

The No. 1 Bestselling Author

Jill Mansell

Meet Me
at
Beachcomber
Bay



Chapter 1

Sometimes it only takes a split second for a state of absolute calm to turn to one of horror and panic.

‘Oh dear, poor thing.’ Clemency turned to watch as a purple-faced businessman in a too-tight suit hurtled across the concourse at Malaga airport in the direction of the departure gates, panting and grunting as he ran and scattering small children in his wake.

The British girl who was working on the Chanel stand in duty-free said, ‘Honestly, it’s amazing how many people don’t bother to pay attention to the boards. Yesterday there was a party of fifteen Spanish guys in one of the bars and they were so busy watching a football match on TV that they ended up missing their flight. Imagine!’

‘That’s crazy,’ Clemency marvelled, trying a purple eyeshadow shot with gold sparkly bits on the back of her hand. *Nice.*

‘Oh, we see everything here. So many people don’t even turn up at the airport until their flight’s about to close.’

‘I couldn’t do that. I always like to give myself loads of time. Then I know I can really relax,’ Clemency said

happily, 'and spend ages in duty-free trying out all the make-up.'

Which was why another forty minutes had passed before she finally arrived at the checkout to pay for the new lipstick she'd chosen, because these things took time, and choosing the perfect lipstick was important.

The bored-looking cashier said, 'May I check your boarding pass, please?'

Clemency glanced down at her left hand, the one that should have been clutching her passport. The passport with the boarding pass neatly tucked inside it.

She looked down at the hand and saw that it was clutching instead a handful of perfume card samplers, each one sprayed with a different scent.

And that was the moment absolute calm turned to horror and panic.

'Just in time,' said the female attendant as Clemency hurtled towards the departures desk. 'We were about to close the gate!'

Clemency couldn't speak. She wanted to fall to her knees and gulp air into her burning lungs, but there was no time; she was already being ushered out through the sliding doors and across the tarmac towards the waiting plane. Her drag-along case was banging against her ankles, perspiration was trickling down her spine and her mouth was dry as she struggled up the clanky metal steps, still hyperventilating. Oh God, she could only imagine the colour of her face. She must be *puce*.

The male flight attendant greeted her with a wink. 'Nice of you to decide to join us. Welcome on board.'

You know that little inner surge of triumph you get when you're on a packed-to-the-gills plane and everyone's boarded and the seat next to yours is magically still empty . . . until at the *very* last minute someone else gets on and you realise you won't be enjoying the luxury of having an empty seat beside you after all?

This, Clemency knew, was the feeling currently being experienced by the passenger occupying seat number 45A. As she made her way towards 45B, she could almost hear the thud of disappointment and his accompanying sigh of resignation.

Oh well. His hopes might have been cruelly dashed, but on the upside he had excellent cheekbones and a beautiful mouth. During her flight over here, the guy in the seat next to hers had weighed almost as much as the plane itself and had been eating tuna sandwiches, so this one was already a marked improvement.

Still getting her breath back, Clemency smiled broadly at him. 'I know, I'm sorry, I'd be disappointed too.'

This was the man's cue to relax, to notice that as far as seat-neighbours were concerned he could do an awful lot worse, and to gallantly offer to lift her heavy case into the overhead locker.

Except this didn't happen. Instead he acknowledged her with the briefest of nods before returning his attention to the phone in his hand.

Then again, she had looked better. Maybe a red-faced, perspiring twenty-five-year-old gasping for breath wasn't his cup of tea.

Case stowed and locker closed, Clemency collapsed into her seat, wiped her face and hands with a tissue and

examined her left foot where the wheels of her carry-on case had repeatedly bashed against her ankle. She exhaled noisily. ‘I can’t believe I almost missed my flight! I *always* make sure I leave loads of time so nothing can go wrong. All these years and it’s never happened before . . . but I suppose the thing is, something always *can* go wrong. Like today. You can’t imagine how I felt when . . . umm . . .’

She trailed to a humiliated halt when she realised the man was determined to ignore her. Nothing, not a flicker; he clearly wasn’t interested *at all*.

