

# **The Travel Auction**

by

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# One

I felt my throat tighten and instantly knew that I'd made a terrible mistake. I glanced around the blurring party faces, difficult to recognise through my alcohol-induced haze. I gasped, fighting to breathe and instinctively patted myself down, frantically searching my pockets. I tried desperately to suck in more oxygen before I started to choke, my legs collapsed and I hit the floor hard, convulsing. Someone shouted, muffled and distant as panic set in around me.

“Shit! Where is it? Quick, find his...”

And that's the last thing I remember. Next thing I knew I was waking up in hospital with the hangover from hell.

“You look like crap, mate,” said a voice I vaguely recognised.

“Kate?”

“Don't be daft. You're a free man now, remember?”

I groaned and tried to sit up as a shockwave of nausea washed over me. I managed to lean over the side of the bed, then threw up all over Justin's shoes.

I was still feeling rough on Monday morning, which made my telephone call to the travel company particularly difficult. I swore under my breath as I replaced the receiver and slumped over my desk. *What do I now?*

“I guess I'll have to advertise,” I said to Justin.

“So you’ll put an advert on eBay for what? *Lady wanted: occasional nursemaid to needle-phobic thirty-something, for all expenses paid trip to South America. Oh, and must have the name Kate Thornly.*”

Justin sniggered. I gave him the finger and took a bite from my sandwich. His sarcasm annoyed me but I was also acutely aware of how much truth there was in it. I’d been dreaming of a trip like this for years, working up the courage to throw caution to the wind, give notice at work and just go.

“Actually...” I said between mouthfuls of sandwich, “...that’s not a bad idea.”

### **Advert on eBay. 24<sup>th</sup> September**

*Adventure of a Lifetime for **KATE THORNLY!***

*Time Left 6 days 7 hours 32s*

*Bid History 0 bids*

*Starting bid £0.01*

*Reserve Not Met*

*Enter Maximum bid £*

#### **Description**

*Three-month trip around South America with thirty-something male. The seller will meet all expenses. This is a genuine sale. Bidders **MUST** be able to meet all of the following conditions:*

- 1. Must be able to leave on 2<sup>nd</sup> October for three complete months.*
- 2. Must have all jabs up-to-date for South America. i.e. Argentina, Peru, Bolivia, Paraguay and Brazil. (Injections - polio, typhoid etc. but in particular yellow fever.)*
- 3. Must be physically fit enough to complete 4-day Inca Trail.*
- 4. Mustn’t be squeamish and should be able to administer emergency first aid and must be comfortable handling needles.*

5. *MUST* have a full 10 year passport and *MUST, MUST, MUST* have a passport in the name of **KATE THORNLY** – this is essential – all bidders must e-mail a scanned copy of their passport for verification prior to bidding.

6. Spanish speaker preferred.

7. Any bid must include a profile of you.

8. Please e-mail any questions before the deadline.

**THIS IS AN UNUSUAL, BUT I GUARANTEE COMPLETELY GENUINE OFFER. I HAVE AN ALLERGY TO NUTS AND NEED A TRAVEL COMPANION WHO'S ABLE TO ADMINISTER EMERGENCY ADRENALIN SHOULD THE NEED ARISE.**

Justin peered over my shoulder as I finished typing.

“You’re not serious?”

“Why not? Has to be worth a try. Kate and I had an agreement. I got a zero interest credit card to pay for the trip up front and she was supposed to pay me back in monthly instalments. Instead, she cancelled her standing order when she gave me the elbow. I rang the travel company; they can’t refund me and won’t change the name on her ticket. So, I either find another *Kate Thornly* to go with me, or I ditch the entire trip and lose all that money.”

“All you need now is a guardian angel armed with adrenaline,” said Justin, somewhat sarcastically.

I shrugged.

“She’ll have a fantastic holiday out of it,” I said, unsure whom I was trying to convince.

“What about a photo?” said Justin.

I considered this for a moment; it wasn't something I'd thought of.

"To be honest, looks aren't important. I just need a travel companion who can keep an eye on what I eat and to be there if I have another episode..."

Justin rolled his eyes.

"What?"

"A photo of you, dopey. These *Kate Thornlys* should know what they're getting into – you could be the elephant man!"

### **Kate Thornly (the 2<sup>nd</sup>)**

Of course I'd heard about the eBay auction, who hadn't.

But luckily I'd avoided all the early attention from my mates because none of them knows me as *Kate Thornly*, to them I'm Angel.

I hate being called Kate. Have done all the way back to school. Kids can be so spiteful. *Katy the Cake* they'd taunted me, because I was a bit overweight back then.

So I decided to use my middle name, the one my dad had apparently insisted on shortly after I was born and he'd buggered off.

