

Chapter 1 *The flower market mistake*

The woman in the red dress was holding some large yellow flowers to her face. Behind her, there were lots more flowers – big flowers, small flowers, flowers of every possible colour.

I was very pleased I'd got up early to see Nice's famous flower market. It was beautiful, and it helped me to forget that I wasn't going to have a nice day. Or a nice ten days.

Grant Cooper! *Grant Cooper!* I couldn't believe I was going to work with that man for ten days. It was going to be horrible. But I wouldn't think about it until I had to. And here, in the market, I could almost forget.

There was colour all around me – not just the flowers, but also the people buying them in their summer clothes. Even the buildings behind the market were colourful – red and orange with blue windows. What a lovely picture it would make, if I only had my paints with me. But I *did* have a pencil somewhere. I could do a quick drawing. I still had a few minutes before I had to leave for the airport.

I found the pencil in the bottom of my shoulder bag, together with an old letter. Soon my pencil was moving quickly over the back of the letter as I began to draw the woman in the red dress. She was smelling some red flowers now, and her hair was very blonde in the sunshine. As I drew what I saw, I quickly forgot about everything else. The woman buying the flowers obviously knew the flower seller. They were talking and laughing together, and I had lots of time to work on my picture.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-71367-2 - Wild Country
Margaret Johnson
Excerpt
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I don't know how long I stood there. I only know that the next time I looked at my watch, it was nine o'clock. Nine o'clock! I only had thirty minutes to get to the airport. Oh no, I was going to be late. Again.

But before I could put the pencil and paper back into my bag, I felt something soft against my legs. It was a small brown dog, and he was on his own. 'Hello, boy,' I said. 'Are you lost?'

The dog seemed to smile up at me, and I reached out to touch it. The dog smiled again, and then ... it bit me!

I screamed and jumped quickly back from the dog. Too quickly. There was a very loud crash behind me.

'*Mademoiselle!*' shouted an angry voice.

I turned round to see flowers all over the ground. 'I'm sorry,' I said. 'That dog – it bit me!'

'What dog?' asked the angry flower seller.

'Well, that one,' I said, but when I looked down, the dog had disappeared. 'It was here a minute ago,' I said, turning to look. Unfortunately, I turned so quickly that my shoulder bag flew through the air and crashed into some more flowers.

'*Mademoiselle!*' shouted the flower seller again.

'I'm sorry,' I started to say, but then I noticed that things were about to get even worse. A river of dirty water from the flowers was moving very quickly towards the blonde woman's expensive white summer shoes.

'*Madame!*' I shouted, but it was too late.

'My shoes!' cried the blonde woman.

'My flowers!' cried the flower seller.

I held my hand up to show what the dog had done.

'My finger!' I cried, but neither the flower seller nor the blonde woman was interested in my hurt finger.

* * *

After I'd given a lot of money to the flower seller for her flowers, and to the blonde woman to clean her dirty shoes, I caught a bus to the airport. I was feeling fed up. It wasn't the best start to a new tour. But then my tours never did seem to go well.

I'd been a tour leader for Wild Country, my father's walking holiday company, for a year. In that time I'd been late meeting a group at the airport several times. I'd also lost my wallet, with all the money to buy food for the tour group for a week in it. And, of course, everybody who worked for Wild Country knew about the time I'd taken a group to the wrong town on the wrong day. They'd all missed their plane home. Now, *that* was a very famous mistake.

My mistakes were so famous in the company that doing something wrong was called 'doing a Tess Marriot'. I think it was Grant Cooper who started saying that, actually – horrible man.

And now my father had arranged for me to work with Grant Cooper on this tour. He thought I would learn something from Grant – something to make me a better tour leader. I thought my father was wrong. I was just too different to Grant; and I didn't *want* to be like him anyway.

After thirty minutes in a hot bus with these thoughts going round and round my head I felt very fed up. Which was the opposite of how I should be when I meet a group at the start of a holiday.

'A tour leader should smile as often as possible.' That's what it said in the book I was given when I started the job. 'At the beginning of a tour, holidaymakers are often tired from their journeys. They may also be worried about what

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the other people on the holiday will be like. A smile from you makes everybody feel better.'

So as I entered the airport building I tried to put a smile on my face. But it was difficult to keep it there as I tried, without luck, to find my group.

'Wild Country, Walking in Provence?' I asked any group of more than four people, but they all looked at me as if I was mad. I was beginning to think I'd got the time wrong or come to the wrong airport when I saw *him* – Grant Cooper. My heart immediately gave a jump, and not just because I was nervous about being late. I didn't like Grant, but he was very good-looking. I'd liked the look of him when I first met him. But then I'd spoken to him, and all that changed. I just didn't find him easy to get on with. Every time he spoke to me I felt he was laughing at me. It made me so mad I wanted to scream.

As I got closer, I could see that Grant had already found the group. There was nothing else to do but walk up to them with a big Wild Country smile on my face.

'Hello, everybody,' I said. 'I'm Tess Marriot, one of your tour leaders. I hope you had a good journey?'

'Hello, Tess,' Grant said. 'Did you get lost on your way to the airport?'

My face went red. 'No,' I said. 'I had a bit of an accident. But I'm here now, so perhaps we'd better make our way to the hotel. The Hotel La Tour, isn't it?'

I reached into my shoulder bag for the hotel information, but could only find my drawing of the market. 'Oh,' I said, 'that's not it. I'm sure it's here somewhere.'

'You've probably lost it,' Grant told me. 'But never mind. I have the information here. It's the Hotel des Deux Tours.'

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I turned my drawing over. ‘Here it is,’ I said. ‘Hotel des Deux Tours. You’re right.’

