

'The Finale' by Alys Key (2019)

'Love your Enemies, for they tell you your Faults' *Poor Richard Improved*, 1756

For the grand final, they swapped a gated London mansion for a villa just outside Sorrento. Kirsty was glad to leave.

The Kensington house had grown quieter and colder as the rooms emptied week after week; another contestant gone and, in their stead, a runner to clear the wardrobe. The suitcases viewers saw on the show were empty, a prop for marching out the door.

What once had the air of an overgrown, luxurious school trip quickly felt more like a horror movie in which contenders were picked off until there was just Kirsty and Alina.

If this was a slasher film, Kirsty thought, Alina would be the only survivor.

The other woman was standing a few feet away on the dock, straight-backed for the rolling cameras. The youngest contestant, Alina's enthusiasm and over-the-top ideas often attracted derision, but Kirsty knew not to underestimate her. Together they had been on six winning teams.

Now the white bulk of a superyacht was pulling closer, absorbing the horizon. As it landed, every film crew member was locked in position, waiting for the star.

Sir Tommy Macleod emerged belly-first into the Italian sun and spread his arms in greeting.

"Bwon-jorrrr-no!" he roared, a voice that was rich with Glasgow and cleansed of Berkshire boarding school.

"Welcome to the Amalfi Coast. One of the most beautiful places in the world and, coincidentally, a favourite destination for the rich and successful.

"But as I hope you know by now, when businesspeople play hard, they work bloody hard too.

"In a little osteria near here, I signed my first £100m deal - with the help of a few gallons of limoncello."

Kirsty laughed for the benefit of both Sir Tommy and the cameraman circling her from a low angle.

"Each of you will host a yacht party, for myself and some friends, colleagues and associates."

As he spoke, two more yachts pulled in. The scene ended with Kirsty and Alina showing their excitement – three times to get the best footage.

"You have two days," he said, before being driven off into the hills.

Kirsty returned to the villa that night after 14 hours of solid planning. Even with hints and help from the crew it was a huge amount to pull together, but she was pleased with her efforts.

The contestant rooms were next-door to each other, both kitted out with balconies that offered a seaview backdrop for filming. Opening the sliding door for fresh air, Kirsty slumped onto the bed. She would have fallen asleep right then if she hadn't heard talking outside.

"Tell the viewer why you think you'll win."

She recognised the voice of Mike, the director, and realised she should stop listening.

She edged closer to the door.

“Sir Tommy knows we’re both excellent. That’s why we’re here.” Alina was speaking now. “So this challenge comes down to personal touch. That’s something I do better.”

“Do you mean Kirsty’s boring?”

“Well, sort of...”

“Alina-”

“Sorry yes, full sentences. I think Kirsty’s style is somewhat boring. It should be easy to outshine her.”

*Boring?*

Kirsty reeled. She had planned something elegant, yes, something in keeping with a business setting: Jazz band, personalised cocktails, mini casino. Other options in the provided phonebook of circus acts and singing waiters seemed like the kind of childish extravagancies they pushed men towards on that other reality show – the one where groom plans a wedding.

But Alina had a point. The competition had been the tale of Kirsty’s steady, unremarkable hand on the tiller while her opponent wowed out front.

*It’s not too late*, she thought.

On Friday night, the sky filled with stars and the small cove flooded with guests.

Employees of Sir Tommy’s companies came by the boatload, while business leaders and celebrities pulled up in Ferraris and armoured BMWs and in one instance a sleek beetle-like helicopter.

With Kirsty up first, all the revellers including Sir Tommy were jammed together on her boat so their reactions could be recorded. Alina was there too. Having the rivals see each other’s efforts would prompt a few catty comments, the producers hoped.

Backstage, Kirsty was given the signal. She took a breath and threw open the double doors to the deck.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome!”

Two hundred faces stared at her. They took in her sleek dress, stomping great gold heels and feathered mask.