He might have a beautiful mouth and excellent cheekbones, but he had no intention of engaging in conversation with the stranger at his side.

Fine. Clemency ostentatiously took out her own phone and began to check her emails. *Because look at me, I’m really busy and important too.*

Half an hour later, once they were flying at 36,000 feet over the Pyrenees, two cabin crew brought the drinks trolley down the aisle, and her travelling companion removed his earbuds in order to speak to them.

‘I don’t believe it.’ Clemency laughed at her own stupidity. ‘I’m such an idiot!’

The man turned to look at her. ‘Sorry?’

‘You! Those things!’ She gestured to the earbuds in his right hand. ‘I was chatting away to you earlier and you completely ignored me, so I stopped talking because I thought you didn’t want to be disturbed. I couldn’t see the wires from here because of the way you were sitting and your collar covered them up. But I can’t believe I didn’t realise the reason you were ignoring me was because you had headphones in.’ Giddy with relief, she added, ‘Well, I suppose

I was in a bit of a state, what with almost missing the flight . . . my brain felt as if it'd been whizzed up in a blender . . . Ooh dear, sorry, that sounds a bit—'

'Red wine, please,' the man said to the blonde flight attendant.

'Certainly, sir. And you, madam? Would you like something from the trolley?'

It was free. Free wine! Why would anyone say no? Except Clemency had observed on plenty of occasions that some people, for mystifying reasons of their own, did sometimes say no.

Ha, not her, though. She said, 'I'd like white wine, please. Oh . . . is it cold?' Because sometimes it wasn't.

The flight attendant wrinkled her nose conspiratorially and said, 'Not very, I'm afraid.'

'I'll have red, then.' Clemency smiled. 'Nothing worse than lukewarm white wine.' The next moment, seeing that her travelling companion was about to put the buds back into his ears, she added, 'I think I deserve a drink, to celebrate not missing this plane!'

'There you go.' The attendant passed them their mini bottles and plastic glasses, along with two airline-sized packets of cheese biscuits.

'Lovely. Thank you.' Clemency filled her glass, raised it towards the man next to her and said, 'Cheers!'

'Cheers,' murmured the man, before glancing back at his phone.

Sometimes persuading someone to make conversation when they didn't want to became a kind of personal challenge. Before he could plug himself back into his music, Clemency said brightly, 'Doesn't it always feel brilliant, having a glass of wine on a plane?'

‘It does.’ He looked pointedly out of the window.

‘I wasn’t late getting to the airport, you know,’ Clemency told him. ‘I had tons of time, which was why I spent ages in duty-free, and it wasn’t until I reached the checkout that I discovered I’d put my passport down somewhere and for the life of me I couldn’t think where I’d left it. Oh God, that *feeling*, though.’ She clenched her free hand and clutched it to her chest at the awful memory. ‘My heart was going like a train, I was trying to ask where it might have been handed in, and everyone in the queue behind me was getting annoyed because all they wanted to do was pay for their duty-free . . .’

For the second time Clemency’s voice trailed off, giving him the chance to join in and say, ‘So what happened next?’

Instead, after an awkward silence that seemed to last longer than Wagner’s *Ring* cycle, he replied, ‘But you found it.’

‘Yes. Yes I did.’ Clemency nodded and looked at the buds he was clearly longing to plug back into his ears. Carefully raising the tray in order to get out of her seat before lowering it again and resting her glass of wine on it, she said, ‘Excuse me,’ and escaped down the aisle.

How embarrassing to realise that whilst you’ve been merrily going through life thinking you were a perfectly nice travelling companion, the kind of person anyone might enjoy sitting next to, you might have been wrong. That you might, in fact, be the kind of irritating person other people *dread* being trapped with.

Chastened, Clemency stared at her reflection in the mirror above the tiny sink in the toilet cubicle. Oh dear, what a mortifying discovery to make. And that poor man, who had presumably been willing her to shut up and leave him alone

instead of wittering on about her stupid passport . . . OK, she wouldn't utter another word from now on, wouldn't even glance at him.

