



# Hooked On The One That Got Away (Miss Lovelock's Agency for Broken Hearts #3)

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** He was her soul mate, but he deserted her. Now he's back. And still keeping secrets.

For five years, Willow and Charlie were voted 'Most Disgustingly Happy Couple' by their friends. Until the morning Willow woke to find a note on her pillow: Charlie had gone. It was him not her, he said. Willow mustn't blame herself. But, of course, she does.

A year on, and Willow keeps her dark moods at bay by wild swimming in her local river, dodging aggressive swans and speeding rowers. But just as she's starting to feel like she's over Charlie, he accidentally hooks her mid-swim with a fishing line, and all Willow's old feelings resurface.

But why won't Charlie tell her why he left and where he's been? What's his secret? Willow always felt like she and Charlie were soul mates, but after the way he deserted her, can Willow ever trust him again?

Miss Lovelock's Agency for Broken Hearts knows when a couple is meant to be together. But trust is hard to rebuild, and Miss Lovelock's magical matchmaking team will have to pull out all the stops to persuade Willow to give her first love a second chance.

**Total Pages (Source):** 24

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

## Chapter One

Willow patted the trunk of her namesake tree, tucked her long ash-blond hair under her swimming cap and tried not to think about Charlie.

Early summer meant the river was warm enough for her to use her thin cap, rather than the sturdy neoprene one that fastened under her chin and made her feel like an old-timey aviator.

She'd also swapped her long-sleeve insulated swimsuit for the patterned cross-back.

It was obnoxiously bright, borderline fluorescent, but necessary when the river got busy.

Willow tried not to think about what Charlie would have said.

He was the whole reason she was out here, about to plunge into a river and swim with the carp, pike and trout.

And the chub and the tench, Charlie would have reminded her.

Charlie liked to sit on the riverbank and – his words again – dangle his rod over the water. Sometimes he even caught a fish.

Dammit! Three Charlie thoughts in a row!

That was Willow's cue to get going. She snapped on her goggles and, without

hesitating, dived into the river and began to swim.

She hadn't always been so brave. The first time she'd tried wild swimming, eighteen months ago, she'd dipped a toe in the water, let out a yelp, and shivered on the riverbank, cursing herself for agreeing to do this.

Okay, so there was plenty of actual evidence that cold water swimming had near-magical benefits for both body and mind, and Willow's certainly needed all help they could get.

Charlie's desertion – not too strong a word – had crushed her.

That fateful night nearly a year ago, she'd curled up next to Charlie's warm body in bed, feeling on top of the world, buoyantly happy and excited about the future.

Next morning, she'd woken up alone, with every drop of happiness wrung from her, leaving her as grey and limp as an old, used dishcloth.

That morning had been the worst of Willow's life.

It was like she'd been cursed by an evil fairy.

The evil fairy of abandonment and lies. Who'd robbed her of everything she believed was good and true and right.

And left her not only with nothing but feeling like nothing.

A nothing person with nothing to live for.

Charlie's note, left on his pillow, insisted it wasn't Willow, it was him.

Yes, he'd actually used that old cliché, and it sounded as stale and meaningless as you'd expect.

After five years together, agreeing how happy they were, and making plans, Charlie suddenly about-faced and buggered off.

And had the gall to tell her not to blame herself.

Too right Willow wouldn't blame herself!

She wasn't the one who'd flat out lied! She wasn't the one who'd talked about the future when all the time they were planning their escape!

She wasn't the one who hadn't had the balls for an honest discussion!

Or who'd done a midnight flit like they were breaking out of jail , for crying out loud!

Once the initial shock had passed, Willow had cried out loud.

Many, many times. Because no matter how often she re-read Charlie's note, and the words that said it wasn't her fault, she couldn't believe it.

She must have done something, or said something, to make him have doubts.

Maybe even to make him believe that leaving in the dead of night would be the kindest way, that she wouldn't have been strong enough to know the truth in advance.

Good friends and the sensible part of her mind told her this was rubbish, and that Charlie was a spineless twat who deserved to be smeared in jam and catapulted into the nearest wasp's nest. But in the dark part of Willow's mind, doubts still whispered, and even after a year, she hadn't been able to shut them up.

Her best friend, Maeve, was the one who'd suggested wild swimming. 'It stimulates your immune system, reduces stress, and it's a wonderful chance to get out and about in nature,' Maeve had told her.

'Will you come with me?' Willow had asked.

'God no,' Maeve had replied, with a shudder. 'All that slimy weed and mud, and those fishes that can bite your toes off? Not on your nelly.'

'I don't think there are any fish that can bite your toes off,' Willow had replied. 'It's not the Amazon.'

'Have you seen the spiky choppers on this fella?' Maeve brandished her phone, on which was a photo of a pike. It did have a lot of very pointy teeth.

'Have they ever been known to attack people, though?' was Willow's question.

Maeve spent some minutes googling. 'Yes! Once! In Wales in 1999!'

'I thought you wanted me to do this?' Willow said. 'I thought you said it would be good for me?'

'I do! It will be!' said Maeve. 'Just don't wiggle those toes like tasty little piggies, or you'll be forced to go down a couple of shoe sizes.'

To be fair, Willow hadn't needed much encouragement.

Every other idea for getting her out of her funk seemed somehow too pleasant.

Too soft. Whereas a daily plunge into freezing cold water would be like a brisk slap, a spur to toughen up, to do better, and be better.