At the age of nine, I started telling mum I wanted to be called Angela. She didn't take the news well. It took several weeks for her to wheedle the reason out of me. I eventually told her one tearful afternoon at a friend's birthday party, where I'd insisted everyone call me by my new name. I think mum felt guilty, unaware I was being bullied. So we made a pact and from that day I was no longer *Katy the Cake*. Mum didn't like calling me Angela, so over time I became Angel. From then on without any 'Deed Poll' amateur dramatics and aside from occasionally having to use

my real name for form filling or booking holidays, I more or less forgot that *Kate Thornly* had ever existed. Until that bloody eBay advertisement.

**Me**

Somehow, the advert on eBay got noticed, but a few of the replies weren't quite what I was expecting...

*E-Mail From: Kate Thornly*

*To: Jonathan Cork*

*Sent: 26 September 08:26*

*Subject: South America*

*Surely you should be paying me to come with you to a continent where they eat guinea pigs and hate the English for reclaiming the Falkland Islands? My fee is one thousand pounds per month, plus all additional expenses.*

*(Mrs) Kate Thornly*

*E-Mail From: Kate Thornly*

*To: Jonathan Cork*

*Sent: 26 September 17:18*

*Subject: Holiday Travel*

*Dear Jonathan,*

*I would dearly love to accompany you on your Latin American adventure. I just have one query: can you send an itinerary of the trip advising when we'll be in a major city as I need to draw my pension every Thursday? I look forward to hearing from you.*

*Yours sincerely*

*Kate Thornly (divorced 1985)*

*PS. You look rather dashing in your photograph*

*E-Mail From: Mathew Tope*

*To: Jonathan Cork*

*Sent: 27 September 01:44*

*Subject: Holiday Travel*

*Hi Jonathan,*

*I'm not Kate Thornly yet, but I'm in the final stages of my gender re-alignment surgery. I've still to officially change my name (my new friends call me Mildred – unfortunately I've had to leave many of the old ones behind for reasons of acceptance of my new self) and Kate Thornly seems like a nice feminine name. I'm not sure how long it takes to change a name by Deed Poll, or how quickly I can get a new passport, but would you consider waiting for me? You seem like a decent man who might be broadminded enough to accept a new woman such as myself. Can't wait to hear from you, I'll write again after my surgery this weekend.*

*Best wishes and new horizons*

*Mildred (soon to be Kate Thornly...?)*

I wasn't prepared for the responses I got from the advertisement. I heard a rumour that a web link to the advert was e-mailed from company to company in most cities. I don't know if that's true, but the 'hits' counter on my eBay page was up to 80,000 after day two, nearly 300,000 by day three and as I sit here now it's over 750,000. Surely there can't be that many Kate Thornlys in the country?

Kate Thornly the 1st was not amused.

“I’ve been made a laughing stock,” she moaned to me over the phone.

“That wasn’t my intention,” I said, but I couldn’t help a private smile.

“But now someone else will get to go on *my* trip. I helped you plan it, I’ve nurse-maided you all these years, and now another *me* gets the benefit...”

“I’d stop there if I were you Kate. Aside from leaving me for someone else, you’ve also left me with *your* debt. So I’m afraid if you’re looking for sympathy from me, you are...”

*Click.*

I lifted my head from my hands and glanced over at Justin.

“This is bonkers. Where the hell do I start?”

“How many have you got? We’ll whittle them all down to a short list, like they do for job interviews.

“Five hundred and twelve,” I replied, in a daze from sitting in front of the computer screen all day. Justin shook his head and grinned.

“What?” I said, from behind fingers still clasped across my face.

“You’re an analyst, right? At most times as we have often speculated, a perfectly useless skill. But here’s an opportunity to put that knowledge to some use.”

I lifted my head from my hands.

“We set parameters, strip down the numbers according to your criteria...”

“Except that I don’t really have any – I’m not looking for a girlfriend,” I interrupted.

“Maybe not, but we have to be brutal with the raw data to crunch the numbers down. That’s what we do, remember.”

“Did,” I corrected him, smiling for the first time that day. Handing in my notice to go off travelling had been a huge deal and I’d dithered for months before finally biting the bullet. But now, despite the small problem of recruiting a new travel companion, it was a huge relief to be leaving the office job I’d always hated.

“Okay, *did*. But let’s use those skills before you leave them somewhere in darkest Peru, never to be seen again...”

I shrugged, glad someone else was huddled over my computer to help take some of the responsibility.

“Let’s make a list. Top of the agenda – age. I assume you don’t want to travel with a pensioner?”

“Nor a teenager,” I said, remembering one of the e-mails.

“Er, no. Although...”

I rolled my eyes, tapping my keyboard, setting up a search programme. Justin winked at me then dropped his eyes to the pad.

“Twenty to thirty five?” he said, jotting down some notes.

“Twenty five to forty.”

“Marital status. I’m assuming single?”

