

Legacy

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The spread was as impressive as the ocean itself. Tiny sandwiches shaped like crabs, mini burgers that opened like clams, and a mother and baby pairing of roasted garlic cloves laid to rest on top of a sapphire salad. The centrepiece was a towering octopus of molten Belgian chocolate that flowed out over éclair tentacles laid end to end. Behind the ten-foot-long table was a banner, flapping by the open window: *Save our oceans with your donations!*

In a side room off the main hall where the fundraising banquet was taking place, a teenage boy sat writing names on envelopes with a slow, careful hand. When each name was done, he dipped a tiny paintbrush in a thimble and painted a liquid over the envelope sealant, where it glistened then dried.

"Are you done yet? It's nearly time," his Mum said as she peered around the door. Rory looked up. "I've done about half, Mum."

"That'll have to do. Start clearing everything away and ... DON'T LICK YOUR FINGERS!" his Mum whispered through clenched lips.

"Sorry," Rory mumbled. "Mum, is it going to be OK?"

She crept into the room and pulled the door softly shut behind her. Then, making a cupboard of her arms for her only child to hide in, she leaned her cheek upon his head. "It's all going to be just fine," she said. "We're going home soon, I promise."

A hush descended on the hall as Rory's Mum stood at the front, waiting to speak. The microphone gave out a soft wail as if it was being squeezed too tightly. "Well, hello everybody, and welcome to a very special day, a day when you can save the oceans!" As she spoke, her arms fluttered like a butterfly conducting a symphony. A ripple of applause made its way around the room, a lazy wave riding up a beach and receding again.

"My name is Jola Hobotnica, Manager of Legacies and Gifts in Wills, and you have been invited here to this exclusive event to find out more about how you can leave a legacy that will last as long as the oceans are wide and protect our wonderful seas and all the amazing life within them for generation after generation. We're now going to watch a short video."

As the lights dimmed, Jola made her way to the side of the hall. Her hand slipped into her pocket and clasped a tiny bottle marked TTX that lay there, a bottle that contained all her hopes and a fair share of her fears too.

Many people want to win the lottery. They imagine the gigantic house, the fast car, the luxury hampers for tea each night, the endless holidays, the hotels where the sheets are crisp as a prawn cracker and glistening white as a morning star. The numbers come through, they don't win, and the excitement fades away until the next time they play. Jola wasn't bothered about winning the

lottery (which was good because she could never afford to buy a ticket). What Jola wanted to win
35 was the Sea Life Saviours UK Staff Fundraiser of the Year Award, a generous prize given every year
to the member of staff who had raised the most money over the past twelve months (the prize
was donated by an independent benefactor and did not, of course, come out of the charity's funds
for saving marine life). The closest Jola had come was third three years ago, a whopping £50,000
behind the winner.

40 This year, she absolutely had to win or die trying, for two reasons. First, to wipe the smug smile
off her nemesis's scarlet lips with a cloth that had only moments before been cleaning under the
fridge. Second, to win £1,000 and a trip to Croatia for two. Croatia was home and had until seven
years ago also been where Jola lived, on the island of Krk where the sun roasted the hilltops each
morning, and the streets smelled of grilled octopus and olives. And home was calling to her. She
45 could afford to go back, but she couldn't afford to stay back. A holiday or £1,000 wouldn't be
enough. It was the chance of both, at no outlay from her, that was proving mesmerisingly
tempting.

The nemesis was Martina, the Italian-sounding name a pretension her Welwyn-born and bred
parents had never explained. Martina was the Trusts, Foundations, and Large Gifts Manager,
50 which meant she got to swan around whenever a substantial cheque came in and appeared in the
local press shaking hands with men dressed as dolphins for some daft fundraiser. She glided
through the office with a sneer here and an agave syrup-coated barb there. She was rude about
Croatia, describing Jola's homeland as a drab little island, a wartorn hell-hole, or, most irritatingly
of all, Romania.