Be the kind of person Charlie would have stayed with.

Normally, Willow was a good swimmer, her strokes smooth and rhythmic, her breathing steady.

But this morning's intrusive Charlie thoughts had switched her into angry turbo mode, and she was splashing and puffing like a seal fleeing from an orca.

She also wasn't keeping an eye on where she was going. Or on what might be coming.

'Watch it!'

An oar slashed into the water beside her, about an inch away from her shoulder. Willow spluttered to a stop as the rowing club's champion coxless four swept past, their long spindly oars making them look like some kind of water bug. Water bugs, however, did not normally shout abuse at you.

'Stupid cow!' yelled one of them. They all looked alike to Willow – broad shoulders, lanky arms and quad muscles the size of marrows. Wearing tight shirts and wrap-around sunglasses, the kind favoured by wankers the world over.

Willow considered giving them the fingers.

River etiquette said they should give way to her, but by not paying attention, she'd drifted out into the middle and thus created a hazard to any craft, let alone one with a crew that faced backwards.

Willow would have to settle for making immature jokes about them being cox-less. The kind Charlie would have made.

Dammit!

Weary now, and sad, and furious with herself for being sad, Willow trod water for a moment more and then turned to swim slowly back to where she started.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

### Chapter Two

‘Don’t give up!’ said Maeve. ‘You’re just starting to see the benefits!’

‘What do you mean – starting ?’ said Willow. ‘I’ve been wild swimming for nearly a year!’

‘Well, you were in very bad place then,’ said Maeve. ‘So, it’s taken you longer than most to make any headway.’

‘There’s a weird logic to that,’ admitted Willow, adding glumly, ‘Today, I felt like I’d actually gone backwards.’

‘Charlie on the brain again?’

‘Like an earworm that won’t quit.’

‘“Barbie Girl” by Aqua,’ said Maeve. ‘Or “Crazy Frog” by whichever maniac is to blame for that one.’

‘How about “Can’t Get You Out of my Head” by Kylie?’

‘“Toxic”? By Britney?’

Willow and Maeve met when they were employed as junior copywriters in the same advertising agency.



Willow quickly found out that she loathed advertising and moved on to a part-time role with the local council, producing content for their website and quarterly magazine.

It wasn't well-paid, but she enjoyed getting out and about in the community, often picking up excellent pieces of gossip that sadly would never make it into the public channels.

And mornings off gave her time for swimming.

Maeve, on the other hand, had flourished at the agency and was now a fully-fledged creative director, whose salary made Willow's look like the tip-jar on the Oak and Whale's bar, which currently contained around 50 pence, two Werther's Originals (one unwrapped) and a bulldog clip.

Maeve wore outfits from The Fold that cost hundreds of pounds, and Jimmy Choos.

Willow wore comfortable, i.e. shapeless, activewear and Chucks.

She no longer had anyone to dress up for.

Maeve had proved a solid friend, though, after Charlie's abandonment, which could not be said for everyone in Willow and Charlie's former friend circle.

Willow guessed that those who'd dropped out of sight were either embarrassed for her, or worried that she was some kind of jinx for their own relationship.

After all, their friends had literally voted her and Charlie 'Most Disgustingly Happy Couple' at a party only two months before the split.

And nobody likes admitting they were completely wrong, because what other

important things might they be completely wrong about?

‘Eh up, pet,’ said Maeve. ‘The ginger beardy fella is back with his violin-thingy.’

Maeve had been born in Ireland, but her parents had moved around a lot, pursuing casual employment opportunities all over Ireland, Scotland, England, Wales and even a stint in the Isle of Man.

Over the years Maeve had accumulated an accent that defied easy identification, as well as a very low threshold for boredom.

‘Fiddle,’ said Willow. ‘Not violin. Same instrument, different use.’

‘I’d happily fiddle with him,’ said Maeve. ‘It’s why I force you to come here every Tuesday night and listen to “Whiskey In The Jar” for the millionth time. Whack-for-my-daddy-o , eh?’

She eyed the bearded fiddler, who was, Willow agreed, pretty cute.

He had a gentle vibe about him and a fantastic smile.

He reminded her of Charlie, only Charlie didn’t have a ginger beard.

He had shaggy light brown hair that no product had been able to tame.

Willow had loved stroking it off his forehead ...

‘ I’m a Barbie girl !’ Maeve sang it a gratingly high-pitched voice. ‘Sorry. I could see you were drifting off to Charlie-land. Thought I’d bring you back to earth.’

‘I don’t know why it’s so bad at the moment!’ Willow almost wailed. ‘It should be

getting easier, not harder!’

‘Maybe it’s because we’re getting close to the anniversary of him leaving?’ Maeve suggested. ‘That’s not the right word, but you know.’

‘Oh, god, you’re right ,’ Willow groaned. ‘I hadn’t twigged. Too busy trying not to think about it. A year ago, tomorrow ... ’

If the table had been big enough, she would have folded her arms on it and rested her head on them. Instead, she settled for a deep sigh, and a pat on the shoulder from Maeve.

‘I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again,’ said Maeve. ‘He behaved like an absolute arse. You deserved so much better then, and you deserve so much better now. Time to move on. Seriously.’

‘Move on where ?’ said Willow, glumly.

The rest of the folk band were taking their seats.

It wasn’t a formal band, more a loose association of like-minded musicians.

Some weeks, there’d be as few as three, and sometimes as many as twelve.

