



# One

Ann clomped over in her King Kong slippers, with a yoghurt, a spoon and a really annoyed expression.

‘Is that stuff in the Tupperware with the blue lid, yours?’

Delia blinked.

‘In the fridge?’ Ann clarified.

‘Yes.’

‘It’s stinking it out. What is it?’

‘Chilli prawns. It’s a Moroccan recipe. Leftovers from what I made for dinner last night.’

‘Well its smell has got right into my Müller Greek Corner. Can you not bring such aggressive foods into work?’

‘I thought it was just confident.’

‘It’s like egg sandwiches on trains. You’re not allowed them on trains. Or burgers on buses.’

‘Aren’t you?’

It was a bit surreal, being snack-shamed by a woman who was 1/7th mythical monkey. Ann wore the slippers because of extreme bunions. Her feet looked like they didn’t like each other.

'No. And Roger wants a word,' Ann concluded.

She went back to her seat, set the contaminated yoghurt down and resumed typing, hammering blows on the keyboard with stabbing forefingers. It made her shock of dyed purple-black hair tremble. Delia thought of the shade as Aubergine Fritter.

Ann's policing of the office fridge was frightening. Despite being post-menopausal, she decanted her semi-skimmed into a plain container and labelled it 'BREAST MILK' to ward off thieves.

She was one of those women who somehow combined excess sentiment with extreme savagery. Ann had a framed needlepoint on her desk with the Corinthians passage about love, next to her list of exactly who owed what to the office tea kitty. For last year's not-so-Secret Santa, she bought Delia a rape alarm.

Delia pushed out of her seat and made her way to Roger's desk. Life as a Newcastle City Council press officer did not provide an especially inspiring environment. The pleasant view was screened by vertical nubbly slatted blinds in that porridge hue designed to make them look dirty before they were dirty, to save on cleaning costs. There were brown-tipped spider plants that looked as if they were trying to crawl off the shelving and had died, mid-attempt. The glaring yellow lights, built into the ceiling tiles' foamy squares, made everything look like it was taking place in 1972.

Delia got on well enough with the rest of the quiet, predominantly forty-something staff, but geographically she

was trapped behind Ann's wall of misery. Conversations conducted across her inevitably got hijacked.

Delia crossed the office and arrived at Roger's desk at the end of the room.

'Ah, Delia! As our social media expert and resident sleuth, I have a game of cat and mouse for you,' he said, pushing a few A4 printouts towards her.

She wasn't sure about being christened the office's 'resident sleuth,' just because she'd discovered the persistent odour in the ladies lavatory had come from an 'upper decker' left in one of the cisterns by a discontented male work experience placement who might have deep-rooted issues with women. It was a *eureka!* moment Delia could've done without.

Roger steepled his hands and drew breath, theatrically. 'It seems we have a goblin.'

Delia paused.

'You mean a mole?'

'What do you call a person who goes on to the internet intentionally trying to annoy people?'

'A wanker?' Delia said.

Roger winced. He didn't do swears.

'No, I mean a concerted irritant of a cyborg nature.'

'A robot?' Delia said, uncertainly.

'No! Did I mean cyborg? *Cyberspace.*'

'Being rude to people online . . . A troll?'

'Troll! That's it!'

Delia inspected the printouts. They were local-interest-only stories based on council reports in the local paper. Nothing particularly startling, but then they usually weren't.

‘So this individual, rejoicing in the anonymous moniker “Peshwari Naan”, starts trouble in the conversations underneath the *Chronicle*’s online stories,’ Roger said.

Delia scanned the paper again. ‘We can’t ignore it? I mean, there are a lot of trolls online.’

‘Ordinarily, we would,’ Roger said, holding a pen horizontally, as if he was Mycroft Holmes briefing MI6.