We spent several hours building our database and inputting information, applying parameters and arguing over my apparently ‘conservative’ choices.

“And finally, but most importantly, breast size?”

I closed my eyes in despair.

“Just kidding. Go for it.”

I glanced up, attempted a half-hearted smile and then hit ‘enter’. Justin pulled his chair nearer.

“How many?”

I stared at the big zero on the screen.

### **Kate Thornly (the 2<sup>nd</sup>)**

I thought I'd just keep quiet, let it pass, but my friend Maria had other ideas. She'd booked a holiday for us last year and had been surprised at the name on my passport, so I'd had to explain. Maria has a good memory, so once the penny dropped that my name matched the ad, she started on at me and didn't let up.

“Think about it, three months all expenses paid. This is once-in-a- lifetime stuff, especially with your, well, you know...”

“Which is exactly why no one in their right mind would ever pick me to go with them...”

“Stop right there,” Maria's stern voice interrupted.

I sighed, knowing I was in for one of her lectures.

“You are an intelligent, attractive woman. What have you got to lose?”

And that's how it started.

## Two

### Me

The auction deadline was looming and I was no closer to getting on a plane with a travel companion. Actually that sounds a bit defeatist. There were options, by that I mean a shortlist of three possible *Kate Thornlys*, but none of them filled me with much enthusiasm.

The first Kate (let's call her Kate 'A' for now, to save any confusion later) was twenty-five, just scrapping into my lower age range, not that age mattered anymore, I was getting desperate. The only problem was her looks. I don't mean she was unattractive, far from it. But she was the spitting image of Kate Thornly the 1<sup>st</sup> – not something I wanted to be reminded of every day for the next three months. Justin couldn't see the similarity, but I could.

Strike one.

Kate 'B' was at the higher end of the age range at forty-eight.

I fleetingly considered her, but was put off by her gothic appearance. In her letter she seemed a little too interested in the Inca sacrificial sites and their whole 'offerings to the gods' philosophy. A pity, she would have been an interesting prospect, if I were in any way interested in the occult.

Strike two.

Talk about extremes. Kate 'C' was off the scale, but in a completely different way. I can't remember which church she was a member of, possibly one of those trendy Christian youth groups. But what really put me off were the references in her e-mail about how much charity work we could do in each country. That didn't fit into

my agenda at all. I hadn't worked my arse off in the city, and slaved away for all those long hours to waste time working for other people, what was the point in that? Call me selfish and arrogant, but that's just the way it was.

Strike three.

Which left me with nothing. Zero. Diddly squat.

### **Kate Thornly (the 2<sup>nd</sup>)**

I no longer have a friend called Maria. No, never met her. Who? What a cow!

We'd had a good laugh speculating about what sort of person he'd end up with; it really was potluck wasn't it? I mean, he was tied to a *Kate Thornly* but had no say in what type of person she was. It was all just down to a name. Of course I didn't write in, despite Maria's insistence, I wasn't that stupid or easy to persuade. We Scots are stubborn to the last.

Do you know how far I went to avoid getting involved with that stupid advert? Knowing how conniving my friend can be, okay, her heart is in the right place and she always thinks she's doing things 'for my own good,' but knowing how mischievous she is, I actually hid my passport. As soon as she started to try and persuade me, I recognised the tremor of excitement in her voice and the alarm bells went off. I excused myself to go for a wee, nipped into the bathroom and tucked my passport behind the basin pedestal.

I thought I was one step ahead of her. Unfortunately, when we'd gone away on holiday last year we'd taken photocopies of our passports as a precaution against having them stolen. A very fine and sensible idea at the time, but Maria still had those photocopies tucked away in a drawer somewhere, gathering dust. Until now.

Picture me shaking my head at Maria as I write this. Thanks a bunch *amigo*.

## **Me**

A rabbit appeared out of a very empty hat. Kate Thornly the 2<sup>nd</sup> dropped into my inbox just in the nick of time. And she seemed so, normal.

“Thirty two years old... trained nurse... up for a challenge... Bloody perfect,” said Justin as he speed-read through her introduction letter.

“And the passport matches?”

I nodded, still a little shocked that I might actually have found someone.

“What about the photo?”

I double clicked on the attachment, which still managed to raise a smile even after several viewings. It had been Justin’s idea to request all photos be taken with a newspaper. This was so that, in his words, I “wouldn’t end up with someone who may have looked okay in a photo taken fifty years ago...” I had to hand it to him, it was a good idea, despite being a bit tacky.

“Bloody hell!”

Justin was staring at the screen. An attractive girl with mousy hair, probably around five feet four, slim but with partially visible curves, was standing in a shower cubicle, half turned towards the camera. She was naked, with cascading water frozen in mid-air around her. It was a stunning shot that grabbed my attention. The real genius however, was that the newspaper front and back pages opened across the middle part of the photograph, barely covering from the lower portion of her milky white breasts to just below the hemline of an imaginary mini skirt. The image was even more erotic because the expression on her face was quizzical yet warm and couldn’t possibly have been posed for. It had been captured, almost as if she were unaware the photograph was being taken.

