

RUTH WARRE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE WOMAN IN CABIN 10
AND *THE IT GIRL*

ONE PERFECT COUPLE

A NOVEL

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ONE PERFECT COUPLE

RUTH WARE



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*To Ian, my absolute favourite scientist. Thank you for being
you.*

PROLOGUE

He is fighting. He is fighting for his life—but so is she. She is neck-deep in the water; there is salt in her eyes, water in her lungs, and she is gasping, choking, unable to breathe.

His body is hard and muscled and stronger than she had ever imagined possible, thrashing like a pinned beast beneath the water.

And as she struggles against him, she knows two things, knows them to be piercingly, desperately true—one: it is him or her, and if she lets go, she will be the one drowning under the waves.

And two: to kill someone this way, you have to want them to die with every ounce of your being.

The question is: Does she? Does she want him to die?



PART ONE
THE CALM

02/15—02:13 a.m.

Hello. Hello?

CHAPTER 1

"I CANNOT, REPEAT cannot, go to a desert island," I said. I didn't look up at Nico, who was hovering behind my chair. Instead, I continued to stare at the computer screen, trying to make sense of the spreadsheet in front of me. One thing was for sure: the data definitely didn't show the kind of correlation Professor Bianchi had been hoping for when he hired me. This was my third attempt, and I could no longer ignore the sinking feeling in my stomach. Something was very wrong.

"But Lyla, I'm telling you, it's the opportunity of a lifetime. Reality TV. *Reality TV.*"

"It could be the opportunity of the millennium, Nic. I can't go with you. How am I going to get the time off?" Was there a pattern I wasn't seeing? Maybe if I tried adding in the previous results? "But don't let me hold you back; you go. I'll cheer you on from here."

"Were you not listening?" Nico asked, the pleading in his voice now tinged with a touch of testiness. "I can't go on my own. It's a *couple's* TV show. Lyla, I don't ask for much, but Ari thinks this is make-or-break for my career. I won't get a chance like this again. You know how long I've been banging my head against the wall, auditioning for God knows what— This could be it. This could be my big break."

I pulled up the spreadsheet of the last batch of samples, clicked to plot the data again, and as the graph filled out, Nico exploded.

"Lyla! For fuck's sake, are you even listening to me? This is the turning point of my career and you can't turn off your laptop for thirty seconds?"

I took a deep breath. My mother's voice sounded in my ear: *Get your head out of your phone, Lyla....*

I saved the file and swung my chair round to face my boyfriend.

“I’m sorry. You’re right. I wasn’t listening. Tell me about it properly.”

“It’s a new reality show. Not much of a prize, because it’s being done on a shoestring budget for a brand-new streaming channel, but it’s going to be their flagship launch original, and if it takes off the exposure could be through the roof. And Ari knows the producer, Baz. They went to uni together. Ari says he can get me in through the back door. Us, I mean.”

“And, sorry, what’s the concept?”

“Five couples on a desert island. Elimination format, counting down over ten weeks. I’m not sure where, Ari was saying something about Indonesia? It’s kind of *Love Island* meets *Survivor*—you have to stay coupled up to stay in. Sun, sand, sea... come on, Lil! It’s just what we both need. A proper holiday.”

“But it’s not a holiday, is it? And how long did you say this would take? Ten *weeks*? Starting when?”

Nico shrugged.

“No idea, but it sounded like they’re in a hurry. Ari was asking about my calendar over the next couple of months. I told him there was nothing I couldn’t move.”

I sighed.

“I’m really sorry, Nico, maybe *your* calendar is empty, but mine isn’t. There’s no way I can just bugger off for the remainder of my contract, you know I can’t. Professor Bianchi would sack me, and then how would we pay the rent?”

Not with Nico’s meager snippets of income as an aspiring actor and part-time barista, was the unspoken coda, though I didn’t say it. But Nico was shaking his head.

“But Lyla, that’s the point. If I got this, it’d be real exposure. I could be a household name by the end of the series, we’d be talking TV roles, film, ads—you name it. It’d be proper money—regular money. *House-buying* money. I could take some of the pressure off you. Come on, Lil, think about it. Please?”

He pushed my laptop out of the way and moved to sit on the desk in front of me, holding out his arms, and I leaned into his embrace, resting my forehead on his chest, feeling the familiar mix of exasperation and love.

I loved Nico, I really did. And not just because he was funny, charming, and extremely hot—definitely an eight or nine to my six. But he was also an incurable

optimist, whereas I was a very firm rationalist. His habit of convincing himself that every rainbow ended in a pot of gold just for him—a habit that had seemed so endearing when we first met—had started to grate after two years together. Two years of me footing the bills and doing the admin and generally acting the grown-up, while Nico chased opportunities that somehow never *quite* materialized.

