

LAST TRAIN TO MUMBAI

Sally stayed back in the conference room after the end of the Monday morning sales initiative review. After everyone from Sales had rushed out of the door, she glanced round quickly then pressed Mel's work number on her phone.

'I've heard from him...the guy who sent me a kiss on *Upmarket Matches*,' she muttered when Mel picked up.

'Cool! Is this *Healing Hands*?'

'Yes, him,' Sally hissed breathlessly. 'We talked on the phone and he gave me the code to access his photo. He's a dish, posh accent, thirty-seven years old, never been married and ... he's a heart surgeon!'

'Oh my *God!* Just like Princess Dianna's lover!' Mel shrieked. 'You'll be the Australian Queen of Hearts!!'

'It's on for tomorrow evening. Indian restaurant in Newtown called *Last Train to Mumbai*.'

'Is he Indian?'

'No! It's *not* Dianna's *bloke!* The restaurant's near Royal Prince Alfred hospital. Just in case I suppose...Got to go, I'm still at work.'

'Okay remember the pact? You call me from the ladies, ten minutes in,' Mel said. 'Sal, there's just one more thing ...'

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Sally hadn't really wanted to drive—it was almost impossible to park in trendy Newtown. However after the incident with 'Deadbeat Dave', as Mel called him, self-drive was a good option.

Mel's 'just one more thing' rankled. How come Dr Nick Taylor was single? she'd remarked. He was an attractive thirty-seven-year-old doctor, tall, handsome, well paid... Sally frowned to herself. *She* was an attractive, thirty-four-year-old marketing executive and she wasn't married either. She wasn't odd ... she'd just been unlucky in love. That was probably his story as well. Sally gripped the steering wheel, must concentrate. She'd already driven past *Last Train to Mumbai* twice.

After a close encounter with the number 280 bus, she squeezed her car into a parking space outside a café in a side street. She glanced in as she walked past. A gloomy looking guitarist in a flat checked cap, belted smock and baggy pants was plunking in a corner. Behind him was a lurid mural of male and female nudes engaged in a wild dance.

A young man strode past her on the narrow footpath, apparently unaware that he'd pushed her into a hedge. He was dressed like a bearded 19th century Russian peasant and his girlfriend looked a fright in an orange and purple ankle-length dress. Sally sighed; she just couldn't keep up with fashion! She'd chosen to wear a plain navy dress and her beloved cream leather jacket with her lapis stone necklace and earrings. She'd even cleared up the heap of discarded clothes on her bed—just in case.

At least her date looked clean shaven, unlike most of the people she'd seen so far in Newtown—but maybe his photo wasn't current. She shook her head, he was a medical specialist he wouldn't be alternative would he? But what about Aunty Dot's

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husband Septimus, the orthopaedic surgeon? Crikey! What if Doctor Nick Taylor was as weird as him? She'd reached busy King Street now, within sight of the restaurant, but when the lights turned green she hesitated.

'Crossing or not darling, make up your mind!'

An effete Asian man with purple hair nudged her and pursed his lips. She sighed and stepped off the footpath. The restaurant was clearly visible across the road. Draped red velvet curtains gave it a welcoming look but she wasn't too sure about the illustrated sign which hung outside. An overcrowded Indian train wasn't everyone's idea of fun she reflected as she got nearer.

When she ducked into a side alley just ahead of the restaurant to check her hair and make-up, she was startled by the sound of a door opening. Further down the side passage someone threw a cat out, yelling expletives in an Indian language and English. She snapped her mirror shut and headed back to the footpath. She pushed open the door of the restaurant momentarily startled by the jangling cowbells which announced her arrival. Her date had arrived well before her, it seemed. Her first glance took in the shattered remains of pappadums on a plate in the centre of his circular table. He rose politely from behind the crisp white table cloth when he saw her.

'Sally, I presume,' he said with a smile.