Lesson learnt.

She left the cubicle and made her way back along the aisle. The man in the seat next to hers was gazing out of the window at the great swathes of cloud surrounding them. As Clemency lifted her glass of wine in order to raise the tray and sit back down, he turned and said, 'Want me to hold that for you?'

Hold the front page. He speaks!

But she had no intention of breaking her vow. With a little I'm-fine shake of her head, she put her handbag on the floor in front of her, then went to raise the tray in order to—

Oof . . .

The jolt of the plane was both sudden and dramatic, eliciting shrieks of alarm from several nervous passengers. Having lurched to one side and bounced off the seat in front of her, Clemency ricocheted back and felt rather than saw the contents of the glass hit her chest.

The plane righted itself, the screams and panic subsided and order was restored. From the cockpit, the pilot genially announced over the tannoy, 'Apologies for that spot of turbulence, ladies and gentlemen. If everyone could stay seated for the next couple of minutes and keep their seat belts fastened, we'll just make sure there aren't any more surprises to come.'

Clemency looked down at her pale yellow lacy cotton top, liberally splattered with red wine. The splashes were spreading, joining up into one vast purple splodge across her

front. It was, of course, one of her all-time favourite items of clothing, because that was sod's law, wasn't it? You never got a drink thrown over you when you were wearing some ancient falling-to-pieces T-shirt.

'Whoops, poor you,' said one of the air stewards, hurrying down the aisle to check that everyone's seat belt was fastened. 'Sit down.'

'Oh dear,' said the man next to her as she sat.

Clemency glanced at him; he didn't have his earbuds in. She did a tiny shrug and felt the wet material cold against her skin. Urgh.

'I bet you wish you'd stuck with the lukewarm white wine now.'

This was like being in a silent movie. Clemency raised her hand briefly in a doesn't-matter gesture and reached for the riveting airline magazine in the seat pocket in front of her. Time to read about the dazzling tourist attractions of Malaga.

'Are you . . . not speaking to me?'

Ah, so he'd noticed. She turned to look at him, one eyebrow lifted quizzically. 'Sorry?'

'Are you deliberately ignoring me because you thought I was deliberately ignoring you?' There was a hint of amusement in his voice.

'Not at all,' said Clemency. 'I just thought you preferred not to be disturbed. I was respecting your wishes.'

Except it didn't come out like that; it came out as *wishies*. Like fishies.

Oh God . . .

'You were respecting my what?' The corners of his mouth were twitching now. 'My *wishies*?'

‘Wishes.’

‘You said wishies.’

‘I was going to say I respected your personal boundaries,’ said Clemency, ‘but seeing as we were sitting next to each other, I decided at the last minute to change it to wishes.’

‘But a bit of it got left behind.’ He nodded. ‘I like the sound of wishies.’

In an ideal world, she would have produced her own pair of earbuds at this point and fitted them into her ears. But her earbuds were in her big suitcase in the hold of the plane. Instead she said, ‘Good,’ and returned her attention to the magazine.

‘Does this mean you’re ignoring me again now?’

And when she looked across once more, he was smiling. With his beautiful mouth.

‘What are you saying? That it’s fine for you not to speak to me, but I’m not allowed to not-speak to you?’

He inclined his head and replied gravely, ‘I’m sorry. I apologise. I didn’t mean to be rude earlier, but I clearly was. And now I feel doubly guilty. May I at least offer you half of my drink?’ He hadn’t poured his wine out; it was still in the mini bottle. When she hesitated, he indicated her ruined top and said, ‘May as well risk it. What’s the worst that can happen?’

Clemency held out her empty glass. ‘Well, the plane could crash.’

Sometimes, just sometimes, you decide you really don’t like someone, then they go on to confound you by turning out to be about a million times nicer than you ever suspected.

His name was Sam, he lived in London and he owned

and ran an IT company that involved a lot of flying around Europe visiting clients. As soon as they were allowed to unfasten their seat belts, he indicated Clemency's top and said, 'If you give that a soak before the wine dries, there's a chance of saving it, isn't there? Do you have something you can change into?'

