

Promising

This can't be happening. It has to be some kind of cruel prank.

I sit stock-still with my hands folded on my lap, but allow my eyes to wander to the cornices where the walls and ceiling meet. I half-expect to see a surveillance camera directed at me—its watchful lens observing my every stifled reaction. But there is no camera. No resurrected has-been celebrity leaps out from behind a partition shouting, ‘Smile, Vanessa! You’re on Candid Camera!’

This is actually happening.

My dream literary agent, Paige Turner, is in the throes of what I can only assume is a lovers’ quarrel.

‘For Christ’s sake, Gareth. Keep your voice down!’

‘I don’t give a damn who hears us. I’m sick to death of pussyfooting around here, pretending you and I aren’t a thing. You gave me your word, Paige. You *promised* to leave your husband.’

Brisk footsteps move across parquet floors. ‘Get a grip, Gareth,’ Paige sniggers. ‘Groveling doesn’t suit you.’ The door to her office slams shut.

Paige doesn’t sound at all like the pleasant, encouraging woman who so enthusiastically praised my manuscript and invited me to her office for a chat. She’d spoken those words—*representation, contract, publication deal*—I’d been longing to hear for years. Coming from her, they’d had an especially gratifying ring.

I exhale slowly through pursed lips to release the tension I’m holding in my neck and shoulders.

Breathe.

Though I can no longer make out distinct words, the argument continues behind closed doors. Gareth’s low tones rumble. Paige’s higher-pitched screeches resonate in my gut.

‘May I offer you a drink, Vanessa? Coffee? Tea?’ Paige’s junior assistant, Becky, says from behind her desk. She doesn’t look me in the eye. She faces me, but her gaze only reaches the space midway between us.

‘I’m good, thanks.’

‘I’m sure Paige will be with you shortly.’

The shouting match in the adjacent room escalates. Then, something weighty bangs against a wall and falls to the floor with a thud. Becky and I simultaneously turn our heads towards the source of the din, and for one fleeting moment, our eyes meet. She is mortified—*for good reason*—but tries to hide her embarrassment by shrugging her shoulders and attempting a feeble smile.

‘What a clever idea to retell *Emma* from Mr Knightly’s perspective,’ she says. ‘Paige believes your novel shows genuine promise. I’m looking forward to seeing your book in print.’

‘You and me both,’ I say.

Becoming a published author has been a lifelong dream. It’s all I’ve ever wanted. And to have the industry’s most respected and sought-after agent interested in representing my “promising” novel Well, I couldn’t ask for any more.

Or could I?

Becky follows my movements as I stand up and gather my belongings.

‘Please tell Mrs Turner that I’m grateful for the opportunity,’ I say amiably, ‘but I don’t believe we’d make a good match.’

I head straight towards the lifts and don’t look back.