This evening, there was the young, bearded fiddler, an ancient-looking man on accordion, a homespun woman of middle-age who played uilleann pipes and/or banjo depending on the number, a teenage girl on the bodhrán, and a man who looked like an accountant on the tin whistle.

Another young guy, who was there every week, played guitar and sang.

He and the fiddle player looked alike enough to be brothers, but folk music did attract a lot of bearded types in flannel shirts and waistcoats, so who knew?

What Willow appreciated most about the musicians was that they hadn't been around when she was coming here with Charlie.

Not long after he left, the Oak and Whale changed ownership.

The new owner was a pink-haired woman of indeterminate age, who also grew flowers, which she sold at the weekend farmers' market.

She didn't spend much time behind the bar, leaving that job to a raven-haired, heavily tattooed young woman called Geillis, named apparently after a Scottish maidservant who was famously executed as a witch in the late-1500s.

Bar-keeper Geillis had various witch-themed tattoos, including a black cat that took up her entire left forearm.

Geillis and the inked cat shared the same unusual green-gold eyes, that Maeve had once described as 'pure fae'.

It was probably a coincidence that there'd been no brawls in the pub since Geillis arrived, but she certainly had a presence about her.

'Why don't you go hit on yon singer?' Maeve suggested to Willow. 'He's not as cute as the fiddler but I've called dibs on him.'

'No.' It had been Willow's automatic response to this kind of suggestion for almost a year, and now she was even boring herself. 'Maybe ... Not today.'

'I'll hold you to "maybe",' said Maeve. 'And remind you that it's your round.'

Like magic, Geillis appeared to clear their empty glasses. She made Willow nervous, especially when she fixed her with that green-gold stare.

And said things like, ‘You’ll be more careful in the river tomorrow, won’t you?’

‘Um, yes,’ said Willow. ‘I’ll avoid all rudely speeding rowers.’

‘They’re not a danger,’ said Geillis, dismissively. ‘It’s the swans you need to watch out for now. It’s breeding season, so they’ll be extra aggressive.’

‘Swans can break a man’s arm,’ said Maeve.

‘They can’t,’ said Geillis, who clearly knew everything about everything. ‘But they can give you a nasty clout. Best steer clear of them.’

‘Noted,’ said Willow, whose nerves added, ‘Thank you.’

‘Ahem,’ stage-coughed Maeve.

‘Oh, and can we have another round?’ said Willow to Geillis. ‘Please?’

‘Sure,’ said Geillis. ‘Pay at the bar before you go.’

As Geillis strode off, Maeve whispered, ‘You know what happens to people who don’t pay at the bar before they go?’

Willow frowned. ‘No?’

‘We’ll never find out because everyone’s too scared of Geillis not to pay,’ said Maeve.

The sound of the fiddle in full flight pulled her attention back to the band. ‘Look at his fingers go on those frets. I do appreciate a proficient fingering.’

‘You could ask him out,’ said Willow, with a smile.

‘I could,’ agreed Maeve. ‘But you know what you call a musician without a girlfriend?’

‘Available?’

‘Homeless,’ said Maeve. ‘And I’m not sure I’m ready to be a sugar-mummy just yet.’

At least Maeve knew something about what she wanted, thought Willow.

Whereas she’d spent almost a year in limbo, not moving forward, not making any plans.

Apart from her job, which she could do in her sleep, all she had in her life was daily swimming and Tuesdays at the pub with Maeve.

And the ever-present full-body ache of missing Charlie and wondering what she’d done that was so wrong.

Maeve was right. It was time to move on. Time to start the slow, painful removal of the hooks Charlie had sunk deep into her heart. It was necessary, Willow knew. But that didn’t mean it would be easy.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

### Chapter Three

Willow hadn't been bothered by swans up till now. They were quite intimidating, with their long, strong necks and black beady eyes, but until Geillis had warned her about them, Willow hadn't been at all concerned when they were nearby. She'd given them space, and they'd cruised on by. No problem.

This morning, almost as if Geillis had willed it, there was a pair of swans on the bank beside the willow tree, and they were not happy to see her.

Both instantly raised their wings up high, pulled their necks back and hissed .

Willow had thought mute swans were just that – silent.

These swans not only hissed, it now appeared they also made snorting sounds.

Then they started racing towards her , hissing and snorting and flapping their truly enormous wings!

Willow turned and ran. She wasn't proud and she also didn't want to become the first human killed and eaten by irate waterfowl.

She made it back to her car, and once inside, hit the button that locked all the doors.

Panting, she looked back but, embarrassingly, the swans seemed not to have followed her.

Willow guessed they didn't want to leave their nest. The nest by her favourite riverbank spot that she'd now need to avoid.

Dammit. Where could she go now? There was limited public access to the river round here.

One side was entirely bordered by very large private mansions.

Or at least, by their gazebos and boat ramps.

The houses were usually miles back beyond a stretch of perfect lawn.

There were other swimming areas not too far away, but they didn't have a willow tree with big gnarly roots you could hide your car keys in.

Oh well, that was what search engines were for.

Willow entered her specifications – and lo, a suitable match appeared.

A twenty-minute drive, but needs must when your spot has been overtaken by fearsome swans.

Besides, it would be good for her to explore and get out of her comfortable rut. She was moving forward, right?

The new spot turned out to be suspiciously ideal.

Suspicious because Willow had a sudden sensation that she was being manipulated.

That forces beyond her control were aligning to shape her fate.