She shook her head. 'All my clothes are in my big case. It's OK.'

Sam leant down and unzipped the bag he'd stowed beneath the seat in front of him. He pulled out a navy V-necked sweater and handed it to her. 'Here you go, you can wear this. Don't worry, it's clean. Give your top a rinse in the sink and you might be able to rescue it.'

The sweater was incredibly soft to the touch. It also smelt amazing, Clemency discovered shortly afterwards in the toilet cubicle as she pulled it over her head and pushed the sleeves up in order to rinse her yellow top in the sink.

'Well?' said Sam when she returned.

Clemency dropped the wrung-out top into the sick bag he was holding open for her and tucked it under her seat. 'I think it's beyond help, but we'll see. Thanks for letting me borrow your sweater.' The smell of the soft wool was intoxicating; seriously, she kept wanting to bury her nose in it. Except that would look weird.

Sam's tone was genial. 'Not a problem. It suits you.'

'As soon as we get our cases back, I'll be able to change into something else.' Clemency stroked the wool fondly. 'It's lovely, though. You know, I once nearly died a horrible death because of a sweater like this.'

'How so?' Sam looked quizzical as she took a careful sip of the shared wine.

‘It belonged to my sister and I borrowed it without asking. She caught me wearing it and tried to wrestle it off me, and I ended up hanging backwards out of my bedroom window with the sleeves tangled round my neck.’

Sam laughed. ‘In that case, I promise I won’t try to wrestle mine off you.’

‘That’s a relief.’ The rogue thought that such a scenario might actually be quite exciting flitted through Clemency’s brain. *Ooh-er.*

‘And how old were you when this happened?’

‘It was just the other week.’ She waited, then broke into a grin. ‘No, our wrestling days are behind us now. This was back when we were sixteen.’

Sam’s eyebrows rose. ‘You were both sixteen? So you’re twins?’

Now that they’d turned towards each other and were having a proper conversation, she could see, up close, that his eyes were brown with flecks of gold radiating from their centres and a black outer ring around each iris. His lashes were black too. There were faint violet shadows beneath his eyes and a tiny mole on his right temple. And as for his mouth . . . well, it was still beautiful.

In fact, getting more beautiful by the minute.

Chapter 2

OK, concentrate. Sam had asked her a question and she couldn't just sit here gazing slack-jawed in wonder at his face.

'Not twins.' Clemency gathered herself. 'Well, not even sisters really. We're stepsisters.'

'Ah.' Picking up on her rueful tone, Sam said, 'And which of you is the elder?'

'Belle is. By two months, which she never, *ever* lets me forget. Makes all the difference apparently.'

'I can imagine. And how old were you when your parents got together?'

'Fifteen. It probably sounds funny now, but you can't imagine how traumatic it was at the time.' Clemency shook her head. 'We already knew each other, you see. Went to the same school. And we were just so completely different, we'd never got along together at all. Belle was perfect and organised, and quite show-offy because her dad was this multimillionaire and she'd grown up being given everything she ever wanted. Whereas me and my mum were living in a rented flat above a fish and chip shop where Mum worked

sixty hours a week.' She smiled as she said it, because just yesterday, while she'd been staying with her mum and step-father at their glorious villa outside Malaga, they'd jokingly referred to 'the chip shop years'.

Sam said drily, 'I can see that it could be awkward.'

'God, tell me about it. Belle had a huge swimming pool in her back garden. The nearest we had to a garden was our window box. Her dad drove a pale blue Bentley Continental. My mum had a rusty clapped-out Fiesta. Belle used to make fun of my clothes, and me and my friends used to make fun of her and her friends. Then one day my mum sat me down and told me she'd been secretly seeing someone for the last six months and things were getting serious. And I was so *thrilled* for her, because for years I'd been longing for her to meet someone nice. I couldn't understand why she hadn't said anything before.' Clemency paused. 'Until she told me who it was she'd been seeing. And then I couldn't believe it. Nor could Belle, obviously, but for once in her life she wasn't able to get her own way and make it stop. We both prayed they'd realise they'd made a horrible mistake and break up, so that everything could go back to normal. But it just didn't happen, because they were properly in love. The next thing we knew, they'd announced that they were getting married. Is this boring?'