He took his job deathly seriously. Or rather, Roger took nothing lightly. ‘But it’s particularly vexatious in its nature. He invents quotes, fictitious quotes, from members of the council. It makes a mockery of these councillors, damages their reputations and derails the entire debate, based on a falsehood. The unwitting are sucked into his vortex of untruths. Take a look at this one, for example.’

He tapped a piece of paper on his desk – a recent story from the *Newcastle Chronicle*.

‘*Council Set to Green-light Lapdancing Club*,’ Delia read the headline aloud.

Roger picked the printout up: ‘Now, if you look at the comments below the story, our friend the sentient Indian side order claims—’ he put his glasses on, ‘*I am not surprised at this development, given that Councillor John Grocock announced at the planning meeting on November 4th last year: “I will be first in the queue to get my hairy mitts on those jigging whammers.”*’

Delia’s jaw dropped. ‘Councillor Grocock said that?’

‘No!’ said Roger, irritably, taking his glasses off. ‘But that false premise sparks much idle chatter about his proclivities, as you will see. Councillor Grocock was not at all happy when he saw this. His wife’s a member of the Rotary club.’

Delia tried not to laugh, and failed when Roger added: 'And of course, the choice of Councillor Grocock was designed to prompt further juvenile sniggering with regards to his name.'

Her helpless shaking was met with disappointed glaring from Roger.

'Your mission is to find this little Cuthbert, and tell him in the most persuasive terms to cease and desist.'

Delia tried to regain her self-composure. 'All we have to go on are his comments on the *Chronicle's* website? Do we even know he's a "he"?'

'I know schoolboy humour when I see it.'

Delia wasn't sure Roger could tell humour from a shoe, or a cucumber, or a plug-in air freshener for that matter.

'Use any contacts you have, pull some strings,' Roger added. 'Use any means, foul or fair. We need to put a stop to it.'

'Do we have any rights to tell him to stop?'

'Threaten libel. I mean, try reason first. The main thing is to open a dialogue.'

Taking that as a *no, they had no rights to tell him to stop*, Delia made polite noises and returned to her seat.

Hunt The Troll was a more interesting task than writing a press release about the new dribbling water feature next to the Haymarket metro station. She flipped through further examples of Peshwari Naan's work. Mr Naan seemed to have a very thorough knowledge of the council and a bee in his bonnet about it.

She toyed with the phone receiver. She could at least try Stephen Treadaway. Stephen was a twenty-something

reporter for the *Chronicle*. He looked about twelve in his baggy suits, and had a funny kind of old-fashioned sexism that Delia imagined he'd copied from his father.

'Ditzy Delia! What can I do you for?' he said, after the switchboard transferred her.

'I was wondering if I could beg a favour,' Delia said, in her brightest, most ingratiating voice. Gah, press office work was a siege on one's dignity sometimes.

'A *favour*. Well now. Depends what you can do for me in return?'

Stephen Treadaway was definitely a little Cuthbert. He might even be what Roger called 'a proper Frederick'.

'Haha,' Delia said, neutrally. 'No, what it is, we have a problem with someone called Peshwari Naan on your message boards.'

'Not our responsibility, you see.'

'It is, really. You're hosting it.'

Pause.

'This person is posting a lot of lies about the council. We don't have any argument with you. We'd like an email address for them so we can ask what's what.'

'Ah, no can do. That's confidential.'

'Can't you just tell me what email he registered with? It's probably Pilau at Hotmail, something anonymous.'

'Sorry, darling Delia. Data Protection Act and all that jazz.'

'Isn't that what people are supposed to quote at you?'

'Haha! Ten points to Gryffindor! We'll make a journalist of you yet.'

Delia did more gritted-teeth niceties and rang off. He

was right, they couldn't give it out. She didn't like being in the wrong when tussling with Stephen Treadaway.

She tried Googling 'PeshwariNaan' as one word, but she got tons of recipes. She attempted various permutations of Peshwari Naan and Newcastle City Council, but only got angry TripAdvisor reviews and a weird impenetrable blog.