Justin was salivating as he studied every inch of the photograph.

“You lucky, lucky bastard! What the hell are you waiting for? Pick up the damn phone!”

### **Kate Thornly (the 2<sup>nd</sup>)**

There was something odd in Maria’s behaviour. She was desperately trying to conceal her excitement, so I asked her outright what was going on. I should have known she was up to something.

“I’m taking you shopping,” she said.

“I don’t need anything.”

“I do. Come on, humour me, I value your opinion.”

I shook my head and smiled. It was a private joke when we went shopping together. I’d sit by the fitting rooms and Maria would ask what I thought of the endless clothes she would try on. I’d agree or disagree with the fit, colour and suitability, etcetera, confusing the hell out of the shop assistant who was by then convinced I had absolutely no taste. Afterwards we’d have a coffee and laugh our heads off as Maria mimicked the reaction of the shop assistant to our double act.

Sitting in Maria’s car, I was none the wiser. I heard the car boot open and then it slammed down again, rocking the car - something heavy having been thrown in. I turned to face Maria as she climbed into the driver’s seat.

“Couple of bits for the journey,” she said.

“Oh. We’re not going local today then?”

“Not exactly.”

I shrugged, it made no difference to me. I had the whole day and besides, I enjoyed our little adventures.

## **Me**

“What about a contingency plan if...” I began.

“Relax. You spoke to her, right? And she didn’t give any sign of backing out or being a loony, so it’s all good, we have lift off. You’re gonna have the most amazing time, forget all about the *other* Kate Thornly and it’s happy days.”

I took a deep calming breath. As if I wasn’t nervous enough about the whole trip, I’d now be going with a complete stranger. Even so, it was exciting to take off travelling for three months. And her picture was dynamite!

Reading her letter again, seeing the photo and speaking to her on the phone had definitely fed my ego. I reckoned I was in for a raunchy trip and I was secretly rubbing my hands together. After all, any girl who was willing to send in that sort of photo had to be up for a good time...

## **Kate Thornly (the 2<sup>nd</sup>)**

“You did what?!”

If I was expecting a sheepish apology, I was soon put right.

“Listen, you can do this. The man wants *you*. It’s the adventure of a lifetime and don’t you dare back out. What the hell else have you got planned for the next few months? You’ve been tiptoeing around life ever since... what I mean is, it’s all organised. I’ve even found your passport, naughty minx - it took me ages. You’ve a backpack in the boot with all the essentials. So sweet pea, *you’re* going to South America!”

I’ve no idea how long my jaw hung open, but it was long enough for Maria to reach across and gently push it back up.

“We’re meeting him in an hour. Tomorrow morning you’re getting on a plane. First stop is Argentina, then Peru, Bolivia and Brazil. You better get him to send back some pictures, the girls all clubbed together to make this happen and will want to hear how you’re getting on. Angel, are you okay with this?”

I was unable to say anything for a long time. How do you react to something like that?

“YEEEEHHHARRRR!!!” I screamed out, a nervous reaction rather than an excited one, as a big knot formed in my stomach.

“WHOOPPPEEEEE!!!” I shouted again, and then broke into a fit of giggles that quickly developed into tears. What sort of person wanted to go travelling with me? What use could I possibly be?

Maria screeched the car to a stop, undid her seat belt and reached over to hug me.

“You’ll be okay, this is just what you need. You can do this,” she repeated over and over as I cried into her shoulder.

## **Me**

I woke abruptly, in a cold sweat. It was the same nightmare that had haunted me since mum died. Was it really a month ago? I shuddered and leant over to check the clock; 3:16am. I felt the familiar guilt well up. I hate hospitals, always have. And those last few visits to see mum were awful. I’d get hot, then feel sick and have to get out. It was the *smell*, clinical and desperate...

I screwed my eyes tightly shut, remembering my own recent stay in hospital. I don’t remember much about the ambulance ride, only the expression on the paramedic’s face.

“You had us worried there,” she’d said, in a tone that was both concerned and disapproving. She didn’t look me in the eye again.

What on earth had I been thinking? I wasn’t a nutcase, I had a good job, career prospects and... I allowed myself a wry smile. *Nutcase*. Now there was an irony.

I took a deep calming breath and sank back into the pillow. In just a few hours I’d finally be leaving all that behind, flying away on an incredible adventure. There was just the small matter of meeting my new travel companion.