“Ready yourselves for... the carnival!”

Acrobats came rushing from the room behind her, tumbling and leaping into the crowd. In their wake, masked staff carried trays of champagne in cut-glass coupes and baskets of masks for the guests. Waiting upstairs was a pool, a DJ, and several swimsuited models of both sexes already dancing. The guests wasted no time getting stuck in.

It was unclear, in the ensuing chaos, if her about-turn had paid off. At least, she thought, as she watched a cameraman film one of Sir Tommy’s millionaire mates attempting to breakdance, it was not boring.

Finally, when the crew was tearing people away to sober up for the evening's next phase, Kirsty was brought to face Sir Tommy.

Before she could speak, he held up a hand.

"No verdict until the end, sweetheart," he said. "They'll be fuming if I give you any wee clues off camera – shall we?" He extended his elbow and Kirsty understood that he was escorting her onto the next yacht.

On board, a garden bloomed with flowers and little lightbulbs. Tables covering the whole deck were filling up with diners.

Waiters, moving like stitches through silk, filled every glass with a very good, very dry white wine before serving plates of creamy risotto, topped with sage.

The guests, ravenous from their exertions, devoured it. Conversation unfurled while a string quartet played instrumental versions of pop songs.

After the second course - a crispy-skinned piece of fish drenched in a delicious sauce - the musicians came to a diminuendo and Alina took the stage.

"Ladies and gentlemen, hello. I trust you're all having an enjoyable evening."

Warm waves of laughter lapped around the deck. A camera lens was peeping at her so Kirsty laughed too, even as she began to suspect that her own party was the punchline.

"Once you have enjoyed dessert, please feel free to stay here, where there will be dancing, or come inside for an espresso martini."

Two waiters pulled open the cabin doors and out shone a fantasy of Italian nostalgia. The whole room had been transformed into a traditional espresso bar, complete with baristas in aprons and ties, a long metal counter and a chessboard-tiled floor.

"For those seeking a little more privacy, you'll find a lounge upstairs where you can have a quiet conversation and a glass of whisky, perhaps a cigar."

Sir Tommy, whose penchant for a Cuban was well-known, clapped his hands in delight.

*Damn.*

Kirsty could not eat her dessert. Around her the party began to knit together, people criss-crossing between different areas, splintering into jovial, secretive, familiar and flirty conversations. She had a horrible feeling that Alina's event contained a delicate magic that her own party had drowned with champagne.

Once the quartet took a break, the festivities wound down and the contestants were called to face their judge. An audience was assembled from those guests who had not yet left or fallen asleep in the cigar room.

"You've both done extraordinary things tonight," Sir Tommy said. "Kirsty, you dispelled any doubt that you can give it your all. These past eight weeks you have played it safe and that's served you well. But today you showed willingness to take a risk. Well done."

Kirsty's smile was all gritted teeth. She was not yet ready to hope she had pulled it off.

“But,” he went on, “your party was not what I asked for. You can’t butter up a business partner when they’re face-down on the bar.”

And with this concise, shattering summary, he turned to the winner.

“Alina. I was concerned that your youth and your unfeasible ideas meant you would not be ready to work in an organisation like mine. Tonight you proved me wrong, striking a delicate balance between business and pleasure.

“Although you have both proven yourselves, I must go with the person who is most able to deliver. And that person is... Alina.”

Long buffers of silence would be inserted later, but the real thing went so quickly. As Alina shook hands with Sir Tommy, Kirsty felt she had been swept up by a wave and dashed against the rocks.

Alina came towards her.

“Congratulations,” Kirsty managed, as she was brought into a hug.

“It’s all thanks to you,” Alina said.

What do you mean?

“You. You were always the one telling me we wouldn’t win if we went overboard, always getting me to take my ideas down a notch. If you hadn’t drummed that into me by now, you...” she trailed off and shrugged, and Kirsty knew she had been about to say “you would have won”.