He looked startled. 'What? No!'

'OK, just needed to check.' After last time, she was wary. 'I bored you before. Don't want to do it again.'

Sam shook his head. 'Seriously, that wasn't you, it was me. Now I'm enthralled. Gripped.' He gestured with his left hand. 'Please continue. You can't stop now.'

His voice, beautifully modulated but not off-puttingly

posh, was the kind you'd never tire of listening to. Better still, now that he'd stopped being completely dismissive, it was warm and confiding, with a dash of humour. Clemency felt herself falling under his spell; was he as interested in her as she was in him? It was too soon to tell, but the faint possibility that he might be was sending little zings of anticipation down her spine.

'Well, everyone at school thought it was hilarious, but Belle and I were mortified. Belle was extra angry because she was convinced my mum was only marrying her dad for his money. Which drove me insane, because I knew my mum wasn't like that. And once you'd seen the two of them together, it was obvious how happy they were.' She shrugged. 'So that was that; we ended up having to be bridesmaids in matching dresses, which was a laugh. And after the wedding, me and Mum gave up our flat and moved into their great big house with the swimming pool in the garden and the Bentley on the driveway. Not to mention the stropky step-sister who went ballistic whenever I borrowed her clothes.'

'Which, let me guess, just made it all the more fun to do.'

'Well of course it did! Because it was such a thrill when I got away with it. Who could resist a challenge like that? And her clothes were so much more expensive than mine,' added Clemency. 'Which made it better still.'

'So you were . . . what, sixteen by then? And both still at school? Weren't the two of you given the same amount of money to buy clothes?'

'Oh yes, we were. Her dad insisted on that. We got the same allowance, but at that age I was going through a surfing craze, so all my money went on wetsuits, traction pads and board wax. Out of the water, everything I wore came from

charity shops.' She grinned. 'Which of course meant Belle would rather go out stark naked than wear any of my dreadful clothes. So that was a win-win situation for me.'

Sam said, 'And did you both slightly enjoy having a go at each other?'

Ha, he knew.

'A bit. Sometimes. Me more than her,' Clemency admitted. 'What with us being the interlopers who moved into the house she'd grown up in. You can understand that, I suppose. And it was only for a couple of years, until we both left for university. How about you? Do you live on your own?'

OK, maybe not the subtlest way of asking the question, which presumably accounted for the brief moment of hesitation before Sam said, 'Yes, on my own.' He took a sip of his wine before continuing. 'But you should have seen the house I shared with six other students while I was at university. Actually, you can thank your lucky stars you didn't. What a health hazard that place was. There were real live toadstools growing in the bathroom.'

Clemency felt herself perk up like a meerkat. 'We had water dripping from a light fitting for months in our living room.'

'We used to have competitions to see who could eat the most out-of-date food.' Sam shook his head at the memory of just how gross it had all been.

'We once found a dead mouse in our fridge.'

He smiled. 'You're very competitive, aren't you?'

'Rate yourself for competitiveness,' Clemency said promptly. 'Out of ten.'

'Nine,' said Sam.

'Eleven.' She grinned. 'See? I win.'

They flew on, heading back to the UK, talking non-stop. Two more mini bottles of red wine were opened, and Clemency felt their connection deepen. There was an undeniable chemistry between them; at first she'd wondered if it was just on her side, but now she was pretty sure the feeling was mutual. When you found yourself on the receiving end of this much attention and the spark between you was almost palpable, it was kind of a giveaway.

And a very nice giveaway at that. The conversation had swooped and darted from one subject to the next, from teenage adventures to escapades on holiday in their twenties, from the various part-time jobs they'd undertaken over the years to all-time embarrassing moments.

'Mine was pretty awful.' Sam shuddered at the memory. 'I asked a client when her baby was due. She said, "I'm not pregnant, I'm just fat."'