### **Kate Thornly (the 2<sup>nd</sup>)**

As we got closer to the hotel I felt the butterflies in my tummy playing havoc and a mixture of nervous excitement flooded through me. I suddenly realised that Maria had been speed talking for the last half an hour, not unusual for her, but I wondered if it was something more than just being nervous on my behalf. Then it hit me. She was trying to stop me from thinking too much. I suddenly realised there were questions I needed answered.

“How did you get round the issue of a recent photo?”

“Oh, just a bit of clever desktop editing. Nearly there,” Maria replied, a nervous twitch in her voice.

I wasn’t convinced but was running out of time to interrogate her because she started slowing down.

“I don’t believe you.”

Maria made a left turn and stopped the car, remaining silent for a moment.

“I caught you unawares. I taped a newspaper across the frame of the bathroom door and took a photo of you in the shower. I got the headline and date in the foreground and you in the background.”

“Hang on, that was the day you told me it was lightning outside. But it was the flash going off?”

“Erm, yes. Come on, let’s not be late,” said Maria, climbing out of the car. I followed her as she opened the boot and picked up the rucksack she’d brought.

“You haven’t told him, have you?”

But my words were lost in the whirl of the revolving door and I suddenly found myself standing in the hotel lobby. I started to shake my head, and then couldn’t help giggling. This was going to be the shortest blind travel date in history.

## **Me**

I was quite taken with Kate Thornly the 2<sup>nd</sup> the first time I saw her. She stood in the lobby looking a bit lost, waiting for her red-faced friend to arrive heaving a huge backpack. Maria, I think her name was. The first inkling that something wasn’t quite right started to sink in as I approached Kate to shake her hand in a friendly, but business-like greeting.

“Hello there, you must be Kate Thornly. I’m Jonathan Cork.”

Kate smiled and offered her hand. I was so caught up in the nerves of meeting her that I didn’t spot anything amiss.

Thud!

Maria dropped the pack off her shoulder next to Kate, puffing from the exertion.

“Good luck lugging that around South America. Right, that’s me done. Gotta run. See ya.”

I raised my eyebrows as Maria hugged her friend and whispered something in her ear. Then she grinned and winked at me, offering a passing comment as she turned and walked out of the hotel.

“Look after her, she’s a real angel.”

I frowned as I watched Maria scurry away. Something was niggling away at the back of my mind. There was an awkward pause as we both stood there.

“Right, well. Um, would you like a coffee, have you eaten?”

“Coffee would be great, thanks,” she said, in a light Scottish accent.

I nodded, picked up the pack (which was bloody heavy) and walked over to the comfy sofas in the corner of the lobby. I set the pack down and turned to offer Kate the nearest seat, confused to see her still standing in the same spot. I walked back to her, a little sheepishly.

“Anything I should know?”

“Perhaps. Yes. Definitely. I didn’t write the letter to you, or speak to you on the phone, my friend did. It was to broaden my horizons, bless her. The photo was also her doing,” said Kate Thornly the 2<sup>nd</sup>.

“Oh.”

We stood there like a couple of lemons as a couple leaving the hotel filtered past us, intrigued expressions on their faces.

“Shall we sit down, have a chat? I’m sure we can straighten things out. You have a backpack, so presumably you’d be willing to come along?”

“Why the hell not. Lead the way,” she said, raising her elbow to form a gap between her body and arm.

“Of course,” I said, then hesitated.

An amused smile broadened on her lips.

“The reason Maria applied for me is because I’m not the easiest of travel companions...”

“No? Why not...”

I still cringe when I think back. How could I have been so stupid not to realise?

There was a long pause.

“Because Jonathan, I’m blind.”

## Three

### Kate Thornly (the 2<sup>nd</sup>)

“You’re... blind?” said Jonathan, horrified.

You often hear people say *I wish I’d seen the look on their face...* But I think that every time I meet someone new. I could immediately tell from the tone of his voice that this situation was now a disaster. He couldn’t possibly go travelling to South America with a blind companion.

I was convinced I’d be back with Maria in minutes. She’d whispered in my ear before she left that if it all went tits up, she’d wait for me in the car park for an hour. Which of course was bound to happen. There was no way I could go off travelling around South America with a complete stranger, I was blind, not stupid!

“I’m sorry you’ve had a wasted journey... couldn’t possibly go with me... rugged terrain and, um... have enough trouble looking after myself... erm... have you come far...?”

I could hear him pacing as he rambled on.

“Jesus, I need a drink!” he muttered and walked away.

### Me

I knocked back the large whisky in one, wincing as it burned its way down my throat. What the hell was I going to do now?

### Kate Thornly (the 2<sup>nd</sup>)

I stood there for some time feeling ridiculous. Surely he’d be back, apologising for

being so rude?

Nope.

*Okay, sod you mate!*

I had a vague idea which way the main entrance was, so I knelt down and felt for my rucksack. Having worked out where the straps were, I heaved it onto my back. Maria wasn't joking, it weighed a ton!