She nodded, trying not to be overwhelmed by his dark good looks as she shook his cool firm hand.

He pulled a chair out for her to sit down and she caught a whiff of the aftershave she'd thought of buying last Christmas for her father. It was so expensive even the tester was locked in a cabinet behind the cosmetic counter in Myer.

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She smiled at him, winningly, she hoped. This was going to be a great evening! He was tall with lightly tanned olive skin—Yacht? House in Byron Bay? Her mind raced with possibilities. He wore a smart grey suit and an open-necked white shirt. She sighed with pure pleasure.

‘May I say, Sally,’ he remarked with an intimate smile, ‘that you look absolutely beautiful. Your necklace complements your eyes and your skin is so clear! You must have a very healthy diet.’

It’s extremely expensive make-up and tinted contact lenses, she wanted to say. But he could find that out later.

‘I think we’ll keep that free,’ he said taking her small evening bag off the third chair at the table. He handed it to her with another dazzling smile which showed his even white teeth. Was someone else joining them? But before she could ask, he stretched his hand across the table and touched hers lightly.

‘I hope you like Indian food. This is the best Indian restaurant in Sydney. Even my mother approves of it,’ his beautifully modulated voice caressed her ears. She hardly had time to think clearly about what he’d said.

‘Oh,’ she answered returning yet another of his warm smiles.

Before she could ask him about his mother, a waiter in a smart white dhoti and red turban materialised at their table. He spoke directly to Nick as he handed them each a menu.

‘This evening, Doctor Sahib, we have the Chicken Gosht which you and ...’ he paused and glanced at Sally. ‘Err ... which you liked so much last time.’

Sally thought she recognised the man’s gravely voice. Was he the cat thrower?

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‘Yes, thank you Savji. We’ll have a mixed entrée plate to begin and then ... we’ll wait a little.’

The waiter inclined his head, helped Sally out of her jacket and hung it reverently over the back of her chair before he moved noiselessly to another table.

‘So tell me about you,’ Nick began.

His liquid brown eyes met hers. She loved his thick eyelashes and dark hair. She could imagine their wedding photograph, she, the Nordic blond (she’d have it specially done) and Nick tanned dark-haired; the perfect foil. She’d have to ring Mel soon, she remembered, as the waiter silently slipped a plate of pappadums and tiny dishes of raita onto the table.

‘Well, my hobby is interior decorating, this restaurant is lovely,’ she smiled and indicated the Mogul tent-like décor. Indian music wafted quietly from every corner. ‘But my day job is different. I’m a marketing executive in a large IT company.’

‘Apple?’ he asked without taking his eyes from her face.

‘Er ... I’ll wait for the entrée, thanks. Oh, I see ... no,’ she laughed nervously, told him the name of her company and their global market position. ‘I gained my MBA last year and ...’

‘Well done you!’ He smiled again.

She was suffused with delight. What a *great* guy!

‘I expect your work at the hospital is very demanding ...’ she began.

He was just about to answer when his mobile phone rang.

‘Please excuse me,’ he said politely.

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She tried not to listen. Maybe it was an underling from the hospital asking for his help? Had an ambulance just screamed past outside? Would he apologise profusely and disappear?

‘You see it came at last, no need to panic my dear ...’ he murmured gently into the phone.

Sally’s imagination was in overdrive. Was this a frightened patient waiting for a heart transplant? ‘Everything’s going well,’ he added. ‘Don’t worry.’

He tapped the phone and slipped it into his pocket.

‘Life is full of small dramas,’ he said enigmatically showing no sign of an immediate exit. ‘Yes, in answer to your question, my job is very demanding. So I need a strong woman by my side.’

I’m your girl, Sally thought.

‘When my patients die I get very upset. So I take my Lamborghini for a spin. I just drive and drive, often with the top down and it blows all my troubles away. I can forget about the hospital ...’ He stopped talking and sighed.