Good thing Maeve wasn't here. She'd have laughed in Willow's face, then possibly slapped it to bring her back to her senses.

Willow shook herself vigorously, and the feeling passed. Time for a swim.

She'd checked the route – upstream first for about three miles, turning back before she got too near to the lock.

Looked like she'd mainly be in open water, though there were some overhanging trees about midway that she'd need to avoid.

Getting tangled in hidden branches was a known risk for wild swimmers.

It would be ironic if she'd escaped death by swans only to be drowned by trees.

Acclimatising to cold water had been a gradual process.

Willow could now tolerate much longer swims on cold days than when she'd started, which meant swims on warmer days felt positively easy.

Today, the weather was calm and bright, and her later start meant the sun had already warmed the top layer of the water.

Willow felt buoyant, cutting easily through the water with smooth, even strokes.

The automatic nature of the physical motion freed up Willow's brain, which proceeded to start an argument with itself.

Maeve was right: Charlie had behaved unforgivably badly.

No decent man leaves without warning, with only a note that says nothing really,

except that it wasn't Willow's fault.

There'd obviously been a side to Charlie that he'd kept hidden, a devious, deceitful and – let's face it– yellow-bellied coward side.

If he'd had an ounce of courage, he'd have been honest with Willow, told her how he felt.

Given her a chance to change, to fix things.

All of that was true, her brain acknowledged.

But then so was the fact that Charlie was genuinely kind, sweet and loving – and you can't fake that for five years unless you're a complete psychopath.

Charlie was not a psychopath; Willow had looked up the warning signs when Maeve made that suggestion, and he didn't tick any of the boxes.

He wasn't superficially charming; he was often awkward and shy.

He wasn't manipulative and predatory; he bent over backwards to help other people and volunteered for community conservation efforts, like tree planting and litter clean-ups.

He didn't purposefully make people uncomfortable with inappropriate sexual comments.

He might have been fond of mildly rude jokes, but he picked his moments for those.

Usually, he whispered them in Willow's ear because he loved to make her laugh. And she'd laughed so often back then.

So, which was the real Charlie? The cowardly deceiver or the kind, loving helper? That was the question Willow's brain couldn't help her answer. Which meant no answer to the other question that bothered her more: had Charlie truly believed that she was not to blame?

Willow would have to suck up not knowing, because she had no idea where Charlie was.

He'd left no forwarding address, and he'd disconnected his mobile phone.

He was an only child, and both his parents had died when he was eighteen, in a car crash.

Willow might have been able to track down other family members, but would Charlie have told them anything?

If he'd wanted anyone to know where he was, he'd have said so in his note.

The lock was close now. The oldest locks dated back to the 1600s and were still an object of fascination for people.

It was hypnotic, watching the water in the lock gradually lift or lower the boat, to give it easy passage to the next stretch of river.

The currents could be strong around locks, so swimmers were advised to keep clear. Time for Willow to turn around.

She bobbed, treading water for a moment, and looked about her. A few walkers on the towpath, most with happily panting dogs. One kayaker in the distance. A couple on the lock overbridge. They appeared to be fastening something to the wire railing – Willow squinted to see. A padlock ?

The couple then kissed, passionately and joyfully.

Oh. It's a lovelock. They'll have their initials engraved on it.

How romantic. The lockkeeper would probably remove it with a bolt cutter the minute they were gone, but that didn't matter.

It was the gesture, and the symbolism. Of their love and commitment to each other.

Willow sighed. Her arms felt suddenly leaden, heavy like her heart.

It had been so long since she'd been kissed.

A year today, in fact. A whole bloody year.

The night Charlie left, she remembered too well.

He'd come to bed after her, pulled her to him and kissed her so hard her entire body flooded with desire.

Charlie normally put her orgasm first, but that night he'd been almost rough, taking just enough time to ensure she was wet before entering her, and filling her to the brim with strong, urgent thrusts.

He'd shoved his hands under her rear and yanked her closer to him, his muscled hardness connecting bang on with Willow's centre, igniting a sudden orgasm that burst through her like fireworks, leaving her stunned and breathless.

She'd gazed in astonishment at Charlie's face above hers, his eyes black with lust, his mouth taut apart from a small, satisfied hitch to one corner.

Then he'd closed his eyes and come, almost lifting her off the bed with the force of his final thrusts.

For a moment, he'd rested his head on the pillow beside hers, and then he'd lifted it and stared down at her.

'I love you, Willow Taylor,' he'd said.

She'd laughed. At the joy of the unexpectedly intense, perfect sex. At Charlie's unusually serious expression, and at the strength of love she felt for him.

'Love you, too, Charlie McKay,' she'd replied, and stroked his shaggy hair off his damp forehead. He'd lifted himself out of her, and they'd curled up together in a warm tangle and fallen asleep. And when she'd woken in the morning, he was gone.

Willow was annoyed to find the memory had made her cry, and even more annoyed that she couldn't wipe her eyes owing to her hands being as wet as her face.

Get a grip , Willow ordered herself. And get moving before you get hypothermia.

Slowly, she kicked off again, back upriver, every stroke feeling like an effort.

The kayaker she'd spotted earlier was paddling her way, so Willow kept over to the right.

She calculated that they would pass her close to the cluster of trees.

There was enough room. Willow wouldn't have to go too near to the bank.

