

PROLOGUE

Eve Sturridge sat at the desk in her attractively appointed and spacious office at Ivy House Preparatory School, scrolling through status updates on her Facebook page. It was 2:46 p.m. on a pleasantly warm Friday afternoon in June and, with the school week all but over, Eve was allowing herself a little time to search for a link to a newspaper article somebody had posted that morning but that, what with one thing and another, she hadn't yet had time to read.

Nor would she now. There was a knock and then, without pause, Gail Prince, her PA, poked her head around the office door and hissed, 'Your three o'clock is waiting in the hall!' Eve smiled; Gail's conspiratorial hissing was a regular default.

'God, is it that time already?'

'The Sorensens are absolutely charming. And fully loaded. You'll have noticed they arrived by *helicopter*.'

'I thought it was a bit windy over by the rugby pitch. Tell them I'll be right there.'

Eve turned to the bookcase behind her chair from

which she pulled out a well-thumbed copy of the *Sunday Times* Rich List. There they were: Stefan and Anette Sorensen, number eighty-six – which meant, were she to bag them for Ivy House, they'd hurtle past her current richest Rich Listers, the Dershowitzes, at number one hundred and two. She had the Dershowitzes to thank for recommending Ivy House to the Sorensens in the first place.

After a couple of minutes, Eve got to her feet, quickly checking that she passed muster in the small gilt-framed mirror by the door. Tucking one side of her neat blonde bob behind an ear, revealing a discreet pearl and diamond stud, Eve headed out through the maze of school offices and into the wood-panelled entrance hall where, she noted with satisfaction, sunlight was streaming through a stained-glass window and glancing off the well-polished sporting silverware in an adjacent cabinet.

'Mr and Mrs Sorensen, how good to meet at last. I hope your journey was pleasant?' Eve extended her hand to Mrs Sorensen – it was important to get the wives onsite straight away. Classic new money and loads of it, thought Eve, but very tastefully done.

'Twenty minutes from Battersea in the whirlybird; here before we knew it.' Eve picked up a mid-Atlantic twang alongside the native Danish in Stefan Sorensen's accent. He smiled, partly with his shrewd blue eyes but mostly with his mouth, Eve noted, as she gave Stefan a swift, imperceptible once-over: beautifully cut, unstuffy navy

OUTSTANDING

suit jacket, clearly Savile Row; dark indigo jeans and a pink, tieless, shirt – Jermyn Street, obviously; a pair of brogues and an unshowy but expensive-looking wrist-watch peeking out from his cuff. In short, the very model of a modern master of the universe.

‘Y-es. It is so much easier and quicker to fly than it is to drive down the A21,’ said Mrs S with just a hint of Nordic sing-song.

‘Absolutely,’ said Eve. Despite being the spit of *Mad Men*’s Betty Draper, there was an aura of warmth about Mrs S, and it was she rather than Mr S who was wearing a suit – cream and, Eve decided, looking a lot like Stella McCartney – which she’d teamed with a pair of baby-blue loafers. Eve liked to see attractive women wearing flats in the daytime; it said, ‘Comfortable in my skin.’ And the evidence indicated that, despite Mr S’s bank balance, in this context at least, it was his wife who wore the trousers. Eve allowed herself a moment to congratulate herself on her wives-first handshaking strategy.

‘I wasn’t sure if I would be meeting –’ Eve paused, it was all about the pronunciation – ‘Aija and Petrus today?’

‘No-oh, we decided against it. Children dislike change, don’t they?’ said Anette Sorensen. ‘We think that if we present their new school to them as a fait accompli it will be much easier.’ Easier for whom? thought Eve. ‘Anyway, right now they are at the Natural History Museum with their nanny. They can’t get enough dinosaurs.’ Anette smiled, the sun came out, glaciers melted.

Eve was conscious of Anette Sorensen's 'new school' comment but restrained herself from making an air punch. And, despite disagreeing with Anette's 'fait accompli' concept, she said, 'So true – and frankly I can't get enough dinosaurs either. Now, would you prefer to start the tour in the gardens or inside?'

'Inside,' said Stefan Sorensen firmly. 'Then we can finish up by the 'copter. Are we due at Heatherdown at five, honey?'

Ah! thought Eve. Heatherdown . . . Heatherdown School was, in Eve's opinion, a very un-Sorensen sort of choice. Admittedly the Sorensens were Nordic, so Eve suspected they probably went in for a bit of free-range *Hello, trees! Hello, sky! Let's build a yurt!* stuff, along with skinny dipping and entire days spent doing 'art', but if it was proper British prep school box-ticking they were after then she felt that Heatherdown was, for all its touchy-feely 'family' ethos, not going to be quite their ticket. Fingers crossed they'd find that out for themselves – probably by about ten past five.