55 Those traits would have made Martina an annoyance; stealing Alastair made her an enemy.
Alastair was the Global Fundraising Lead and Head of Supporter Engagement, a nonsensically long
title that simply meant he was the boss. On arriving in England, Jola volunteered at Sea Life
Saviours UK to improve her already excellent English. Alastair rapidly saw the benefit of having
someone at the charity who could tell the difference between an octopus and a squid and offered
60 her a little role in the Supporter Services team, chatting to donors on the phone and sharing a love
of the ocean, even if she did have to be reminded to describe the *fruits de mer* as beautiful rather
than delicious. Jola made her gratitude to Alastair clear, and in a restaurant on Putney High Street,
two doors down from Jola's flat, they became a couple. They genuinely seemed to love each other
and attracted indulgent looks when they were caught holding hands in the office, kissing under
65 the mistletoe at the Christmas party, or when she brought him coffee and Greek pastries from the
bakery at 11 o'clock each morning. Alastair tolerated Rory, Jola's awkward, unhappy son, and
promised that they could go to live in Krk when he retired in ten years' time.

Martina had swaggered into Sea Life Saviours UK with a track record of big successes on the
Trusts front. She was English, closer in age and intellect to Alastair and, in his eyes, a little bit less
70 work, with no awkward background, relatives, or language to consider. In six months, Jola had lost
her lover, her safety net, and her pride. And one of them, she was determined to get back.

Jola was startled by a loud yawn. Martina had sidled up beside her, her perfume wafting over the banquet like an angel's fart.

75 "Darling, I'm sure you showed them this video last year," Martina whispered.

"I'm surprised you can remember last year's event," Jola retorted. "And there was me thinking Italians were supposed to be able to handle their Prosecco. But of course, you're not actually Italian, are you Martina?"

80 "Sweetie, drinking is the only way I can get through these torturous little events you arrange every year."

"You don't have to come."

"Oh, but I do, Jolly Jola. Alastair wants me to be here. Oh, look, I think you're up again."

85 The credits were rolling, and Jola made her way to the makeshift stage by the prandial extravaganza just waiting to be served. Her butterfly arms were back; a minuet this time: "Thank you all so much for listening so attentively. Now, there are waiters going around your tables with a delicious selection of wines, and the amazing thing is all the wines have been chosen from near one of our majestic seas! We have a uniquely flavoursome Pinot Gris from the Black Sea, a crisp and piercing Sauvignon Blanc from the South Pacific, and, my personal favourite, a deep red Bosso from the Adriatic, so don't be shy, tuck in and try them all. But before you wet your lips, just a little
90 reminder that this amazing hamper you see before you is ready to be won and taken home this very day! Entirely vegan and organic, so none of our sea friends have been harmed in its preparation, you can look forward to morel mushrooms dark as moonlight, ready to be sauteed with wild garlic. We've got an extremely exciting jam of wild red gooseberries blended with the fruit of the Irish strawberry tree! Plus biscuits to savour, black olive paté and, would you believe
95 elderberry gin. Thanks so much to our sponsors for their kind donations! Round of applause, please! Every single legacy to our wonderful cause that's pledged this evening will be in with a chance of winning, so thank you!"

100 Jola replaced the whining microphone and signalled to the waiters to bring the guests up to the buffet, table by table. It was time to hand out the envelopes and do as much smarming as she could manage. Think of the prize, she told herself. Think of the prize. She headed to the side room where she'd left Rory. With her hand on the door handle, she paused. Laughter. A woman's laughter. Jola felt again in her pocket for the small bottle. Still there and empty now, she wasn't yet sure of the safest way to get rid of it. She opened the door abruptly and saw Martina sat on the edge of Rory's desk.

105 "Hello, Jola," Martina said. "I'm surprised you don't want Roger here to come out and help you schmooze. I'm sure he'd be wonderful at that, wouldn't you, dear?"

"It's Rory," Jola said. "And I'm just here to fetch the envelopes."

"Of course you are," Martina said, sliding off the desk and casually smoothing her skirt down over her legs. "I always thought you were best suited to secretarial work."

110 Jola waited a beat after Martina had gone before picking up the envelopes. "Did you tell her anything?"

"Tell her what, Mum?"

"About what you're doing in here."