Without warning, the kayaker suddenly changed course – and started heading right towards her ! At speed ! It was the swans all over again. Only this time, she was

pretty sure the kayaker wasn't murderous; they just hadn't spotted her.

No point in yelling out. The kayaker had a helmet on, and probably earbuds in underneath. Nothing for it except to seek shelter beside the trees and wait until they'd passed.

As she approached the tree-lined bank, something small flicked past her vision, and she felt a sharp sting on her shoulder.

A wasp? A horsefly? Whatever it was, she could still feel it, tugging now on the cross-back of her swimsuit, caught by whatever insect part might get trapped.

Willow didn't want to give that too much thought, but she really did want it off her.

Trouble was, she couldn't see it, and she certainly wasn't going to try to grab it.

Yikes, it was pulling at her! As if it was trying to tow her towards the bank!

What kind of monster bug was this ? Panicked now, Willow flailed her hand around over her shoulder in the hopes she might knock the insect off her – and made contact with a taut, thin plastic thread.

A fishing line! Some stupid idiot had hooked her!

'Oy!' Angry now, Willow yelled towards the bank. 'Stop pulling! Your line's caught in my swimsuit!'

From among the trees, she heard a distant, 'Shit.' A person emerged, holding a fishing rod. Their face was filled with concern.

Their face was also horribly, gut-churningly familiar. Willow felt her stomach clench

and fought the urge to throw up, but she managed to croak out one word. ‘Charlie ...’

The mouth on the face dropped open, then said, ‘ Willow ?’

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

### Chapter Four

The shock had shut down Willow's capacity for rational thought. All she could do was tread water and splutter. Charlie seemed equally stunned but was quicker to recover.

'I, er – can I get you unhooked? You'll need to swim a bit closer.'

Getting closer to him was the last thing Willow wanted to do.

However, she didn't have much choice. The hook was firmly lodged where she couldn't reach it.

Now that the initial shock had subsided and Willow's brain could function again, she could see why Charlie had chosen this spot to fish.

The tree branches were clear of the water, and the curve of the bank had created a still pool, sheltered from the current.

Charlie had a rod licence, but he'd never been a serious angler.

He'd preferred sitting in a quiet spot, and if a passing fish chose to take his bait, then that was great.

If they didn't, his day wasn't spoiled. Willow could easily guess that he hadn't expected to catch a person, let alone his former girlfriend. What were the odds of that ?



Once more, she had a sense that she was being somehow manipulated by outside forces – but she couldn't dwell on it.

She dog-paddled over, and Charlie squatted down to remove the hook, before holding out his hand to help her up onto the bank.

Willow considered leaping like a salmon and swimming away as fast as she could.

But that would be undignified, and more importantly, would only be postponing the inevitable.

Charlie was back, and she may as well face that fact – and him – right now.

For a year, she'd tried not to imagine bumping into Charlie, as it felt far too painful.

But the odd time she'd done so, she'd pictured herself looking her absolute best. She had not been dripping wet, and in a garish swimsuit, unflattering cap and goggles that would leave unattractive red ridges on her face when she took them off.

She had to take them off, though. They were fogging up.

Charlie was staring at her, and it took all of Willow's emotional reserves to return his gaze.

Her heart was pounding uncomfortably at the base of her throat, and her stomach fluttered and flipped.

Part of her wanted to throw her arms around him and sob into his chest. Another part wanted to punch him into next week.

Yet another part was frantically searching for something sensible to say. Again,

Charlie beat her to it.

‘You’ve taken up swimming?’ he said, then grimaced. ‘Captain Obvious here, at your service.’

No, thought Willow. He has no right to make jokes. No right to be so goddamn fucking casual!

‘Sorry.’ Charlie had read her expression correctly. ‘I just – this is a massive surprise, and I don’t really know how to handle it. Resorting to jokes as always. Sorry,’ he said again.

Willow was cold now, and the adrenaline spike of the shock was fading. She began to shiver.

‘Shit, you’re freezing.’

Charlie whipped off the nubbly green jersey he was wearing over his t-shirt and offered it to her.

Willow’s desire not to become hypothermic won over her instinct to throw it in the water.

She pulled it on. It smelled like Charlie and was still warm from his body heat.

Willow wondered if the day could get any worse.

‘Can we talk?’ Charlie sounded subdued. ‘Can I – explain?’

‘Ha!’

Willow's bark of sarcastic laughter startled both of them.

Charlie's expression became worried and wary.

And well it might, thought Willow. She was angry again.

No, scratch that – she was furious. All this time, she'd been wondering what it was she'd done wrong when it was Charlie who felt guilty, who needed to justify his actions to her.

It was suddenly all so blindingly obvious.

'No,' she said. 'No, we can't talk. No, you can't explain. What you did to me was unforgivable. It was deceitful and unkind. More than unkind – it was cruel. You nearly destroyed me, Charlie—'

Her voice cracked. She hugged herself for comfort, took a breath and shook her head.

'Willow, I'm so—'

'I have to go,' she said, and started to walk towards the towpath.

'But – how far away's your stuff?' Charlie called after her. 'I could drive you—?'

Willow ignored him. Swim shoes weren't great for walking, but they'd last the mile or so back to her car.

Somehow, she knew Charlie wouldn't follow her.

This meeting, strange as it was, had felt like the closure she'd needed for a year.

She'd spoken her mind, told him how she truly felt.

Made it crystal clear how much he'd hurt her.

She'd also made it clear that she no longer needed him to explain because nothing he could say could change what he'd done.