'Y-es,' said Anette, who turned towards Eve wearing a subtly empathetic, sisterly expression. 'We are seeing other schools.'

'Of course,' Eve said enthusiastically, 'and so you should. These are not the kind of decisions one rushes into.' Eve infiltrated herself comfortably between Mr and Mrs Sorensen and, placing a proprietorial hand gently on the small of their backs – a trick she had learned by watching

OUTSTANDING

US presidents ‘welcoming’ foreign (invariably less powerful) heads of state – ushered them through the entrance hall. ‘A delightfully idiosyncratic school, Heatherdown, and always very much a reflection of its Principal – though I’m sure you’re aware that he recently passed away?’ Eve didn’t wait for an answer; it was enough to plant the seed and then water it a bit. ‘So who knows what will become of the school now? Anyway, let us start with our marvellous new library, which I’m sure you know all about since it was so generously endowed by Mr and Mrs Dershowitz.’

AUTUMN TERM

1

‘Mum. Mu-um!’

Seeing her mother’s brand new and extremely expensive handbag still sitting on the kitchen table, Zoe Sturridge hurried down the hall in her dressing gown and opened the front door. Not wanting to negotiate the wet gravel drive in bare feet, she hopped up and down on the equally damp front step.

‘Mum! Your bag! First day of term and you’ve forgotten your satchel.’

At which Eve re-emerged from the Volvo. ‘Thanks, darling. Every bloody year, eh?’

‘Just as well the staff don’t know how heavily you rely on a seventeen-year-old, but your secret’s safe with me. Have a nice day, Mum.’

‘You, too. Shouldn’t you be off soon?’

‘Nothing till eleven today.’

‘OK. Well, when you leave, wrap up – chill in the air.’

‘Dur! I’m not *seven*.’

Zoe shut the door, went back to the kitchen, rummaged

in the fridge for yoghurt, padded up the stairs to her bedroom and opened her wardrobe. Staring at the rails she decided she was feeling skirt – *short* skirt – far more than she was feeling skinnies, and started looking for some black opaque tights before settling on a clean purple pair. As she slipped on her favourite old pink Converse high tops, Zoe heard the *beep-beep* of an incoming text on the phone beneath her pillow.

I ♥ U. Coast clear? XXX

♥ U2. Yeh! XXX

Round in 5 XXX

!!!XXX

Zoe removed the Converse and peeled off her tights, put her dressing gown back on over her second-best bra and knickers and went downstairs where, having checked that her mother had actually left the premises for the entire day, she set the front door open on the latch and went back upstairs to wait until Rob arrived on his Honda. She hoped he didn't rush too much – not in this rain – yet, with an anticipatory tingle, she couldn't help thinking, Hurry up!

Zoe believed herself to be fairly sensible, even allowing for being seventeen. Nonetheless, she knew it wasn't particularly sensible to be bunking off half a day's school – she

was in the upper sixth of a highly sought-after girls' grammar – in the first week of the autumn term and preparing to shag her boyfriend at home – but, hey. Zoe was unfazed by the prospect of removing her sensible handbag-spotting head and replacing it with her sexy-for-my-boyfriend head. That stuff was simply part of the game of growing up. And she was, for the most part, enjoying growing up.

She heard the slam of the unlatched front door, a pounding on the stairs and then there was Rob in his leathers, bike helmet under his arm, grinning at her in the doorway. Zoe had, along with most of her mates, watched sufficient online porn to know that, if the opportunity presented itself, sex should probably always start with a bit of burlesque-style flirtation before you got down to the serious stuff, so she let the silky pistachio-coloured dressing gown slide off her shoulders and thrust out her right hip.

'Morning, babes.'

'Sick!' said Rob, appreciatively. 'How long we got?'

'How long do we need?'

'Not long.'

He launched himself at Zoe, fumbling with his leathers.

'I'll do it.' Zoe knew it was important to be in control. Men liked that stuff – even nineteen-year-old boy-men.

Rob groaned. 'Go on, babes.'

Zoe went on, falling to her knees, unzipping Rob's leathers.

'Yeah, like that; more like *that* – please?' Rob's voice

dived up and down an octave or two as if it were still breaking, so Zoe carried on. It didn't take long. If she was honest, she didn't really like this bit of the proceedings but she was very good at pretending she did.