Grant smiled at me. ‘I usually am,’ he said. ‘Very nice drawing by the way, Tess. Right, everyone, now we’re finally all here, let’s get on our way. The tour bus is waiting for us outside.’

As I followed everyone out of the airport building I felt as if there must be smoke coming from the top of my head. It was the way I always felt when I was around Grant Cooper. ‘Thank you very much, Dad,’ I thought. ‘Thank you very much!’

Chapter 2 *Please, Dad!*

I sat next to a woman called Ellen on the bus. She was Canadian and she told me she'd been on Wild Country holidays all over the world. She seemed very nice.

As I half-listened to her, I looked at the other people in the group. It was a small group – only five people altogether. There was a couple who were kissing or touching each other all the time, and I thought they must be just married and on holiday. A honeymoon couple. They were called James and Sarah, but I knew I'd always think of them as the honeymoon couple. There was also a white-haired man of about sixty and a very beautiful Scandinavian woman of about eighteen with long blonde hair. Astrid, she was called. She'd smiled when we were introduced, but now she was looking out of the window. I thought she looked sad.

The man with the white hair was called David, and he had a walking stick. Grant was talking to him about the mountains. He probably wanted to know if David would be able to do all the walking on the holiday. Wild Country holidays are really for people in good health, because the walks can be difficult. I knew Grant had to ask David about his leg, but I hoped he'd be kind about it. Before he started working for Wild Country, Grant had been a soldier for five years. Sometimes he spoke to tourists as if they were soldiers too. He'd spoken to me like that when we first met, but I wasn't going to let him do it on this tour. Oh, no!

The couple were kissing again. Ellen saw me looking at them. 'Makes you feel a bit sick, doesn't it?' she said softly, and I had to put my hand over my mouth to hide my smile. A tour leader should *not* laugh at the tourists in their group. I didn't need the Wild Country book to tell me that.

'What did you do to your finger?' Ellen asked me, and I saw Grant look over at us with that smile of his.

'Yes,' he said. 'What *did* you do to your finger, Tess?'

'It's a long story,' I said, and turned my head away so I couldn't see him.

But I still heard what he said: 'I thought it might be.' And then he laughed.

When we got to the hotel I phoned my father, while Grant went to the front desk with the group.

'I'm just on my way to a meeting, Tess,' my father said. 'Can I call you back later?'

'This will only take a minute, Dad,' I said. 'I just want to ask you to let me work with someone else. Please. I don't like Grant. We just don't get on well together.'

When he spoke, Dad sounded a bit impatient. 'Oh, Tess,' he said. 'Grant's a good man, and he's very good at his job. You'll learn a lot from him.'

'Listen, Dad,' I started to say, but it was no good.

'Come on, Tess,' he said. 'You'll be OK. After all, when you take over the company you're going to have to get on with everyone, aren't you? Now, I must go. My meeting's about to start. Love you.'

And he was gone.

As I went to join Grant and the group, everyone looked at me. I felt as if they knew what I'd been talking to my father about.

‘OK, Tess?’ Grant asked me, and I smiled as nicely as I could.

‘Yes, thank you, Grant,’ I said.

‘Good,’ he said, and then turned to the group. ‘Right, you can go up to your rooms for a bit, and we’ll meet back down here at twelve o’clock. I’ll tell you something about the tour, and then the rest of the day is free for you to do what you like. OK?’

After they’d all gone off to their rooms, Grant and I were left alone.

‘I can help you tell them about the tour, if you like,’ I offered.

Grant looked at me. ‘I didn’t think you’d been here before,’ he said.

‘I haven’t led a tour here,’ I said, ‘but I have been on holiday here. I know the area quite well.’

Grant smiled. ‘Well, I think I must know the area a little bit better than you, Tess. I’ve been leading tours here for over a year now. Anyway, I thought the idea was for you to learn from me.’

My face quickly went red. It was clear that Grant thought it was very funny that my father had sent me to learn from him. ‘I don’t need to learn how to speak to a group,’ I told him. ‘I don’t have any problems doing that.’

‘No?’ Grant said. ‘Well, of course, do add anything if you think it will be helpful, Tess.’

From the way he said it, I knew he didn’t think anything I said to the group *would* be helpful.

‘See you back here in an hour.’ Grant turned to leave, then looked back. ‘Oh, and Tess, if you do leave the hotel, please don’t get lost.’

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He was laughing as he walked away. As for me, that smoke was starting to come out of the top of my head again, I knew it was! It was going to be a *very* long ten days.

Chapter 3 *Shopping with Grant*

‘First thing tomorrow, we drive to St-André-les-Alpes,’ Grant said. ‘From there we start a six-hour walk through the forest to Castellane,’ Grant told the group.

‘You’ll *love* Castellane,’ I added. ‘It’s so beautiful. There’s a lovely river, and mountains everywhere.’

Grant gave me a look. ‘Thank you, Tess,’ he said. ‘While we’re in Castellane you can climb up to the top of Robion mountain, which is one thousand, six hundred and sixty metres high ...’

‘Or there are some nice restaurants with tables outside if you want to just *look* at Robion with some good food and a glass of wine,’ I said.

Grant’s voice sounded cross. ‘Next day it’s an early start as we climb above the Verdon river, where the mountains of Cadières de Brandis are one thousand metres high ...’

‘The colours are beautiful,’ I told the group. ‘The river is so blue through the trees, and the mountains seem to be looking down on us like people ...’

Ellen started to laugh. ‘Are you two sure you’re talking about the same holiday?’ she asked.

Grant looked at me crossly. ‘Just what I was thinking, Ellen,’ he said.

‘We don’t have to carry our bags, do we?’ asked David worriedly.

‘No,’ I said quickly, before Grant could answer. ‘Your bags go by bus.’