It all felt liberating to Willow, like a weight had been lifted.

Charlie meant nothing to her now. She was free.

By the time she reached her car, Willow was warm enough to discard the jersey. She considered shoving it in a rubbish bin but instead stopped off at the local charity shop and handed it over as a donation. And then she went home to shower and change before work.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

### Chapter Five

The town council offices were in a pleasant old Georgian brick building.

There weren't many staff; the big decisions in the area were made by the county council.

Willow's desk was next to the two-person team at Community and Amenities, and in front of the Admin Officer.

She liked her colleagues well enough but vastly preferred getting out and about to gather content and chat to people.

Today, she was popping in to see the graphic designer who did the quarterly magazine layout.

Harvey had got into the game back before desktop publishing, when, as he liked to tell Willow, his tools were a Rotring pen, scalpel and hot glue.

Willow was curious about how he'd used each of those but wasn't entirely sure she wanted details.

Willow didn't know much else about Harvey's background except that he was from a posh if cash-strapped family, and though he must surely be over fifty, had one of those pink, cherubic, unlined faces framed by a shock of mostly still-golden curls.

His office was tiny, consisting of a wall of bookshelves, his desk, and an

extraordinarily messy table with two chairs for holding meetings.

His desk, by contrast, was spotless. Basically, because everything that had ever been on it was now on the table.

Willow had got used to propping her notebook against the nearest pile of stuff.

As usual, Harvey's outfit looked faintly Dickensian, with a tweedy waistcoat over a collarless shirt. The clothes probably had belonged to his Victorian ancestors. Truly posh people never threw anything away.

'Right-ho,' he said. 'What razor-sharp pieces of investigative journalism do we have for this next issue?'

'Hot Dogs restaurant has finally been sold,' replied Willow.

'No guarantee the new owners won't knock it down and start again, so brace yourself for Preserve Our Mock-Tudor Heritage protesters chaining themselves to the bike rack outside.

Um ... a record amount of litter was gathered by volunteers in the spring clean-up, and another retirement home is opening. '

'Is that really necessary?' said Harvey, his expression pained.

'Ageing population,' said Willow.

'I'd sooner die,' said Harvey.

'Well, yes, that is the other option.' Willow scanned her list. 'And we're going for best-kept village again, despite having not won it for the last sixteen years, which

could seem like a hint to stop trying.'

'Only a curmudgeon doesn't enjoy a nice hanging basket of petunias.'

'Noted,' said Willow with a grin. 'Of course, there'll be the usual Council committee reports. And – actually this is quite interesting – a local not-for-profit has been set up to investigate creating hydro power from the river. Clean energy and all that.'

'At least something about the river will be clean,' muttered Harvey.

Willow paused. 'What do you mean? The river's clean just here, isn't it? It better be, I swim in it every day!'

Harvey pursed his lips. 'It seems ,' he began, slowly, 'that the local water company is illegally dumping raw sewage in it.'

'Is there a legal way to dump raw sewage?'

'Well, that's the problem,' said Harvey. 'Water companies can legally discharge sewage if there's a heavy rainfall, to prevent the sewers from backing up. But apparently they've been spilling in dry times, too.'

Willow was aghast. 'I'd heard this was going in other places. But not in our river? Why is this happening? And more importantly – why is no one stopping them ?'

'My source says that the powers that be are a little wary of the big water companies, seeing as they're owned by private investors with vast amounts of dosh – and political influence.'

Willow gave Harvey a look. 'Your source?'

Harvey leaned forward, putting a noticeable strain on his waistcoat buttons. 'There's a group of environmental activists who've made it their business to hold the water companies to account. One of them is an old chum from school. I can't tell you his real name, but we call him Piggers.'

'Of course you do,' said Willow. 'So, why haven't Piggers and his mates gone to the police yet, or the media?'

Harvey hesitated. 'Well, as you just said, this goes beyond our waterways. This is happening in rivers, seas and lakes all across the country. Piggers and his cohort are part of an extensive undercover activist network, and they need to gather evidence to force change. People are simply not aware of the extent of the problem. So that's the aim, to prove that this – pardon my French – is a gigantic shower of shit, to which the authorities have so far turned a blind eye. '

Willow was calmer now but no less enraged. 'So, how long will it take before Piggers and his mates can go public, then?'

'When they're sure they have enough evidence,' Harvey replied. 'It's a bit like the Post Office scandal. They need the weight of public outrage on their side, so that the politicians are forced to take notice.'

Willow saw the sense in this. But her river was being polluted right now! Her daily swim was under threat! And from something worse than irate swans! She had to do something .

'Does the water company have an office here?'

'It does ...' Harvey went to his desk and started searching on his computer.

'If you are going to start making a fuss, and I certainly wouldn't blame you, then I'd



suggest targeting their PR team rather than the executive.

They're motivated to make problems go away, so it's your job to convince them that you won't. '

Harvey peered at the screen. 'Here you are. Their newly appointed Head of External Communications – obviously what they call it these days – is one Charlie McKay.'

He frowned. 'Isn't that your, er?—?'

'Yes,' said Willow, grimly. 'Yes, that is indeed my "er".'

She wasn't quite sure what this feeling was. Perhaps rage, at being betrayed yet again. How dare Charlie work for the people who were dumping human waste in her river? The very same river he was fishing in only this morning!!