I could feel the occasional waft of fresh air from the revolving doors, which presented me with a bit of a problem. It's all down to timing, you see.

Chop, chop, chop. The doors whirled past the opening like an airplane propeller in slow motion. Now, which limb did I want to lose first?

## **Me**

Thwack!

I lifted my head from my hands and opened my eyes, the noise just beat my conscience in pulling me back to reality. I twisted round in my seat to see Kate Thornly the 2<sup>nd</sup> standing by the revolving doors, her backpack wedged in them. I watched, bewildered, as she felt her way into a vacant segment of the doorway, stepped over the rucksack, then hauled it in after her. It took a moment for the penny to drop – she'd thrown the rucksack into the door to stop it spinning, clever girl! The middle-aged couple stuck in an opposite segment with their noses squashed against the glass weren't amused however and started banging on the glass.

I jumped up and rushed over, fighting the temptation to laugh.

## **Kate Thornly (the 2<sup>nd</sup>)**

"Alright, keep your hair on!" I shouted, pushing against the revolving door with

my forehead as I dragged the rucksack with my left hand and trailed my right against the curved glass, waiting for the gap.

*There! go, go, go!*

I leapt into fresh air, but wasn't quite fast enough yanking my rucksack out and I felt it jam against the next part of the door.

*Bugger!*

## **Me**

The middle-aged couple were now banging furiously on the glass, trapped only a few inches from the hotel lobby.

Outside the hotel, an irate Kate Thornly the 2<sup>nd</sup> tried to heave her jammed rucksack out of the door, but it wouldn't budge. It took me a few seconds to realise that I had to push the door the opposite way to free the rucksack, so I attempted my best apologetic smile and pushed the door against the angry couple.

I heard a scream and saw Kate Thornly the 2<sup>nd</sup> tumble backwards, having put all her weight behind pulling the rucksack just as the door released it. The couple pushed past me, swearing. By the time I got to Kate Thornly the 2<sup>nd</sup> she was sprawled on the floor in a dishevelled heap.

"Kate, are you okay?" I said weakly.

"Piss off, you rude arrogant bastard!"

"It was just a shock, the blindness thing... here, let me help you up," I said, putting my hands under her arms to lift her up.

"Take your fucking hands off me!"

I stepped back as she stood up, dusted herself down and pulled sweaty hair out of her eyes.

“I’m not a cripple!”

“I’m sorry, I was just trying to help,”

“Then get my rucksack and buy me a sodding drink!” she said, wiping her tearful eyes.

### **Kate Thornly the 2<sup>nd</sup>**

“I don’t think I’ve ever been so humiliated,” I said, taking a gulp from the glass of wine, banging it on the table.

“Your friend conned us both, so technically it wasn’t my fault. You can’t blame me for...”

“*Technically* you’re a coward for running away!”

“It was a shock, alright! From your reply to the advert, I was expecting...”

“What, exactly? Someone *able-bodied*? Not *disabled*? Not a liability?” I shouted at him.

There was a long silence, during which I hoped he was squirming uncomfortably in his seat.

“Someone who matched the description given to me,” he said quietly.

“Well boo-bloody-hoo! Have you never internet dated? People are never as they appear. It’s all smoke and mirrors and bullshit self-marketing. Wake up to the real world Jonathan! Maria told me you were a decent guy who had integrity. So where’s the match in *that* description?”

### **Me**

What a complete and utter mess. I watched her sink back into the chair, arms folded, angry as hell. I wondered how quickly I could get rid of her without a big scene.

“Look, I’m sorry you feel deceived too, but she’s *your* friend. You have to take some responsibility for Maria stitching us up.”

“That’s no excuse for your reaction!”

“Okay. I’m sorry. You’ve made a fair point. I didn’t handle this meeting very well. But clearly this, us travelling together, isn’t going to work. I apologise for wasting your time. I think its best we shake hands now and go our separate ways.”

“You’re not even prepared to give it a try?”

“How can I? If after a few days or weeks it’s not working out, what then? I’ve already paid out a fortune. Not your fault I know, but the cost of your full fare back to England part way through the trip would be massive. And I don’t have that sort of money. Do you?”

“No.”

“Exactly. It’s all or nothing. And let’s face it, we’ve hardly got off on the right foot. So I can’t take the risk. We need to cut our losses and go our separate ways.”

*That ought to do it*, I thought, relaxing. I’d just have to adapt and muddle along as best as I could on my own. I stood and offered my hand.

“It was, um, an interesting experience, meeting you.”

### **Kate Thornly the 2<sup>nd</sup>**

I sat there for a moment, thinking.

*The hell with it.*

I stood up and offered my hand. Much as I hate to admit defeat, he was right. We couldn’t possibly go travelling together, especially with no way out if we didn’t get on.

