

JACK & STELLA'S STORY

*forever
love*

TRACY-LEE PULLAN

CHAPTER 1

We all travel along on the journey that is meant for us, and we pick up and drop off people along the way. They can be in your life for a short time or a long time, but they all leave something behind. Some of the best moments in life are the ones you can't tell anyone about but Jack and Stella decided they wanted to share their story with you.



Stella was on her way to McGregor and Bailey, a very well-known web design agency. She had to keep pinching herself, it had been a dream of hers for so long to one day work here, and to think, she had an interview! It would be challenging, she had no doubt about that, but they were looking for a graphic designer who could bring something different and she felt quietly confident this was the role for her. Her recruitment agent had already told her that her fresh ideas and positive attitude had shone in her resume.

Stella had fallen in love with the role as soon as she had read the job description. Her current role had run its course and she wanted something she could really sink her teeth into to stimulate her creativity.

Her confidence on the day of the interview was momentarily rattled when she walked into the interview room and her gaze locked with the darkest brown eyes she had ever seen. Something almost primal stirred deep within her.

‘Take a seat,’ he said. She sat where he had indicated with a brief wave of his arm. His aftershave wafted between them and she couldn’t help but discreetly inhale it. It was spicy and intoxicating.

‘I’m Jack Turner and I am one of the senior partners here at McGregor and Bailey.’

As he shook her hand she was startled. It felt like an electrical current was coursing through his fingers. She looked into his eyes to see if he had felt anything but his expression remained neutral, so she guessed it was all in her imagination. She couldn’t help but think, *Is it possible to feel instant chemistry when one meets a complete stranger?*

Distracting herself from the handsome interviewer by looking around the room, she noticed that every wall was glass. It felt a little bit like sitting in a fishbowl. There were a couple of big ferns in black pots on either side of the table, but otherwise the room was devoid of decoration. She took some quick breaths to calm herself down. Her hands felt clammy and she surreptitiously wiped them on her skirt.

As she stole another look at her interviewer, Jack, she couldn’t help but admire his well-tailored navy pinstripe suit. He had paired it with a tie that had some kind of tiny insignia on it she couldn’t quite place. The suit clung to him in all the right places and accentuated his broad shoulders. *Stop it*, she thought, *this is a job interview, not a first date*. But his presence seemed to dominate the room and she couldn’t take her eyes off him.

‘So, tell me a bit about yourself Stella. What is it about the role and our company that you’re most interested in?’ asked Jack.

‘I’ve been in my current role for quite a while now and I’m looking for a change. I have a lot of ideas but haven’t had the opportunity to use any of them. Your agency has such a wonderful reputation and from what I have read on your website, some of the clients you have— I was impressed. Most people in the web design industry dream about working here.’ She took a deep breath, conscious that she had been speaking very quickly.

‘But you can see room for improvement?’ Before waiting for her to answer, Jack smiled, and leaned back in his chair. ‘Don’t worry Stella, it isn’t a trick question. I just don’t believe in beating around the bush,’ he said with a laugh.

‘Well, yes. If I can speak freely, there is a lot of room for improvement.’ She sat up straighter in her chair with a new found confidence surging through her. ‘The first thing I noticed was the font you use on your website it is very outdated. I’m not sure how you can expect to design other people’s websites, when your own one is very, well, bland.’ Jack’s eyes narrowed and she paused, wondering if she had gone too far.

‘If something as simple as the font we use is deemed as outdated, I am now very interested in the vision you have for the rest of our company.’ He was trying hard to suppress a smile but the raised corners of his mouth gave him away. She didn’t let this deter her as the cogs turning in her brain spurred her on.

‘With a fresh new direction and better layout you would have a much better, user-friendly website. I’m sure you would capture the customers you are currently losing. I imagine they take one look at the clunky website you currently have and move on. I would also love to do something with your Instagram and other social media—it really does need to be dragged into the 21st Century.’ Her face turned a very light shade of pink, had she gone too far? She decided to opt for some more tact.

‘I noticed most of your clients are from the top end of town. How do you attract other clients in a way that doesn’t make them feel intimidated?’ Tilting her head, she stared into his eyes.