Or maybe he wasn't fishing at all? Maybe that was a ruse to check out possible dumping spots? How dare he be so calculating, so deceitful and underhanded?

Well , it wasn't as if he didn't have form .

'What's their address?' she demanded.

'Er, you will take care, won't you?'

Harvey was a kind man. He wouldn't want her to do anything she'd regret.

Like get arrested for grievous bodily harm.

But Willow had already wasted too much time blaming the wrong person for her unhappiness.

It had not been her fault. The only mistake she'd really made was trusting Charlie.

Who was now proven beyond doubt to be the least trustworthy person on the planet.

Hardened criminals were at least reliably criminal.

'I'll be there on behalf of the Town Council's quarterly magazine,' said Willow. 'I think it's high time we interviewed one of the biggest companies in our region.'

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

### Chapter Six

Willow was secretly pleased to see that the water company offices were in the sterile business park on the edge of town. Charlie had hated the business park.

‘I’d rather be lobotomised,’ he’d told Willow. ‘Mind you, working in that place would pretty quickly have the same effect.’

Charlie’s last job before he left was at a small local firm of lawyers.

He’d found it all a bit stifling and had been talking about going out on his own.

He especially wanted to work with start-ups and non-profits who wanted to make the world a better place.

‘Us idealists need to stick together,’ he’d said.

Another lie, obviously. Charlie had done a good job of pretending to be a good guy. But now the mask was off.

Outside the doors of the water company was a security guard. Given what she’d just learned, Willow wasn’t surprised.

‘I’m here to see Charlie McKay,’ she told the guard.

‘I’ll need to see confirmation of your appointment,’ the woman said.

Wow. That seemed over the top. But Willow could lie, too, if she had to.

‘We made it over the phone just now.’ And she could bluff, too. ‘Call him and check.’

Her bluff was called. The guard pulled out her phone. The conversation was brief, and though Willow tried very hard, she couldn’t hear what was being said on the other end.

‘Sign in at reception and get your security pass,’ said the guard. ‘Mr McKay will meet you there.’

Willow’s heart gave a traitorous leap. Stop it, she scolded. This is the real Charlie, not the one you thought you knew. This is Bad Charlie.

She’d just hung her security lanyard around her neck when Bad Charlie walked out of the lift.

This time, her whole body responded. Charlie was in a suit, the perfectly tailored kind that enhances a man’s physique instead of hanging like a sack.

His shoulders were broad and his legs muscular.

His hair was tamed and groomed, and his jawline set firm.

He looked like a goddamn male model. Whereas Willow had on her usual sweatshirt and jeans combo.

She looked like a baggy, shabby frump. Oh well, too late now.

‘Willow. What brings you here?’

Charlie's tone was coolly professional, but Willow detected a hint of wariness. And he should be afraid. He should be very, very afraid.

'I want to talk to you,' she said.

'Okay ...' Charlie did something on his phone. 'Meeting rooms are full. Want to go to the cafeteria? I'll buy you a sandwich?'

What was that phrase about supping with the devil?

'Sure,' she said.

The cafeteria wasn't the old-school kind Willow had envisaged, with grumpy servers dumping unidentifiable fried items on your plate.

This looked like an upmarket Pret a Manger.

Being after midday, the place was filled with various executive-looking types engaged in earnest conversation.

Probably convincing each other that human waste was organic therefore fine to dump in the river, Willow decided, glaring at them.

'Um, chicken or ham?' Charlie asked. 'Or there's egg salad or rather soggy tomato?'

You should know what I'd choose , was Willow's first thought. Or have you forgotten everything about me already?

She must have scowled because Charlie looked startled.

'I just wanted to check whether you've – you know – become vegetarian or vegan or

something,’ he said. ‘Although I think the tomato sandwiches are still made with butter ...’

‘Chicken,’ said Willow, pointedly. ‘And a peach kombucha.’

It was the most expensive drink on the menu, Willow had noted. If Charlie was paying, then she’d make him do it through the nose.

‘Can’t handle kombucha,’ said Charlie. ‘The floaty bits look like someone gobbled in it.’

Willow only just managed to turn her snort of laughter into a cough. Seemed like the old Charlie wasn’t entirely gone. But that could not sway her. She had to stand firm. She might not actually drink the peach kombucha, though. Those floaty bits did look a lot like a spit ball.

Charlie carried their tray to a seat by the windows.

The view was of the green belt land that bordered the industrial park.

It was made up mainly of untamed meadow and woodland, and Willow recalled that there’d been passionate protests about how far the business park should encroach upon it.

She also recalled that Charlie had encouraged her to sign the petition that was successful in limiting the business park development to its current size. How ironic.

‘Um ...’ Charlie began. ‘I don’t have much time, I’m afraid. Meeting in twenty minutes. What – er – what did you want to talk about?’

There was a note of hope in his voice that caught Willow off guard.

She realised Charlie thought there might be a chance she'd changed her mind about talking to him about – them.

And for a moment, Willow's heart pleaded with her to do just that.

To get it all out in the open so they could find a way through all the hurt and pain and – what? Make new start?

Impossible, Willow reminded herself. Her life with the old Charlie had been a lie. There was no going back to it.

'Sewage,' Willow told him, bluntly. 'In the river.'

Charlie glanced anxiously around. 'Ah ...' he said. 'That.'

'You know ?' Willow's rage came flooding back.

'Shhh!' Charlie gestured urgently at her to keep her voice down.

It was true, people were staring. And Willow was in enemy territory now, so she'd better play it cool.