'OK, I can beat that. This guy brought his little daughter into the café where I was working, and I said, "Ooh, is Daddy going to buy you an ice cream?" And the little girl looked all confused and the person with her said, "Actually, I'm her mum."'

Sam almost choked on his drink. '*God*.'

'I know! But . . . short hair, no make-up, jeans and a fleece . . . and in my defence, there was a definite hint of moustache.'

'What did you do?'

Clemency flapped her hand. 'The obvious. Apologised like crazy and told them I was registered blind. Then I served them coffee and ice cream and pretended I was counting out the money by feeling the coins. They sat in the café for thirty minutes, and the whole time I had to

make out I was doing everything by touch . . . OK, you can stop laughing now, it wasn't funny at the time. I was eighteen and mortified.'

The captain's voice came over the tannoy. 'Ladies and gentlemen, can you make sure your seat belts are fastened . . . we're now beginning our descent.'

And for the first time in her life Clemency wished a flight could have lasted longer. But hopefully this wouldn't be the last she'd be seeing of this particular travelling companion. Once the plane landed, Sam would be heading into London and she'd be making her way back to Northampton, which wasn't the most ideal of situations. But it wasn't completely ridiculous either. When two people liked each other, a bit of commuting might sometimes need to be factored into the equation. And from Northampton to north London was only . . . what, sixty-odd miles? That was doable.

In her imagination, Clemency realised, she was already picturing them driving to meet each other, or catching trains, the excitement of seeing each other again more than making up for the slight inconvenience involved. And who knew, maybe if things progressed nicely, it might even make sense for her to leave Northampton and search for a job in London . . . unless Sam wanted to move out of the capital to be with her . . .

OK, this was like being a teenager, scribbling your first name and your new boyfriend's surname all over your school exercise books just to see how they'd look together if you got married. Though she didn't even know Sam's surname and couldn't ask him what it was in case he guessed why she wanted to know. Ah, but once they'd managed to retrieve their cases from the luggage carousel, she would give him

one of her business cards and hopefully he'd return the compliment.

They landed safely – always a bonus – and made their way through passport control, then waited at baggage reclaim for their cases. Clemency's was one of the first ones to appear on the carousel and she lifted it off with relief.

'OK, don't go anywhere. I'll be two minutes.' Having unzipped her case and rummaged through it, she pulled out a red stripy top and waved it at Sam. 'There's a loo down the corridor – I'll go and change in there, then you can have your sweater back. Oh, and take this as well.' As an apparently careless and casual afterthought, she handed him one of the business cards that had been tucked into a side pocket inside her case. 'Right, I'll be back in no time.'

Then, because Sam was gazing intently at her rather than at the luggage carousel, she added, 'Mind you don't miss your case!'

In the ladies' loo there was a queue for the cubicles. At last it was her turn. Clemency changed out of Sam's top into her own, then gave his sweater one last lingering sniff, committing the scent of it to memory. Although hopefully she would smell it again soon, maybe when they said goodbye to each other a few minutes from now and he gave her a kiss on the cheek.

Or on the mouth . . .

OK, doing it again, stop it. Expertly reversing her cases and manoeuvring them out of the cubicle, Clemency prepared to make her way back to the carousel. Oh, but what if Sam murmured, 'I'm not ready to say goodbye yet. Can I buy you dinner?'

And after that: 'Now I'm definitely not ready to say

goodbye. Do you have to go back to Northampton tonight, or could I persuade you to stay?’

Could he? That was the question. Clemency felt herself quiver with anticipation; she was so clearly able to picture Sam’s face and hear his voice as he issued the invitation.

Oh, who was she trying to kid? Of course she would stay. Today, meeting him on the flight, had felt like one of those defining, life-altering events.

If Sam were to ask her to spend the night with him, there was no way in the world she’d say no.

But when she reached the carousel, there was no sign of him.

Which was unexpected, but presumably meant he’d decided to visit the men’s loo before making the journey home.

After loitering at a discreet distance for several minutes, Clemency headed over there, pushed open the door and called out, ‘Sam, are you in here?’