‘What do you mean, what other clients would we want?’ His nostrils flared.

‘Well, there is a whole other customer base that you are missing out on. Where are the non for profits and other small businesses?’ she said, tapping her fingers lightly on the wooden table.

‘We haven’t really had the resources to deal with small businesses and often their budgets are so tight that we can’t really design anything for them they can afford.’

‘Really? Surely there can be some kinds of suitably priced packages for these clients—why should they miss out on having a great website just because of their financial status?’ Stella could see that she had him on the hop now and once again hoped she hadn’t gone too far. But he had asked her opinion and she wasn’t going to sugar coat it.

Her hands were still sweaty so she wiped them down her skirt again. She had a vision of her white satin top being completely transparent as she felt so hot and sweaty and she took a quick peek to check. Thankfully all was as it should be, and no outline of her bra was visible.

‘Thank you for that Stella. I love the fact that you say it how it is. It’s quite uncanny how similar we are.’ He raised an eyebrow and leaned back in his chair. Relief washed over her. It seemed her speech had paid off and she’d managed to impress him.

‘As you would appreciate, our industry is extremely cut throat. Do you think you can handle it?’ he said, bracing his elbows on the table and leaning toward her.

‘Absolutely. I am ready for the next challenge in my career and I really feel I can offer a lot to your company.’ She braced her arms on

her chair and leaning forward, mirroring him. Jack appeared rattled by the confidence she projected and cleared his throat.

‘To give you an idea of the chain of command, you would report into me but would also work with other members of the team. At the end of the day, Dylan Bailey, our Managing Director, has the final say on what comes out of the agency. As you would have seen from our website, Dylan started this company many years ago and is still very much involved in the running of it.’ Jack steeped his fingers and she fidgeted beneath the intensity of his gaze.

‘But you and I would be working very closely together so it is important to me that I hire someone that I feel I can work with and trust to do a good job for the company.’ Her ears pricked up when he mentioned “trust”. Gosh, if only he knew her views on that small word. Her mind drifted for a moment, but she stopped herself from going down into that dark place.

As the interview wore on, she was liking this company more and more and hoped she had made a good first impression and then wondered if she was trying to impress him for the job or was it because it was important to her that Jack liked her in general? She could feel the lines blurring and then decided firmly that it was going to be a business decision and she wanted the job.



Jack was excited as the candidate, Stella, ran through other projects she had recently worked on. She was exactly what the company needed to bring some new energy into the team. Their last graphic designer had kept on churning out the same ideas over and over and they were losing clients at a rate of knots. The rest of the team would be impressed with her and their new clients would no doubt enjoy working with her.

He told her that they were just about to start work on a major

tender, one of the biggest ones in the company's history. Basically, this was why they needed someone with her experience, to help bring this together. Even though it was an interview, without even realising, the two of them started brainstorming. Bouncing ideas around they both felt so inspired. All of this just from an interview. He wanted her and was going to do everything in his power to convince Dylan that she was the one.

The interview concluded and as they shook hands, he could feel the heat permeating through her and their eyes clashed. Did she feel the spark that he did? He dropped her hand, determined to keep things professional.

Jack was keen to get in her for a second interview and introduce her to Dylan. If he signed off on this, he would get straight back to the recruitment agency and offer her the job. The sooner she started the better as far as he was concerned. He wanted to see her again, she had surprised him in so many ways and it wasn't often that happened.



Stella's confidence faded as she arrived home. She didn't want to get her hopes up. Perhaps she wasn't actually good enough for the role. Did they want someone more senior? Her usual self-doubt seemed to swamp her.

Kicking off her shoes she settled down into her favourite chair and called Jaz. They had been best friends since meeting at primary school and she was her sounding board for everything in her life. They had been through so much together—the good, the bad and the ugly. Her advice always made her feel better.

'Hey, it's me,' she said as Jaz picked up.

'Stella, how are you? I was just thinking about you. So, how did you go?' Her friend had known that the interview was today, had

even texted her a string of good luck emojis this morning, so had naturally been waiting for the debrief.