'Love you, babes.' Rob sounded spent but happy. What's not to like? thought Zoe. But the truth was she enjoyed making Rob happy.

'You're good at this, babe. Do you want me to make you come?'

'I'm all right. I'm a very giving kinda girl.'

'Fucking right you are! Kiss?'

Zoe got to her feet, rose on her tiptoes and kissed Rob full on the lips.

'You'll make me hard again.'

'Make the most of it. One day you'll be fat and forty and needing Viagra just to do it *once*.'

'Ha! Not me. Never. Now I wanna fuck you. Slow.'

'Right. Bang goes the eleven o'clock lecture then.'

Rob cocked his fingers, pistol style. 'Bang *bang!*'

Beep-beep: her phone.

'Wait a minute,' said Zoe, moving over to the bed. 'You can fuck me while I read a text.'

Rob raised an eyebrow. 'Sex-y! Whosit?'

Zoe fell back on the bed, pulling off her knickers. She started texting her reply. 'Mum. She wants me to make sure I walk the dog before college.'

'Ha! Tell her you'll walk the dog, doggy style! Fuck, I fancy your mum.'

OUTSTANDING

‘You’re gross!’ said Zoe with a grimace, but she didn’t mean it. Rob had said this sort of stuff before about her mum. She thought it was funny, the idea of Eve being hot, but it also made her, weirdly, slightly proud. A hot mum was better than a not-hot mum, surely? She touched *Send* on the iPhone as Rob sat on the bed next to her, watching.

‘And I bet she’d be so proud if she could see you now.’

‘Sarky!’

‘Sexy!’

‘Fuck me!’

And then, after that particular distraction, Zoe posed for some more pictures for Rob – pouty, porny, very obviously boyfriend pleasing and designed to be something for Rob to revisit on those occasions when Zoe wasn’t around. And Rob posed for pictures for Zoe, too – which seemed fair, even though Zoe felt that pictures of naked men alone always looked a bit, well, *gay*. And then both of them took selfies together. This was the most fun because they looked as good as they felt – maybe even better. A little bit Rob Pattinson and Kristen Stewart, thought Zoe. Cool.

Eve stood in Ivy House's entrance hall, welcoming the new intake. Having learned over time that you could never assume any decision by the super rich was a done deal until the evidence was in front of you, she was satisfied to note the intake included Aija and Petrus Sorensen. Eve had previously seen children delivered to their first day at school by nannies, so on this occasion she was pleasantly surprised to see the children with both their parents.

'Mr and Mrs Sorensen, Aija and Petrus -' Eve was pronunciation perfect - 'welcome!' She extended her hand to Aija, the eldest, first. The girl shook it solemnly and seemed very likely to curtsy. Though she did her best to disguise it, Eve always found it impossible not to favour the school's more attractive children, especially those with impeccable manners. And despite having the offspring of three ex-models on the school roll, with their matching white-blonde hair and huge cornflower eyes the junior Sorensens were not only beautiful children but apparently had manners to match. When Petrus shook

OUTSTANDING

Eve's hand there was, too, a perceptible nod – a bow – of his head. Eve was charmed. 'So, let's go to the classrooms where you can meet your teachers and fellow pupils. Each of you has been assigned a special classmate to show you around the school and tell you where your pegs and lockers are. I guarantee that by lunchtime you'll be so settled you'll feel as if you've been here a week!' Eve glanced at the senior Sorensens. 'Mummy and Daddy are very welcome to come with you to the classrooms, or we can leave them right here and you can say goodbye now.'

'We'll come today,' said Anette, firmly. 'Just to see where you are.'

'But don't come to the class every day,' said her daughter, equally firmly. Aija was ten and therefore about to go into Year Six – aka 'Beethoven'.

'Come every day to my classroom, Mummy!' said eight-year-old Petrus, who was going to be in Year Four – 'Brahms' – where he'd be taught by Eve's favourite Ivy House teacher. At thirty-one, with a modish angular haircut and a bubbly head-girl's personality, Ellie Blake – a former head girl, albeit not at Ivy House – would almost certainly have blanched at the description but was, in Eve's opinion, the definition of diligent and methodical, yet without being dull. Yes, Eve thought, you're both in very safe hands . . .

Anette smiled at Petrus. 'If you want me to – though I know you won't when you see that I'm the only mummy who does.'

He's her favourite, noted Eve. And Aija is a chip off her mother's block, which is probably why.

'OK, so I shall come every day, Aija – whether you like it or not,' said Stefan Sorensen, smiling.

And she's his favourite. Same old same old.