I felt him clasp my hand briefly, then pull away, in a hurry to send me on my way.

But in that split second I changed my mind. Why the hell shouldn't I have the same opportunities as any other girl? And I can be pretty determined when I want to be, or bloody-minded and stubborn, depending on your perspective. I gripped his reluctant hand and didn't let go.

"By the sound of your eBay advert, you *can't* go alone. That nut allergy will kill you if you don't have me with you."

Silence.

Good, keep going with both barrels.

"I was a nurse until three years ago. My eyesight hasn't gone completely, yet. I can see very close up, after a foot things get blurred, further than that, not much. I've got something called Retinitis Pigmentosa. It's hereditary and it's only going to get worse. There's no cure. But I still have my nursing skills. And you have a problem I can help with."

He may not want to take me with him, but I wasn't going to give up that easily. No way.

"Right, okay then. Good. The problem is still the same..."

I began sizing him up for my next move.

"Actually you've got two problems. One, you need someone to taste any food that might contain nuts. And two, you need someone who can act fast if you run into difficulty."

"Yes, but I'm not sure you're the right person... I mean you can test the food, sure, but if anything happens..."

"You carry adrenaline with you, right?"

I started to prepare myself.

"My old girlfriend used to..."

I mentally lined up where I thought he was relative to the table and sofa.

“Do you have any on you at the moment?”

Slight adjustment, five seconds...

“Yes, but...”

Three seconds...

“Where?”

Get ready.

“In the breast pocket of my jacket. I try to forget it’s there because...”

Go!

I let go of his hand and propelled myself towards him, knocking the table aside as he fell back, my knee landing on the sofa between his legs. I found his shoulder, used it as a reference point and reached inside his jacket pocket. I grabbed the adrenaline ‘pen’ and ran my other hand down his chest, over his groin and located his thigh. I pressed my thumbnail into his leg.

“That quick enough?”

I stayed sitting astride him, listening to his rapid breathing and feeling the tension in his body.

“Take that bloody needle away!”

We held eye contact for a moment. I was close enough to see the hazy outline of his face.

“So I can come with you?”

“Jesus, yes! I’ve got the point okay, just take that bloody thing away...”

If I could have seen further than just in front of my nose, I’m sure I would have enjoyed seeing the other people in the lobby staring at us. I decided to let him live, for now.

“Good. Another glass of wine please, a large one this time.”

I replaced the cap and pushed the pen into his jacket pocket. I felt the way back to my own sofa, leaving him breathing uneasily and sweating; I could feel the hot glow.

“Quickest draw in the west amigo. That’s Spanish by the way. I’ve got a couple of those learn a new language in a week CDs!”

## **Me**

She’s a complete raving lunatic! I blame the National Health Service for breeding such aggressive nursing staff.

It took me quite a while to regain my composure after that. I just sat there breathing erratically as a waiter placed two glasses of wine in front of us, even dropping me a mischievous wink as he left.

What the hell had I got myself into?!

## **Kate Thornly (the 2<sup>nd</sup>)**

I think Jonathan was pretty impressed with my demonstration, though he didn’t actually say as much. In fact he was very quiet afterwards, perhaps that’s just his way. But at least I’d proved my point, no helpless female here. Okay, I did slightly bully him, but it was for his own good. Anyway, it’s too late for him to change his mind now; we’re flying out in the morning, Jonathan Cork and a new and improved *Kate Thornly*.

It’s weird to be called by my birth name again. It’s even stranger to think that Jonathan will be calling me the same name as his ex. I wonder what went wrong between them?

Dinner that night was a strange affair.

“It’d be really helpful for me to understand your mood. So you need to talk to me,” I said, when the silence finally became too much.

I sipped my soup and waited.

And waited.

“Have you abandoned me Jonathan?”

More silence.

“You’re hardly being a gentleman,” I said a little louder. Was that a sigh I heard? Difficult to say with all the background restaurant chatter.

“I’m still here.”

“But you were thinking about doing a runner, right?”

“Maybe. How’s the soup?”

I lifted the spoon to my mouth and slurped really loudly, like I was hunting down the last dregs of a McDonald’s milkshake.

“Is that really necessary?”

I could hear the annoyance and embarrassment in his voice and it amused me. I guess I was just testing the water.

“Just making sure you’re paying attention. Thing is, if you’re not much of a talker, we need to work on that. If I can hear you then I know where you are, and in the unfortunate event of you chucking anything nut-related down your throat, I need to be close so I can get there quickly. I gauge distance by your voice, so you’ve got to talk to me, *a lot*.”

“That may take a bit of getting used to,” he said.

“And you need to be more expressive in how and what you say, I can’t see body language, I can only listen or *touch* to find out what’s really being said. That’s something / have to get used to.”

There was a long pause.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

## **Me**

Still in a state of shock, it took me until coffee after the meal to broach the rather tricky subject of *boundaries*.