‘Ah at last,’ he breathed as he stood up pushing his chair away slightly.

Sally turned round. A tall fair skinned older woman, with fashionably cut light grey hair, was walking towards their table. A gold necklace glittered at her throat and her gold earrings caught the light. Her cream suit was immaculately cut and she wore smart stiletto-heeled shoes. She had a slightly petulant expression on her face.

‘Sally, allow me introduce you to my mother,’ Nick beamed at the Chanel-suited interloper. He moved out the third chair at the table. Sally stared in amazement at the other woman who bestowed a cursory glance in her direction.

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Nicholas's mother sat down and turning her face to her son she said in a high pitched British accent reminiscent of the young Queen Elizabeth,

‘The taxi was late, and now you *cahn*’t even kiss your mother hello.’

‘So sorry darling,’ he bent and planted a kiss on her upturned cheek.

Without looking in Sally's direction the woman remarked,

‘Do tell me about your latest date.’

‘Mother this is Sally Blake, she's an IT executive,’ he nodded to Sally and indicated for her to shake his mother's hand.

‘I'm very pleased to meet you Mrs Taylor,’ Sally said faintly as the other woman briefly touched her fingers in a dismissive handshake.

‘Oh *maiy* goodness!’ the other woman exclaimed with a laugh. ‘I haven't been called that in such a long time!’

‘I'm sorry mother, I didn't mention ... Sally, my mother is usually known by her title...Lady Margot.’

‘Oh!’ Sally nodded her head awkwardly ‘Lady Margot ...’ She made a conscious effort to close her gaping mouth.

‘Well anyway, *dahling* Nicholas,’ Lady Margot continued. ‘You know, I do find it difficult to negotiate *maiy* way down the *pawth* in the dark these days.’

Darling Nicholas smiled indulgently.

‘Well, you have a torch on your phone, mother. Pass it over,’ he stretched out his hand. Sally stared sadly at his cool masculine hands with their beautiful long fingers, helplessly aware that they would never touch her yearning body.

Lady Margot searched in her cream leather handbag, exclaimed ‘Oh! *thahr* it is!’ before she folded her mobile phone into her son's outstretched hand.

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‘Look,’ he said kindly. ‘It’s simple, let me show you.’

‘Oh *maiy goodness!*’ she exclaimed as the torch lit up. ‘Oh *dahling*, you’re *so clevah!*’ She turned briefly to Sally with a delighted child-like smile. ‘Look! Look! ... I’ve got a *tawch* on *maiy phown!*’

She waved it in Sally’s direction then switched it on and off a couple of times. ‘Nicholas *dahling*, how gifted you are!!’

This is excruciating, Sally thought, I can’t slip out to make a phone call, *mother* might tell the waiter to get rid of my chair. Anyway what on earth could I say to Mel? She was just about to slip her phone out to text a quick message when Lady Margot spoke again.

‘Well I’ll *ordah* as usual shall *Ai?*’ she announced, as if there was a choice, her body still turned away from Sally. ‘They still speak Hindustani here don’t they?’

She raised her arm and clicked her fingers and called out sharply in Hindi. The cat thrower and the Maitre D. raced across to the table.

‘What can I get you Lady Mehm Sahib?’ the Maitre D asked, his head nodding from side to side. Lady Margot picked up the menu and ordered the food without consulting either her son or his date.

Nick leaned across to Sally.

‘Mother’s family lived in India for generations, she was there until 1960.’ He turned to his mother. ‘I was just telling Sally about India ...’

Lady Margot waved the waiters away.

‘Oh! Yes, yes, yes,’ she drawled. ‘*Awful* place. Of *cawse* it became *far* too difficult *arfter* the natives took over. All because of *gharstly* Mr. Ghandi. Daddy tried

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his best with them for *yahrs* ... but ... well their general aptitude is very poor. Except of course dahling, *dahling* Prince Ranjit ...' she sighed.

