered. That last beverage was now off the menu. In fact, she hoped she’d never see one as long

as she lived. Not after what had happened on that fateful day with Rogue.

She opened a cupboard under the sink, hunting for the Fairy Liquid and finding only a half-empty bottle of some dubious-looking solution in between the bleach and an old mouse-trap. Emma tried not to notice the small black droppings next to the trap. This was the country, after all, and she didn't want to be a wimp. And what was that they said? You were only ever six feet away from a rat in London. Urban myth or not, she knew where most of them hung out.

Pulling off her jacket and longing for some Marigolds, she set to work on the mugs. With only her bare hands and no detergent, it wasn't very effective but she was doing her best. Most important, she was being useful.

'Here. Try this.'

Emma turned round. It was that voice again. Deep and distinctive, the soft Cumbrian accent taking the edge, a tiny bit, off the gruffness. A big hand, sprinkled with hair reached above her head to a shelf and pulled down a bottle of green liquid.

She ought to have said thanks, but after the reception she'd got from Will earlier, the words seemed to stick in her throat. She took the bottle from his hand ungraciously.

'Shouldn't you be in the meeting room, putting the case for the prosecution?'

He leaned against the worktop. It had warmed up in here, next to the boiler, and Emma again felt herself grow uncomfortably hot in her suit. 'Aren't you going to vote against me?'

‘I abstained.’

‘Oh.’

Squirting a splodge of liquid into the bowl, she wondered why she felt so self-conscious. She kept her eyes on the bowl and her hands busy, whipping up the foam with her fingers, feeling a bit shaky.

‘And if I had voted, it wouldn’t have been against you.’

She plonked a wet mug on the drainer. Will picked up a tea towel and started drying the mugs.

‘Do you mean that?’ she asked.

He placed the cup on the worktop, shining and clean. ‘I wouldn’t have voted against you personally. Only against your idea.’

‘Thanks a lot,’ she managed, dropping a plate in the bowl and succeeding in splashing his trousers.

‘You’re welcome,’ he said, without a trace of irony.

Emma had never known that washing a few cups and plates could be so excruciating – or complicated. She felt confused. Was he holding out the olive branch by helping her? Or was he here to let her know he meant business and wouldn’t be denied his say? His directness about the calendar was irritating in one way, unnerving even, but at least he’d laid his cards on the table, which was more than some men did.

Will also wasn’t giving her any clues. He didn’t say anything else, just carried on drying crockery and placing it on a shelf above the sink. Occasionally, he waited, a trifle impatiently perhaps, if she couldn’t keep up with his drying.

She also found herself trying hard not to touch him in any way, which was difficult given the smallness of the room. Once she brushed against his arm and felt the hairs on it touch her bare wrist. He didn't seem to notice but Emma felt the tickle go on after they'd lost contact. As she scrubbed at a plate hard enough to wear a hole in it, debating whether or not to try and make conversation, Suzanne poked her head round the door again.

She was good, Emma gave her that. Her face barely registered her surprise at finding them in apparent domestic harmony at a kitchen sink.

'Keeping busy?' she asked mischievously.

'Team building,' said Will, startling Emma.

'See – he does have a sense of humour lurking somewhere,' laughed Suzanne.

Will threw the tea towel down on the worktop without smiling. 'For some things,' he said and strode off towards the meeting room.

Emma stood with her mouth open and Suzanne shook her head. She hardly dared to ask the outcome of the vote, but as they trooped back to the room, she was soon put out of her misery.

'There. Told you you had nothing to worry about,' Suzanne hissed as Bob's voice rang out, confirming that the motion to take part in a nude calendar had been carried unanimously.

'Where's Will gone?' Emma whispered, searching for him among the other men.

Suzanne rolled her eyes. 'I think he's sorting out some

kit. Anything to get away, probably. What was he doing in the kitchen?’

‘He wanted me to know he only hates my fund-raising methods, not me personally.’

‘That’s something, I suppose. I told you he’s not that bad.’

Emma was saved from replying by Bob.

‘So that’s eleven in favour and one abstention,’ he declared to the group. ‘It looks like that’s it, lads – and Sue. There’s no going back. Get yourselves in training and stock up on the fake tan.’

Predictably, groans filled the room.

‘That won’t be necessary,’ reassured Emma. ‘It would be better if you went for the natural look. Although I’ll volunteer to do a spot of waxing if anyone needs it.’