“This is a bit awkward, but we should probably talk about sleeping arrangements for the trip,” I blurted out, somewhat clumsily.

“Are you going to be a gentleman and sleep on the floor?” she said, allowing a wry smile to creep across her lips.

“Um... well, three months is a long time and I’ve paid a lot of money... I was originally travelling with the *other* Kate, so sharing a bed would have been perfectly natural. Now things have changed, I don’t have enough cash for separate rooms. So perhaps we should try and share, but without any, erm, well, you know, any...”

“Without any... *shenanigans*?”

I nodded, forgetting that body language was wasted on her.

“Probably best to keep everything on a business footing don’t you think? Try to get through the trip without any complications.”

“What is it Jonathan, worried you’re not over Kate and won’t be able to perform if I come on to you?” she said, in a playful voice.

I flinched as I felt her foot brush against my shin.

“Don’t be stupid, it’s not that at all...” I said indignantly.

She giggled, a wicked grin on her lips.

“You men are so predictable! Relax, I’m just teasing you.”

At this point I should have conceded she’d wound me up a treat and retired gracefully from the conversation. But I was flustered and on full automatic pilot.

“Look, I just want to establish some boundaries early on, so there isn’t any confusion...”

“Do you really think I’m the sort of girl who’s going to leap on you and give you the best night’s shag you’ve ever had, having met you less than two hours ago? You’re not that charismatic!”

I just sat there, completely dumbfounded. What the hell could I say to that?

“A pact then,” she said, draining her wine and offering her hand across the table.

“A pact?”

“Yup. Not to get sexually involved.”

“Okay,” I said meekly.

I gently squeezed her hand.

“That means no wandering hands in the middle of the night. We stay to our own side of the bed. Agreed?”

“Agreed. But I’m not that sort of bloke...”

“I was talking about me!”

I sat on my side of the bed, wondering how I’d ended up in this bizarre situation. This was supposed to be my big dream, the once-in-a-lifetime trip I’d been planning for the last fifteen years. But now here I was, about to be full-time carer for a disabled, sorry, *partially-sighted* person.

For the second time that day I thought about doing a runner. I'd sneak out of the room in the middle of the night and go on my own and just be really careful what I ate. But then, she played the oldest trick in the book and aroused my curiosity...

### **Kate Thornly (the 2<sup>nd</sup>)**

I sat on the bath deep in thought. Jonathan was not the open-minded travel companion I'd been led to believe.

I guess Maria put an extra bit of spin on the telephone conversation she'd had with him. Even so, I was warming to the trip. Three months away would be one hell of an adventure. I just needed to get Jonathan to chill out. So I started to put together a cunning plan to ensure I was by his side at the airport check-in desk the next morning.

I stood up, took a deep breath and opened the door, pulling off my t-shirt as I left the bathroom.

"I thought we'd get this out of the way early on, so that we can stop tiptoeing around each other, being polite."

I knew he was still sitting on the far side of the bed because I could hear his faint breathing. I kicked off my shoes and unzipped my jeans, starting to wiggle them down over my hips.

"Forgive me for jumping to conclusions, but I'm sensing you still have some reservations about travelling with me, despite my earlier demo. So, here's a little test for you."

I stooped and pushed my jeans over each ankle.

"One advantage of being blind is that I won't laugh at your paunch, if you have one. But if I ask you to shut your eyes, because I sleep in the nude and am about to

strip off, you have a choice. So, Jonathan - decide. Are you going to be a gentleman, or will your manly curiosity get the better of you?"

I reached behind my back and unhooked the clasp of my bra. Thank goodness I'd put on some reasonably nice underwear this morning, practical and comfortable, but with a bit of lace.

I wondered what he'd do.

"Ready? Shut your eyes... now."

I slipped my bra off, then in no particular hurry, eased my knickers down over my thighs. Then I felt my way to the head of the bed, pulled back the covers and climbed in.

"Did you peek?"

I know it was naughty, but what the hell, we needed an icebreaker.

"I'm a gentleman, there are rules about that sort of thing..."

He passed by the end of the bed on his way to the bathroom.

"Yeah, but did you look?"

I heard the bathroom door shut and grinned. I'd put him on the back foot, embarrassed him. Maybe I could have some fun on this trip after all...

## **Me**

Jesus Christ!

I'm no prude and I admit I enjoy checking out the female body as much as the next man, but what are you supposed to do in that situation? Is it really bad etiquette to look, or is it rude *not* to?

I shook my head and sat down on the corner of the bath to think. My brain needed a moment to catch up with the madness of this crazy situation.

Once I'd got over my shock, I couldn't help smiling. Perhaps this trip wasn't going to be so bad after all.

But of course all this is irrelevant. What you really want to know is, did I look?

Well, what would *you* have done?!