Sally was about to say that she worked with some extremely intelligent Indian men and women in the IT industry, when she noticed an odd look pass between mother and son. Her date frowned at his mother and shook his head. Lady Margot shrugged and her petulant expression returned briefly but when the entrée plate arrived she took charge of it barking intermittent orders to the grovelling staff.

I'm stunned, Sally thought. I'm stunned and shafted! The most promising date in MONTHS and he brings his mother along. *And* was there something Nick didn't want her to know? For a start, where was *Sir* Margot?

'Do you speak any other Indian languages?' Sally asked, attempting to gain a foothold in the conversation.

'I certainly do not! A lady's job is to learn enough Hindi to tell the servants what to do and that's all. Now please excuse me. In *polite* society, one doesn't talk while one is eating.'

She took a large selection of food from the entrée plate and began to eat her way through it. She paused occasionally and carefully turned a piece of chicken or a small lamb chop on her fork as if examining it. *For cat hairs*, Sally wondered. She looked across at her date and saw to her amazement that he was beaming at both women.

'I do hope you and Mother will get on well together,' he whispered quietly. His mother stopped eating and breaking her self-imposed decree, she said,

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‘This person and I have very little in common, Nicholas,’ she glanced briefly at Sally, ‘just like the *lahst* young woman—what was she—a lecturer in Mathematics?’ She barked a laugh. ‘What a ridiculous job for a woman!’

I’ve got to get out of here, Sally thought desperately. More dishes arrived and the waiter piled food, first on ‘Mother’s’ plate and then on hers and she was hungry.

‘So, how long have you lived in Australia?’ Sally asked tentatively scooping a piece of chicken korma onto her fork.

‘Darling Sally, please ... mother has told you she doesn’t talk while she’s eating,’ Nick frowned slightly and inclined his head mother-wards.

They ate in silence then Sally, a slow fuse of anger burning inside said quietly,

‘Maybe *we* can talk ... to each other, Nick. Why did you become a heart surgeon?’

‘Ah,’ he sighed but before he could speak his mother, mouth full of food, waved her fork in the direction of the kitchen.

‘Yes of course, Mother.’

He leaned back in his chair and turned to the waiters who had taken up a permanent position near their table.

‘Is everything to your liking?’ the Maitre D. asked leaning towards Lady Margot.

She paused for a second, swallowed and dabbed delicately at her mouth.

‘*Noh* it certainly is not!’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘I thought you had a new chef. Bring him here!’

‘Oh, Lady Sahib, madam, I think ...’ the man began.

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Lady Margot snapped out a few words in Hindi and the man scurried away.

‘Mother is very particular about her food,’ Nick said quietly.

There was no hint of apology in his voice. No thought that bringing your mother on a first date was **weird ... not ... normal!** The Maitre D, two waiters and two chefs, complete with hats, shuffled up to the table. Sally glanced round the restaurant. The other diners had put down their forks and were sitting back as if waiting for a show to start. Lady Margot indicated the half-dozen empty dishes on the table, the torn nan bread, slopped raita, the chutney and the tiny piece of lamb korma Sally had been about to eat.

‘This was the most terrible food *Ai* have ever eaten,’ her ladyship announced. Her voice carried to the four corners of the restaurant.

‘You,’ she sneered at the chef, as if he was a cockroach she’d found in her rice. ‘Your food is only fit for ***untouchables***. *Mai* son,’ she waved her hand in the direction of her smiling son ... ‘is a *Doctor*. **Doctor Sahib!**’ she said loudly ‘Do you understand? No bill, understand? We—not—pay!’

As she rose quietly from her chair, Sally saw a small tear trickle down the chef’s cheek. She patted his arm briefly in passing.

‘You and me both, mate. That’s for the meal,’ she muttered and shoved a \$50 note in his hand.

She was certain that no one, least of all her date, noticed her disembark the ‘*Last Train to Mumbai*’.