Aija pulled a face. 'Don't be silly, Daddy. Even if you wanted to, you couldn't. You're hardly ever here.'

Stefan Sorensen shrugged and carried on smiling. 'You're right, of course, *pølse*, though I'm here now, aren't I? Come on, let's go.'

Anette turned to Eve. '*Pølse* – Danish for sausage.'

'Well, thank you – *tak!* The addition of *pølse* has just improved my Danish by precisely one hundred per cent.'

Smiles all round; ice duly broken. Fifteen minutes later, Eve was standing on the school's front steps, assuring the Sorensens that everything would be 'fine, just fine! They're in very good hands. Rest assured, we've done this rather a lot.'

'I'll be back at four o'clock,' said Anette. 'Though not every day – Birgitte looks after the children when I can't, so she will deputize quite often. I have a lot of commitments.'

'Of course! We look forward to seeing you both whenever you're able. In the meantime, don't ever hesitate to pick up the phone.' And with that Eve turned her attention to the remaining parents. Even if the Sorensens were on the *Sunday Times* Rich List, it wasn't good to be seen to be devoting her entire attention to them when they were paying pretty much the same fees as everyone else. Though

OUTSTANDING

none of the other hovering couples and a few singles – all of whom, Eve noted, had spotted the Sorensens' waiting Bentley and driver – seemed to mind. Indeed, a few of the fathers looked particularly impressed – *If Ivy House is good enough for the Sorensens . . .* – while several mothers wore expressions Eve could easily read: *How many children do they have? Boys or girls? What years are they in? How soon can we arrange a play-date for Milo/Tiffany? Right, I'll be back at 3:55 . . .*

Some things, Eve noted, didn't change much, even though the style in which they were carried out clearly did. For example, in Sorensen circles, peaked caps and ties for one's driver were obviously *déclassé*. This driver leaned casually on the bonnet of the car, wearing jeans and a hoodie. From a distance he could easily have passed for David Beckham on the school run. Eve turned to the nearest pair of parents.

'Mr and Mrs Brooks! Was Lauren excited this morning? I know that the girls in Bach are going to thoroughly enjoy welcoming a new member into their little gang!'

By ten a.m. the last angsty and nervous parents had departed, ushered soothingly out of the door by Eve ('Really, there's no need to worry. Lauren's EpiPen will be very clearly labelled in her locker and we have six other children in the school with peanut allergies . . .') and she was back in her office, putting off the paperwork that had piled up on the desk while she'd been on meet-and-greet duty in favour of catching up with an education blogger she'd found on Mumsnet. She scanned the article:

Against a challenging economic background, fee-paying schools have continued to grow. New figures released by the UK Independent Schools Conference show that among the 1,222 schools that took part in their survey this year and last, there are now 25,690 non-British pupils with parents living overseas, compared to 23,529 the year before.

Yada-yada-yada. Eve suppressed a yawn and ploughed on.

In the same schools, the number of British pupils fell to 476,007 from 478,932 in 2008. In the past five years, the biggest growth in overseas pupils has come from Russia, Spain, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and China . . . The Schools Conference says that the rise in numbers of non-British pupils ‘highlights the attractions of an education at an independent British school to the global market’.

‘Thought you might need this.’ Gail Prince entered the room without knocking, but bearing a large mug of proper frothy coffee from the new mini Gaggia that had been installed in the staffroom over the holidays.

‘Marvellous, thanks – you are a total treasure. What a morning, eh?’

‘How’d it go? Sorensens OK?’

Eve pulled a mock-reproachful face. ‘We do have several *other* new parents, Gail.’

OUTSTANDING

‘I know, but none of them were on the cover of last Sunday’s *Telegraph* magazine.’

Eve shifted a few of the papers on her desk and pulled out the magazine.

‘No, indeed. Nice cover: “Sex and the City, Sorensen style”.’

She appraised the amusing, stylish portrait: Stefan in his trademark jacket-and-jeans, facing the camera squarely with one arm draped over Anette, who leaned into him while looking into the lens in semi-profile, wearing – distractingly – a high-cut red and white swimsuit that was clearly intended to evoke the Danish flag, plus her old beauty-queen sash (‘Miss Denmark 1995’), vertiginous heels and a tiara. This one’s probably not paste, thought Eve. And those legs . . .

It was an arresting image even without the added visual ‘joke’: in his free hand Stefan held a large bouquet of flowers while Anette held a MacBook Pro. The message was, presumably, that Stefan Sorensen was a master of the universe who was also in touch with his feminine side, and that there was far more to Anette than met the eye – despite the fact that what met the eye was more than enough to be going on with.