This sounded like another one of his pie-in-the-sky dreams, just like the West End musical of *Twilight* that turned out no one had cleared the rights to, and just like his plan to become a YouTube acting coach. There had been so many schemes that had come to nothing, so many shows canceled before their first episode and pilots that never got off the ground. But if I pointed any of that out, *I* would be the bad guy. I'd be the person who had denied Nico his chance.

“Can I at least tell Ari you'll meet with the producers?” Nico said, his breath warm against the top of my head. I shut my eyes, knowing that if I looked at him, at his brown puppy-dog eyes and pleading expression, I'd be lost. What I *wanted* to say was that there seemed precious little chance of this getting past the first meeting, when the producers would presumably meet me and realize I wasn't the big-boobed hottie they were looking for. Reality TV wasn't exactly my usual entertainment fare, but I'd watched enough to know there was a certain physical type for female contestants, and that I didn't fit it. Nico—with his gym-toned body and salon-tanned skin—he was different. He'd have fitted in fine on *The Bachelorette* or *Perfect Match*. But me? Were they really going to look at a thirtysomething scientist with fingers stained purple from protein gels, and a permanent frown line from squinting into a microscope, and think, *We want to see her jogging down the beach in a skimpy bikini?* Unlikely.

On the other hand... if it was never going to happen... would it really matter if I strung Nico along for a bit longer? Then, when I got rejected, or the whole thing finally stalled in development, this Baz guy could be the baddie, and I'd get to be the supportive girlfriend. Until the next hopelessly naive scheme materialized, anyway.

I opened my eyes, trying to think what to say, but instead I found my gaze straying to the glowing screen of my laptop. I couldn't read the figures because Nico had shoved the computer to the far side of my desk. But that didn't matter. They were there, and I knew it. Inconvenient. Incontrovertible. Unignorable.

“Please?” Nico said, breaking into my thoughts, and I realized that he was still waiting on my answer. I looked up at him. At his big brown eyes, fringed with impossibly long lashes—like a young George Michael. I felt something inside me giving way... melting. Oh God, I was going to say yes, and we both knew it.

“Okay,” I said at last, feeling my face crack into a reluctant smile. For a moment Nico just stared at me, then he gave a whooping holler and lifted me off my feet, crushing me in a giant bear hug.

“Thank you, thank you, oh my God, *thank you*. I love you, Lyla Santiago!”

“I love you too,” I said, laughing down at him. “But you have to get on the show first, okay? So don’t count your chickens! I don’t want you to be disappointed if you don’t get in.”

“I’ll get in,” Nico said, setting me down and kissing me firmly on the lips, one hand on either side of my face, his smile so wide it crinkled up his tanned cheeks. “Don’t you worry about that, Lil. I’ll get in. We both will. How could they resist?”

I looked up at him, at his broad grin, his white teeth, his sparkling dark eyes, and I thought, how, indeed, could they resist? No one could say no to Nico. I just had to hope Professor Bianchi would feel the same way.

02/15—02:13 a.m.

Hello? I'm not sure how this thing works, but this is Lyla, to the *Over Easy*, over.

02/15—02:14 a.m.

Hello, is anyone receiving this? This is Lyla to the *Over Easy*, please come in.
Over.

CHAPTER 2

"OH DEAR." PROFESSOR Bianchi's face had gone from cheerful to depressed as I talked him through the latest batch of data. The findings left by Tony, my predecessor, had been—well, *exciting* was an understatement. If they'd proven reproduceable, they would have represented a major breakthrough in chikungunya, my specialist area. But they weren't proving reproduceable, and that was a problem.

The annoying thing was that Tony was long gone. He'd published his thesis to rippling excitement and had promptly been headhunted by a private lab for a permanent position. I'd been hired by the university on a one-year contract to tie up the loose ends. My task was supposed to be simple: repeat Tony's experiments with a wider range of samples and prove that the results held up. The problem was, they didn't. I'd repeated and repeated and repeated until I was blue in the face, but after the third attempt, I'd had to admit it. The effect Tony had found wasn't just weaker, it wasn't there at all.

In theory, I'd done my job. Pat on the back. Great work, Lyla. And in theory, disproving a false lead was as valuable and important as finding something new. The problem was that in practice, we all knew that wasn't how it worked. Grant funding didn't go to the scientists who found out something *didn't* work. It went to the groups with sexy new discoveries and results that got everyone talking. No one wanted to publish a paper meticulously outlining the anatomy of a damp squib, no matter how good the research.

In my darker moments, sleepless, at 3 a.m., I'd blamed Tony. Perhaps he'd written his method up wrong. Maybe he'd even faked his results? But in my heart of hearts, and with my scientist's head on, looking at the data, I knew it wasn't Tony's fault. He'd thrown a dozen dice and they'd all returned sixes. Just one of

those things, and when I tried again on a much bigger scale, the pattern hadn't held. But I was the one having to break the bad news, and deal with the fallout.