‘It went well; I think but—’

‘But nothing Stella. You would have nailed it. You’re perfect for the role and you know it. Don’t go down that path, please don’t.’

‘I can’t help it. Maybe I should have said more, worn a different outfit. I don’t know.’ Jaz snorted down the telephone line.

‘You have all the qualifications and are perfect for this role.’

‘I know but maybe I’m not the right fit for the company? Perhaps they had a different type in mind and then I walked in? I don’t know—I just feel sick.’

‘So, what was the boss like? Male, female, young, old?’ Stella knew Jaz was trying to move her thoughts away from the path it was heading in. She was getting good at this; she had been protecting Stella’s fragile mind since they were ten years old. Stella’s home life had been anything but nurturing and Jaz had made it no secret that she hated Stella’s mum, probably more than Stella herself would ever admit to.

‘His name is Jack—I really liked him. He was very welcoming and so easy to talk to. He is younger than me though,’ she hesitated, wondering what Jaz’s thoughts would be on that bit of information, ‘but we really clicked and I think we will make a great team.’

‘Are you smiling Stella?’

‘No,’ she said and she forced herself to stop.

‘Yes, you are! What is it you aren’t you telling me?’

‘Nothing, I promise you.’ She could feel a smile spreading across her face again.

‘Stella Carter, I know you’re holding out on me. Spill. What happened?’

‘Well,’ she started, fiddling with a loose thread on one of the many cushions decorating her couch, ‘promise you won’t judge me?’

Something weird happened with Jack and I, the guy I would be working with closely...'

'What? Did you spill a coffee or something all over him?' Jaz laughed.

'I wish that was what had happened.'

'Now I'm really intrigued, what did you do?'

'Nothing bad. But when I shook his hand, I got this weird feeling and it was quite embarrassing. I hope he didn't notice.'

'What kind of feeling?'

Sighing, she tried to explain to Jaz how she had felt.

'It's definitely a feeling you shouldn't get while in an interview, right?' Stella burst out laughing.

'Probably not, but this is so funny. I hope you get the job so you can see him again.'

After they had hung up, Stella thought about that handshake. She was damn sure she hadn't imagined that charge of energy that passed between them when their hands connected.



A few days later she got the call to say they wanted to see her again. She could barely contain her excitement.

It was the same drill as last time. She even sat in the same seat as the previous interview, which helped to settle her nerves. Jack and her shook hands again and yes, there it was, that familiar jolt. Did she imagine Jack's mouth turning up into subtle smile? She was sure he had felt something this time.

Jack introduced her to Dylan.

'So, you're the infamous Stella Carter, the lady who wants to drag my company into the 21st Century?' He chuckled which made his eyes crinkle. Stella's face went bright red and she turned and looked at Jack with a pained look.

‘Don’t worry Stella, like Jack here, I appreciate honesty, it really is quite refreshing. I’m sure you will fit in here nicely, as you obviously speak your mind.’ She smiled weakly but still felt mortified that Dylan was aware of what she had said.

Stella left the interview still not sure whether she had done enough to impress them and secure the role. Her head was spinning. If she did get this job, she would certainly be asking Jack what else he had told Dylan so she could be prepared. If there was one thing Stella hated it was surprises.



Jack and Dylan sat in the meeting room—there was always a part of the day where they caught up with each other so they took this opportunity while there were no other distractions.

‘So, you like her then?’ Dylan asked. Jack felt his cheeks turn pink. Something about her had shaken him more than he cared to admit.

‘What do you mean like her?’ Jack had a moment of confusion as if somehow Dylan had known what had just gone through his mind.

‘Yes, like her, do you want her on the team or not? I liked her and think she will be a great asset to the company.’ Thankfully, Dylan didn’t notice anything unusual about Jack’s behaviour. Jack shook his head to clear the thoughts he had about Stella Carter, while Dylan continued, ‘Get on the phone now and get the recruitment people to offer her the role. In fact, don’t,’ and he flicked his assistant an email asking her to get the ball rolling. ‘Let’s get her started as soon as we can—we have a lot on as you know so she will be thrown in the deep end.’

‘Let’s hope she can swim then,’ whispered Jack.