Leafing through a calendar, Suzanne frowned. ‘Wait a minute. You said that eleven people had volunteered. That means we’re one short.’

Jason put up his hand. ‘We could have a group shot . . .’ he suggested. He was so sweet, Emma thought, picturing him *au naturel*, cuddling one of the rescue dogs.

‘It would be better if we had a guy for each month. You know, Mr January, Mr March, etc. You can all put your name down for one,’ she offered, handing out a pad and pen. What difference it made, she really couldn’t see, they were all going to be starkers, but it was always good to give people the illusion that they had a choice. ‘Maybe choose your birthday month? That would be appropriate. Jason, you go first as you seem to be so keen.’

‘I only want to help the team,’ he said, turning strawberry again. Poor lad, Emma thought. He couldn’t be more than twenty. She wondered what his mum would think.

Ten minutes later, the pad came back, with more crossings out than her old maths book. Two of them had wanted December, having creative visions of tinsel and holly and one man couldn’t decide between his wedding anniversary and his wife’s birthday, but things had been arranged somehow, to most people’s satisfaction.

‘Only Mr July vacant, then?’ enquired Emma, feeling relieved and far happier than she knew she deserved.

‘We’re going to have to find someone else,’ said Bob.

Phil, the ponytailed man, gave Emma her pen back. ‘Yes, but who?’ he asked. ‘We can hardly go round asking for contributions from friends and relatives and it *is* meant to be a team project.’

‘What about asking Wardale MRT to put someone forward?’ suggested Suzanne.

‘I don’t think so,’ said Bob.

‘No way!’ cried Jason.

‘What’s wrong with Wardale?’ whispered Emma to Suzanne.

‘Penis envy,’ replied Suzanne, forcing Emma to stifle a giggle. ‘There’s a bit of a history there. They got a lottery grant for their new base and we missed out.’

‘But don’t they help you out on rescues?’ asked Emma. ‘I mean, I’m sure Bob told me the teams often work together.’

‘Of course we do and quite often, if there’s a major

incident. It's all strictly professional on a call-out, naturally. But afterwards,' Suzanne gave a sharp intake of breath, 'never the twain shall meet.'

'Oh dear.'

'I suppose,' said Bob, scratching his beard thoughtfully. 'We might have to, if we're desperate . . .'

'What about Harry Caversham?' offered Suzanne.

Bob nodded. 'Hmm. I did wonder. He may be one of them now but he was a member for five years until he moved house.'

'I'll do it.'

Emma stared at the door where Will had managed to creep back in without her noticing again. He moved quietly for a grumpy giant. 'But only if I *absolutely* have to,' he added, eyeing Emma.

'Don't feel obliged on my account,' said Emma primly.

'I don't,' he said, smiling at her now, with what looked like a flash of amusement in his eyes. It was gone before she had time to register it, and his trademark glower was back on his face. 'But it's a damn sight better than dragging outsiders into this bloody charade.'

Bob laughed. 'Very gracious, Will. Don't put yourself out, mate.'

Will didn't laugh back but just shrugged his shoulders. 'The offer's there.'

Emma was trying desperately not to look too smug or too surprised. She picked up the pad, wrote down his name and gave him a brief professional smile.

'Thank you, Will. It looks like you're Mr July.'

He narrowed his eyes at her and stalked off again as the meeting broke up, leaving Emma exhausted and a bit shell-shocked, with a sticky blouse and a mouse dropping stuck to her cuff.

‘Well, I have to admit, I never thought I’d see that,’ said Suzanne, as they walked out of the base later, en route to the Black Dog. ‘Will agreeing to take his clothes off in public.’

‘It was a turn-up,’ agreed Emma, wondering for the umpteenth time just what she had let herself in for.

‘Then again,’ said Suzanne mischievously, jangling her car keys, ‘I didn’t think he’d want Wardale getting involved. And you have to admit, miserable bugger though he is, he is going to look rather aesthetic . . .’

‘Sue, you’re married!’ giggled Emma, realising how Will had been stitched up. And Suzanne was absolutely right. Emma had to concede, even though it went against all her principles, that at six feet three, dark-haired and disgustingly handsome in a rugged, rough-edged kind of way, Will Tennant was the only one she’d have paid good money to see naked.