She had welcomed a challenge, but this was suddenly looking like a nigh-on impossible task. She could go on the message boards and openly request him to contact her, but it wasn't exactly invisible crisis management.

And *was* he a crisis? Peshwari was active but hardly that evil. Scrolling through the *Chronicle's* news stories, it was clear that most people got he was joking and the replies were similarly silly.

Under a report about 'Fury Over Bins' Collection "encouraging rats", Peshwari claimed that Councillor Benton had started singing 'Rat In Mi Kitchen' by UB40.

Delia sniggered.

'Something's amusing you,' Ann said, suspiciously.

'It's a troublemaker on the *Chronicle* site. Roger's asked me to look into it.'

'New frock?' Ann added, uninterested in Delia's response. Her eyes slid disapprovingly over Delia's dragonfly-patterned Topshop number.

Ann clearly thought Delia's outfits were unprofessionally upbeat. Aside from medicinal novelty slippers, she believed in simple, sober attire. Delia wore colourful swingy dresses, patterned tights and ballet shoes, and a raspberry-pink coat. Ann wore plain separates from Next. And gorilla feet.



People said Delia had a very distinctive, ladylike style. Delia was pleased and surprised at this, as it was mainly borne of necessity. Jeans and androgyny didn't work well on her busty, hippy, womanly figure.

Years before she reached puberty, Delia realised that with her ginger hair, she didn't have much choice about standing out. It wasn't a tame strawberry blonde, it was blazing, rusty-nail auburn. She wore her long-ish style tied up, with a thick wedge of fringe, and offset the oyster-shell whiteness of her skin with wings of black liquid eyeliner.

With her wide eyes and girlish clothes, Delia was often mistaken for a student from the nearby university. Especially as she rode to work on her red bicycle. At thirty-three, she was rather pleased about this error.

Delia drummed her fingers on the desk. She had a strong feeling that Peshwari was male, bored, and thirty-ish.

His references were songs and TV shows she knew too. Hmm. Where else might he be online? In her experience, message board warriors had always practised elsewhere. Twitter? She started to type. Wait. WAIT.

Yes – complete with avatar of a speckled flatbread, there was a Peshwari here. And he mentioned being a Geordie in his bio. (*Snog On The Tyne.*) She hit the GPS location on the tweets, praying to a benevolent God. They were sent from the web, and not only that – BAM! – a café in the city centre, Brewz and Beanz. A most distressing name for likers of proper spelling and good taste, she'd always thought. She knew the place – her boyfriend Paul called it Blow Your Beans.

She scrolled through the Naan's timeline and noted they

were usually posted at lunch hours and weekends. This was someone in an office, firewalled, annoyed, bored. She empathised. Project Naan kept her occupied for two hours, until the weekend's start point arrived. Friday afternoon productivity in her office was never Herculean.

Well, Monday's lunch destination was assured. A stake-out, that was much more exciting than the usual fare. She wouldn't tell Roger just yet: no point bragging and then realising she'd happened across a different talking Naan altogether.

Delia headed into the loos to get herself ready for her evening out. She'd left the bike at home and got the bus in today. She changed into a small heel and a 50s-style rock'n'roll petticoat she'd brought with her to work, stuffed into a plastic bag. She shook it out and wriggled it on under her date-night attire dress.

The ruffled taffeta was a dusky lavender that poked out an inch below the hem and picked up on the pattern of the fabric. She was self-conscious once back among her colleagues, and bolted for her coat.

But not fast enough to evade Ann's gimlet gaze.

'What *are* you wearing?!' she cackled.

'It's from Attica. The vintage shop,' she said, cheeks heating.

'You look like a Spanish brothel's lampshade,' Ann said.

Delia sighed, muttered *wow thanks* and grimaced. Nothing between nine and five mattered today, anyway.

Today was all about this evening: when life was going to take one of those small turns, a change of direction that led onto a wide, new road.