Up until a few weeks ago, I hadn't been worried about the fact that my contract at the university was about to expire—Professor Bianchi had more or less assured me that obtaining further funding was a formality. Now... well, now I could tell from his expression that I should be polishing up my CV. And I wasn't looking forward to explaining at interviews the fact that I'd spent a full twelve months working on a highly exciting project and had absolutely fuck all to show for it.

"You'd better write it up," Professor Bianchi said a little wearily. "And then we'll have to see whether there's anything that can be salvaged from it. Maybe something will come out of Gregor's animal modeling."

I bit my lip and nodded.

"I'm sorry," I said again, and Professor Bianchi shrugged, the philosophical shrug of a man with tenure who'd wanted this to work out, but hadn't hung his career on it.

"Not your fault, Lyla."

"What do you think it means for the funding renewal?"

"Ah. Good point. Your contract's up next month, isn't it?"

"March, in fact," I said quietly. "Ten weeks."

Professor Bianchi nodded.

"I'll speak to the grant committee. But..."

He trailed off. *Don't make any big purchases in the meantime*, was the strong implication.

I forced a smile.

"Sure. Thanks. Listen, I..." I swallowed. Now wasn't the time I'd have chosen to ask for time off, but in a way it didn't matter. I could write up the paper just as well on Nico's desert island as I could here, and I might as well take my holiday entitlement before the contract ended. "Would now be a bad time for me to take some leave? Nico, my boyfriend, he's been invited on this—" I stopped. I wasn't 100 percent sure Professor Bianchi knew what a reality TV show was. The one time I'd referred to *Big Brother*, he'd assumed I was talking about George Orwell. And it didn't exactly fit with the responsible in-demand professional image I was

trying to project. “On a work trip,” I finished. “He’s asked me to come along. I can write the paper there; it’s probably easier than trying to fit it in around lab work.”

“Sure,” Professor Bianchi said, and his face... did I imagine a flicker of relief? “Of course. And hopefully by the time you come back I’ll have heard from the grant committee. Thanks again, Lyla, for all your work on this. I know it’s never easy coming in with disappointing results.”

“You’re welcome,” I said. And then, since the interview was plainly over, I showed myself out of his office.

I SPENT THE bus ride back to east London watching the winter rain trickle down the steamed-up windows and considering my choices. I was thirty-two. All around me friends from university were buying up houses, settling down, having kids. My mum’s jokes about grandbabies had started to become slightly pointed. But here I was, stuck in a cycle of short-term post-docs that didn’t seem to be going anywhere. Once, I’d dreamed of heading up my own team, my own *lab*, even. Talks about the dearth of women in STEM had made it all seem so possible—funding committees were crying out for driven female scientists, we were told.

In truth though, there’d been a healthy proportion of women in my cohort, at least when I started out. My first two bosses in the lab had been women. But the funding committees didn’t look any more kindly on us than they did on the men, and as the years ground on, more and more of my colleagues had been forced out by the reality of life in academic research. Maternity leave didn’t mesh well with funding deadlines and the pressurized race to results. Babies didn’t mix with tissue cultures that needed constant tending, cell lines that had to be split at ten o’clock at night, five in the morning, endless round-the-clock work, or else they’d wither and die. And mortgage providers didn’t like the uncertainty of short-term contracts. Every time I started a new job there was a narrow window of security when I was out of the probation period, but not yet under statutory notice of redundancy—and it never seemed to be long enough to get a foot on the ladder. Combined with Nico’s feast-or-famine line of work (and there’d been precious little feasting over the two-and-a-half years we’d been together), it made for a

stressful existence. And the longer I'd been in the field, the more I realized that there was a ticking clock, and not just one relating to babies. The career pyramid for science was shallow—many researchers, very few lab heads—and the competition was astonishingly fierce. If you didn't tick certain boxes by the time you were in your thirties, you just weren't going to make it.

Maybe it was time to throw in the towel, admit once and for all that the dreams I'd held when I left uni were never going to happen. That I was never going to be able to fund my own lab. That Professor Lyla Santiago was never going to exist, would never give the keynote address at a prestigious academic conference, or be interviewed on *This Week in Virology*. With every year that ticked by, it was looking increasingly likely that I'd be forever a lowly post-doc, scrabbling around for my next short-term contract. And maybe it was time to face up to that and figure out what to do.

