

Friday lunch with Sam

THE restaurant was modern and expensive, but not yet busy. She arrived at least ten minutes late and came to my table.

‘James?’

‘Jason.’

‘Sorry, Jason. You found it, good, not been here before, but I’m told the new chef’s food is outstanding and I thought I’d try it, not got yourself a drink yet? What do you prefer, Jason? Jace? Jay? Something else?’

‘Jason’s fine.’

‘Great. Lovely to meet you.’ She held out her hand.

‘I’m Sam Cagle, we spoke on the phone.’

She sat down, took out her mobile and put it next to her wine glass

‘Let’s get straight to it, I always, always, always prefer candour and honesty and, let me warn you, there’s not a lot in this business, it’s a racket, be warned.’

‘That’s -,’

She held up her hand.

‘Let me finish, James, let me finish and you’ll have your say next. This is a ‘Friday lunch’ which means, sorry, I’m not taking you on, but — but! — I might later. So I’m not actually wasting your time, and at least you’ll get a splendid lunch out of it, they say his porcini risotto is to die for!’

‘So -?’

‘Yes, I’m afraid, but I can -,’

A waiter appeared

‘Ah, two kir royale, please, and what are you having, James, sorry, Jason? Oh, he’ll have one, too, so three kir royale please and some bread and olives. Thanks. Where was I?’

‘You said -,’

‘Yes, of course. What I can do is give you some very good tips on what publishers are looking for and -.’

Her phone buzzed.

‘Sorry, I’ve got to take this. Dan, I’m busy, what is it?’

I could not hear what Dan was saying.

'I told you, Dan, but you never listen and look properly, ever, it drives me mad. Top drawer on the left. And if it's not there, downstairs in my study in the little box on third bookshelf up.'

Dan said something.

'What! No, he can't bring his new girlfriend, he just can't, we don't even know her!'

More from Dan.

'I don't care, it's no! Tell him! Look, I'm busy, talk later. Get the car packed so we can get off as soon as. And don't forget anything! You know what you're like! The traffic will be awful. Ciao!'

She ended the call and put down the phone.

'Sorry about that, James, we're off up-state to our cabin later, and it's always, always, always such a bloody production number, nothing's straightforward, nothing, don't get married, James, don't even think about it. Where was I?'

'You said -.'

'Yes, of course, yes. What was I saying?'

'You could give me -.'

'Right, yes, and don't get this wrong, but . . . are you gay?'

'No.'

'Don't worry, doesn't matter at all, but it does sometimes help these days, for some reason gay writers sell. Bisexual? But no, don't worry, just a thought. I read some of your manuscript, but -.'

'But what?'

'Well, it, you know, just seems to be about 'people'.'

'What's wrong with -?'

'Nothing! Nothing at all! And great for you for tackling them, but what sells, what really sells is issues, not people, well, people, yes, of course people, but people involved in issues, eco stuff, dystopian futures, global corruption, the destruction of mankind, that kind of thing, readers love it, just love it, and trashy romance, of course.'

'But -'

'I'll be upfront - ah, here they are -'.

The waiter arrived with our drinks and she took one of the three kir he set down on our table.

'They keep saying we shouldn't drink, I know, I know, I know, but life's too bloody short.'

‘And we might all be dead by Tuesday.’

‘What? What do you mean? Oh, yes, of course, very good.’

She sipped her kir.

‘Heaven, just heaven! And I’m not driving! Where was I? oh -.’

Her phone buzzed again. She rejected the call.

‘What many writers starting out like you don’t realise is this: that it’s a serious business and at the end of the day it’s pretty much just about making money. Money makes a publisher’s soul sing, and although an agent can tell you that, a publisher most certainly won’t, they’ll give you all kinds of crap about literature and being passionate about literature and yada, yada, yada, but if you want their interest, and if you want my interest for that matter, you’d better believe it. Money and selling, selling and money.’

‘What did you think of my -?’

‘Oh, I loved it, loved it, I’m sure I did, but ‘people’, you see, ‘people’ and as I said -‘

Her phone buzzed again.

‘Damn, I’ve got to take this, sorry. Yes, Dad, what!’

I couldn’t hear the other party.

‘Oh, no! Oh no! Oh no! She can’t! Not today!’

More talk from the other side.

‘Jesus, Dad, you and Mom pick your moments, but I’ll have to come right now, right now, and you’d better both be ready. I’m serious, we’re off to the cabin later! Be about fifteen to twenty.’

She hung up.

‘Look, James, I’m sorry, I’m really, really sorry, but I have to go, something’s come up. Think about what I was saying and keep in touch, do, and, oh, order what you like and charge it to me.’

She drained the first glass of kir.

‘You have the other one and we’ll be in touch. Ciao.’

And she was off.

I did have the porcini risotto, followed by a champagne peach verrine and a cheeseboard, with two large glasses of St Emilion and a Sauternes with dessert. It certainly was to die for, though I then I found that Sam Cagle had not yet set up an account.