115 "I'm just helping you, Mum, aren't I? What is this stuff, Mum?" Rory nervously held up the empty thimble. "Where did it come from?"

"From Rio at the Japanese restaurant. It's just a natural chemical to help the envelopes stick. We don't want to lose any of those all-important cheques, do we? Just think, Rory, if this all works out, we can go home!"

"I want to go home, Mum."

120 "I know you do, sweetheart," Jola whispered to him, wishing for the thousandth time that her son was just a bit more like everyone else's.

125 Leaving Rory alone once more, Jola started making her way around the tables to distribute the envelopes. She knew most of the guests by name. But, more importantly, she knew their donation history and how much time to give them. She was as sweet and effervescent as a Billecart-Salmon Demi-Sec, oozing just the right amount of charm according to the guest's worth.

Jola arrived at her most lucrative donor's table and pulled up a chair. He was a tricky customer, not least because of his complicated Greek name, but he could be the difference between winning and having to suffer Martina for another year. She slid the envelope under his wine glass and started to talk knowingly about baklava.

130 "Can't I just make a donation by card?" he asked. "Isn't it a bit old-fashioned having to write a cheque?"

"Well," said Jola, "really, the cheque is more of a pledge rather than an actual donation. No money is transferred now, and we would only pay in the cheque if your exceedingly kind legacy came to pass before the cheque expired. Otherwise, we'd simply await the very generous ..."

135 "You mean you only cash it if I pop my clogs in the next six years, eh? Ha! I suppose you've got a good chance! I might die of hunger if these waiters don't call us up soon. Well, if I must do this damned thing properly, have you got any of those things you can dab so you don't have to lick the envelope? The taste is foul."

140 "Well, Dr" – Jola cast a quick glance at his name card – "Dr. Griddled Octopus, we have some sweet treats coming your way that will make the taste disappear!"

"Could they come soon, please, or I might just forget a zero, and it's Griliopoulos."

"I'll lick your envelope for you," ventured the lady sat to Dr. Griliopoulos's right. "It reminds me of the war. I was a secretary then, you see. Lots of post." She leaned forward and slowly closed

145 one eye. It could have been a hush-hush wink or perhaps a game of Wink Murder that no one else seemed to be playing. "I haven't worked since, but I do still like to lick an envelope."

"Go on then," said Dr. Griliopoulos, a little ungraciously, "but don't peep."

"Oh, a girl never tells," tittered the winking lady. "And it's all in SUCH a good cause – just think of all those fishees you'll be saving!"

"As long as it doesn't all go on pufferfish!"

150 Jola nearly spat out the generous swig of Adriatic Bosso she had just taken. She swallowed hard. "Pufferfish?" she ventured. "What made you think of pufferfish doctor?"

"They're lethal little buggers!" Dr. Griliopoulos replied. "Friend of mine saw one on the menu at a new Japanese restaurant that opened up in Piraeus, catering for the tourist trade – quite literally! Of course, in Japan, it's all regulated but back home, not so much."

155 "Can you eat pufferfish then?" asked the winking lady, demonstrating her licking skills with a quick swipe of her pert lips using her astonishingly pink tongue.

"Mad if you do!" said Dr. Griliopoulos. "It contains tetrodotoxin, a lethal poison also found in blue-ringed octopi, and I've never heard of anyone eating one of those! So anyway, where's my envelope? Let's get this thing signed and sealed, and we can all move on to eclairs."

160 With a clammy hand, Jola passed Dr. Griliopoulos the envelope and watched him seal it tight. "Thank you," she said. "I'm very, very grateful for your sacrifice."

It took only a fortnight for the solicitor letters to start trickling in. *Dear Ms. Hobotnica, I am writing to inform you of the sad death of our client...* As she saw the letters pile up on Jola's desk, Martina's professional smile waned until it resembled a snarl.

165 Six weeks later, Jola lay back in her chair, Rory looking excitedly out of the window at the Adriatic Sea far below. The flight attendant wheeled a squeaking trolley through the narrow aisle.

"Madam, a drink perhaps?"

Jola paused. "Do you have any Bosso?"