It didn't help that Nico was only twenty-eight, and decidedly not ready to settle down in any way. He'd barely changed from the cute, wannabe actor I'd met almost three years ago, at a friend's "Valentine's Day Massacre" horror-themed party for pissed-off singletons. He'd been a disturbingly sexy Freddie Krueger; I'd cheated and borrowed a lab coat from work, spattered it with some fake blood. We'd mixed Bloody Marys in the kitchen, watched *Friday the 13th* on my friend's couch, shrieking and hugging each other during the jump scares, and ended up snogging in the bathroom. The next day my friend had ribbed me about pulling out of my league.

For six months I'd almost forgotten his existence, the only reminder the occasional thirst-trap photos he posted on Instagram. They were... I mean, they were easy on the eye, I had to admit it, and they made a nice break to my workday. I'd be flicking through my phone on coffee break, and there would be Nico, sweatily tousled at the gym, all crunched abs and tangled dark hair. On the bus back from the university, there he'd be again, sprawled on a beach in the Algarve, tiny swimshorts stretched across his hips, smirking up at the camera from behind mirrored shades.

For half a year that was it—me single, bored, head down at work, barely thinking about the handsome actor I'd groped in my friend's bathroom. And then one day, out of the blue, I posted an Instagram photo of myself. It was

uncharacteristic. My normal feed was dinners I'd cooked and funny memes about the hell of working in academia. But I'd ordered a dress online and when it turned up it was almost comically undersized, the skirt just skimming my thighs, my boobs spilling out of the top. I posted it as a funny "what I ordered / what I got" pic, but I was aware that, while I wasn't going to keep the dress, it also wasn't exactly unflattering. It was about as un-me as it was possible to get, but it also squeezed me in the right places, and my tits did look pretty awesome.

The first comment was from Nico—just a string of chili peppers that made me laugh.

And the second was a reply from him to his own comment. It just said "Drink?"

A drink turned into drinks, which turned into dancing, which turned into tequila slammers and drunken snogging and, eventually, a shared Uber (which Nico promised to split, but never did). Nico, it turned out, lived around the corner from me in a house share in Dalston, but that night we ended up at my place—and, well, somehow he never quite moved out.

Two and a half years later, I was older, wiser, and considerably more jaded—facing up to the realities of living in one of the most expensive cities in the world on a researcher's salary. My rent had gone up. My pay had not. I had started to think about plan B. Maybe even plan C. But Nico was still dreaming of Tinseltown, still refusing to sell his dinner jacket in case he one day needed to attend the BAFTAs or the Grammys. Nico was still fighting, still hustling for his dreams, and most days that was part of what I liked about him—his relentless optimism, his faith that one day his ship would come in.

But on a day like today, the grayest kind of gray London day, when even the sun seemed to have given up and gone back to bed, that optimism was a little hard to take.

When I got off the bus at Hackney Wick, the rain had turned to a stinging sleet, and I realized I'd left my umbrella at the lab. I half jogged the twenty minutes from the bus-stop, trying to shield my laptop from the worst of it, then stumped wearily up the three flights to our little flat in the rafters of a Victorian terrace house. When I had first brought Nico here, we'd run up, laughing, only stopping to kiss on the landing turns. Now I was chilled to the bone, and each

flight felt steeper than the last. I had to will myself up the last set to my front door, and when I finally reached the top, it took me three tries for my numb fingers to get the key in the lock.

“I’m home!” I called as I peeled off my wet coat, though the flat was so small—just a bedroom, a bathroom, and an everything-else-room—that I didn’t really need to raise my voice.

The words had hardly left my lips when Nico appeared, mobile pressed to his ear, motioning me to keep quiet.

“Of course,” he was saying, in what I thought of as his *actor* voice, deeper, smoother, and more assured than he would have sounded on the phone to his mum or a mate. “Sure. Absolutely. Absolutely.” There was a long pause, with the person on the other side evidently saying something, and Nico nodding with an attentive expression on his tanned, handsome face that was totally wasted on the person on the other end. At last, after a short back-and-forth of goodbyes, he hung up and danced down the hallway to throw his arms around me, lifting me up and whirling me around.

“Nico!” I managed. His grip was suffocatingly strong, and in the narrow hallway my foot caught the mirror as he swung me round, making it swing dangerously against the wall. “Nico, for God’s sake, put me *down!*”

He set me on my feet, but I could see that my reaction hadn’t dented his mood. He was grinning all over his face, his dark eyes quite literally sparkling with excitement. That expression had always seemed like the worst kind of cliché to me—from a scientific point of view, it’s not possible for eyes to change their reflective properties because something fun has happened—but I had to admit it was the only apt description for Nico right now.

“That was Baz,” he said. “The producer of *One Perfect Couple*.”

“The producer of what?”

“That’s its name.” Nico flicked his fringe out of his eyes. “The show. I told you.”

“You didn’t, but okay.”

“I *did*. But anyway, that’s not the point. The point is I sent him some pics and he *loves* both of us—”