Silence. Until a man shouted back, ‘Yeah, darlin’, that’s me, I’m Sam. Couldn’t come over and give me a hand, could you? Ha ha ha . . .’

She let the door swing shut. All of a sudden the happy-fantasy-that-was-about-to-become-reality appeared to be veering wildly off course. How could Sam have vanished?

Her heart clattering, Clemency made her way through customs. Still no sign of him anywhere. Emerging into the arrivals hall, she searched the sea of faces without success. Hastily she checked her phone to see if he’d texted her, but no. Nothing.

What was going on? This made no sense at all.

Out through the revolving doors she went, because where

else could she search for him in a huge airport? If he'd left a car here and had headed for one of the car parks, she'd never find him, but if he were getting a cab . . .

Except why was she even doing this? She'd given him her business card – if he wanted to be in touch, he had her number. It was just that it was so completely unexpected. Apart from anything else, she still had his navy sweater. And it wasn't just any old sweater; this one was cashmere.

Seconds later, she spotted him. It was only the back of his head, but it was definitely him. Feeling as if she'd been hit in the stomach by a medicine ball, Clemency dragged her cases behind her until she was alongside him. He was waiting in the long queue for a cab, facing directly ahead, jaw visibly tense.

Why? *Why?*

One thing was for sure: she wasn't going to ask.

'Here you go.' She held the sweater in front of him. 'Thanks for letting me borrow it.'

For a split second she glimpsed a world of pain mingled with guilt in his eyes. Then he took the sweater from her and slowly shook his head. 'I'm really sorry.'

Clearly this was the end of the line; the connection between them had been as fleeting as it had been fun. And now it was over, the shortest holiday romance in history.

Clemency said, 'Me too,' and turned away.

He caught up with her twenty seconds later, his hand reaching for her arm to stop her in her tracks.

'OK, I need to explain.' He looked . . . agonised. There was no other word for it.

'You don't have to. It's not rocket science. I'm guessing you have a girlfriend or a fiancée.' He wasn't wearing a wedding ring, but she said it anyway. 'Or a wife.'

'I do.' Sam nodded.

'Girlfriend?'

He exhaled and said evenly, 'Wife.'

Oh. Right. 'And you just forgot to mention her before. Not that there's any reason why you should,' Clemency amended. What had they done, after all, other than sit next to each other and pass the time of day during what would otherwise have been a dull flight?

Except they both knew it had been more, so much more than that.

'I didn't forget.' Sam hesitated, as if searching for the right words. 'I . . . put it to the back of my mind.'

Like thousands of other married men the world over. And women too. It wasn't as if he'd committed some heinous crime. If anything, Clemency envied his wife for having married a man with scruples and enough of a conscience to stay on the straight and narrow.

Lucky old her.

'Oh well, it was nice to meet you anyway.' Crushing disappointment was one thing, but she couldn't be cross. She added on impulse, 'Did you look at my business card?'

'No.' He shook his head and it was clear that he was telling the truth. 'No I didn't.'

Good. 'OK, this is going to sound weird, but can I have it back?' She felt herself flush. 'It's just that I'm . . . um, running a bit low.'

The real reason was so she wouldn't have to spend the next few weeks wondering if he might, against all the odds, be in touch. It would be so much easier to simply remove the possibility that that could happen.

'Sorry, I don't have it. It's in the bin next to the newspaper

stand in Arrivals. If you want, I could go back and get it for you . . .’

Of course he’d thrown her card away; why would he even want to keep it? His wife might come across it and wonder what he’d been up to. *God, just for a few seconds, she’d forgotten he had a wife.*

‘No, it’s fine, doesn’t matter.’ Clemency looked at him, taking in every detail of his face for the last time. With a brief smile, because she really was leaving now, she said, ‘I’m not that desperate.’

‘I wish things could have been different.’ Sam put his hand out to clasp hers, before stopping himself as if she were radioactive.

Wishing she’d just kept the nice sweater now, Clemency said wryly, ‘But they aren’t.’