‘Handsome couple,’ said Gail.

‘To say the least. And the *children!* Do you remember that old film from a thousand years ago, based on John Wyndham’s *The Midwich Cuckoos?*’

‘Oh, yes – *Village of the Damned*. They did a remake a while ago.’

‘That’s the one. The Sorensen kids are like that – all blonde and blue-eyed and “Tomorrow Belongs To Me”.’

‘That’s awful, Eve. You are so bad!’

Eve knew that Gail was thoroughly enjoying her badness. ‘Any resemblance is purely physical. They are charming children and both lucky enough to have one parent each who loves them the best, which is at least fair. Also, I think Aija, the ten-year-old, is probably very bright, while Petrus is . . . well, he’s a boy and yet to make eye contact with me, so it’s a bit too soon to say. He’s his mother’s favourite, clearly, so probably a bit of a handful. We’ll see.’

‘Can’t wait. Can I borrow that mag for a mo? Everyone in the staffroom is gagging to see it.’

‘Sure. Not too much passing around, though. If people want to read all about the Sorensens, tell them I’ve said to do it online, and preferably in their own time. Now, Mrs Brooks says she’ll call me at midday to check how Lauren is doing. I’m in a meeting, obviously – and Lauren is *fine*, obviously. And thanks for that coffee.’

As Gail left, Eve logged on to her computer and checked Facebook: two status updates already from Anette Sorensen with whom she was now ‘friends’ (Eve had been surprised but undeniably pleased when the request had come from Anette):

Dropped the kids off at their new school today – both are happy and excited. Meanwhile, I’m still sharpening my pencils!

And:

Beloved husband is already en route to Geneva. Guess that leaves me with the rest of the unpacking!

Eve recalled recently reading something about the Sorensens' new house but couldn't remember where; however, Google revealed it was a two-week-old article from the *Sunday Courier's* property supplement. Eve pored over the accompanying picture; now that really *was* a house and a half.

SUSSEX AND THE CITY – SORENSEN STYLE:

Danish power-couple Stefan and Anette Sorensen last week moved out of their Mayfair town house to be nearer their children's new school in East Sussex. They have a daughter, Aija, ten, and a son, Petrus, seven.

Wrong, thought Eve – he's eight.

A spokesperson for the Sorensens, who married in 1998 and made London their home in 2005, says they 'currently have no plans to sell their London house'. However, it is thought that the family will be spending the majority of their time at the Grade I listed Palladian mansion with 7,500 acres, including its own river, woodland and home

farm, all of which was formerly owned by the Russian oligarch Piotr Brezinsky, who has now relocated to New York.

The Sorensens' nearest neighbours, Mr and Mrs Percy of Eastdene Farm, with whom they share a boundary –

Now that should be interesting, thought Eve.

– say they are 'delighted to have such charming neighbours'.

'We were charmed when Anette turned up on the doorstep with the children and a bouquet of very beautiful flowers and said that she hoped the building of the family's new helicopter pad – for which they have full planning permission, I might add – wasn't too noisy,' says Richard Percy. 'I'm sure they will be an asset to the neighbourhood.'

Meanwhile, the Sorensens have been on something of a property spree recently, adding a house in the Hamptons, a Manhattan triplex and a Spanish villa to their portfolio, so it remains to be seen whether they will manage to spend much time at their new local, the Red Lion, or attend a service at their parish church, St Mary's in Eastdene.

Anette Sorensen has a MSc in Economics and is a former Miss Denmark.

Not just a pretty face, then, thought Eve. And then, with a start – Bugger! I wonder if Zoe has remembered to walk Barney? She reached into her bag and extracted her phone.

3

Gail had never imagined she'd live in a bungalow – at least not before she retired and started consulting Stannah catalogues. Yet, back in April, when her parents had decided to move into sheltered accommodation in Bexhill, Gail had sold her pretty first-floor, two-bed flat on the edge of Battle and moved herself and her ten-year-old son, Harry, into her parents' house.

The bungalow, a long, low, 1950s build on a large plot with a detached garage and what estate agents describe as a 'carriage drive', hadn't been Gail's childhood home – her parents had moved into it in the mid-1980s when their daughter had first flown their cosy thatched nest – thus Gail hadn't felt quite as repelled by the idea of moving in as she might have. For a start, her parents were effectively handing over their legacy early, which was typically generous, with the result that, after a decade of living with a bijou balcony heaving with tubs, she and football-mad Harry would now have the best part of half an acre of garden to play with – and in.