'You know your company is dumping shit in the waterways?' she repeated, more quietly.

'We've had issues with process,' said Charlie.

'Process?' said Willow, sceptically. 'Last time I checked, "process" couldn't operate machinery. You mean your people, don't you?'

'Sometimes poor decisions are made,' Charlie said.

Willow noted the typical PR-speak use of the passive. He really had gone to the dark side.

‘It’s been going on for years , Charlie,’ Willow insisted. ‘That’s a leadership problem, not a problem with a few rogue staff.’

Charlie stared at her. Willow observed that his face had got leaner over the past year.

When they’d met six years ago, Charlie still had a slight boyish plumpness to him.

In fact, it was the dimple in his cheek when he smiled that had first made Willow’s heart do flip-flops and her stomach flutter.

That dimple belonged to the old Charlie.

The Charlie in front of her now had well-defined cheekbones and a strong jawline.

Willow reluctantly had to admit that new bad Charlie was ridiculously handsome.

‘We’re dealing with it,’ he said, shortly. ‘ I’m dealing with it.’

‘How?’ Willow demanded.

‘Willow.’ Charlie bent forwards across the table, his voice low and urgent. ‘I shouldn’t even have told you this much. I did because I trust you. Now can you please trust me . Don’t take this any further. I’m dealing with it, I promise.’

Amazing how powerful words are, thought Willow. That little zap of pleasure when Charlie said he trusted her. And then the stab of pain when he said the words, ‘I promise’. Because Charlie had made promises to her before, hadn’t he—?



Willow stood up. The chicken sandwich remained uneaten on the plate.

‘I’m not sure you realise how important this is to me, Charlie,’ she said. ‘Swimming in the river saved me from a very dark place, and the thought of having to stop because your firm wants to put its reputation before our safety makes me furious.’

She took a breath. ‘I can’t let this go, and you don’t have the right to ask me to. Goodbye, Charlie. I won’t bother you again.’

He gazed at her, face taut with either anger or alarm. But he didn’t try to stop her. Willow walked away, and once she was down in the lobby, ripped off her security lanyard and dumped it on the desk beside the puzzled receptionist.

Next time she came back here, Willow would be armed with irrefutable proof. And there was nothing Charlie could do about it.

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*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

### Chapter Seven

‘Harvey, I need to join your friend’s activist group.’

After seeing Charlie, Willow had driven straight back to Harvey’s office. He hadn’t seemed that surprised to see her.

‘I’m not sure that will be possible,’ he apologised. ‘They keep things very tight. They work in separate cells and everything’s on a strictly need-to-know basis.’

‘You can vouch for me,’ said Willow. ‘You know I’m trustworthy!’

‘Of course,’ said Harvey, diplomatically. ‘But it’s not as simple as that.’

He looked faintly embarrassed. ‘I shouldn’t even know that Piggers is involved,’ he confessed. ‘I’m afraid I overheard a clandestine conversation and became convinced he was in the thrall of some gangster types. I rather forced him to come clean.’

Willow considered asking him exactly what kind of friendship he and Piggers had but decided against it.

‘And I certainly shouldn’t have told you,’ Harvey went on. ‘But I’m not cut out for secrecy. Which is probably why Piggers kept it from me in the first place.’

‘Couldn’t you at least ask him?’ she pleaded. ‘It’s so important to me, Harvey. I honestly don’t think I could survive without my river swims.’

It was the truth, Willow realised. Her daily swims soothed and comforted her, even the icy cold ones. They gave structure to her day and a sense of achievement. They gave her a connection to nature and a feeling of peace and – yes – joy. Willow would be bereft if she couldn't swim.

‘Very well,’ Harvey agreed, with a sigh. ‘But I’d advise you to be prepared for disappointment.’

What’s new? Willow thought. But she said, ‘Thank you.’

Outside on the street, Willow wrestled with her frustration.

She wasn’t normally an impatient person but the thought of waiting around, powerless to act, was maddening.

Who knew how much crap the water company would dump in the river before they were stopped?

Surely, it was a just a matter of someone capturing the illegal dumping on video.

Wouldn’t that be enough proof? Or should she tell someone else – someone in a position of responsibility at the council, perhaps?

Willow thought about her Council colleagues. They were all very nice people, committed to their work. But the biggest issue they had to deal with was removing illegal posters. The County Council handled the meaty problems, and she didn’t know anyone who worked there, not personally.

And what if they were somehow involved? Maybe County Council officials were being paid to turn a blind eye? Harvey had said that the problem was nationwide, so perhaps corruption was rife? In which case, it would probably do more harm than

good for Willow to go whistleblowing.

Dammit, she was stuck. And frustrated. And, even more annoyingly, sad. Despite her best efforts, seeing Charlie had stirred up regret as well as anger. What a waste those five years with him had been. Not to mention the past year she'd spent trying and failing to get over him.

But, oh, how she'd loved him. How happy she'd been in her blissful ignorance. How convinced she'd been that Charlie was The One, her soulmate. And that they'd be together forever.

Willow thought back to when she and Charlie had met.

It had actually been under a table. At an engagement party for one of Willow's friends from university, held at a flash restaurant in London.

The happy couple-to-be were doing very well in finance in the City and had spared no expense.

Willow had bought a new dress for the occasion, much shorter and sparklier than her usual taste but the sales assistant had sworn that it suited her, and it seemed to fit the glitz of the occasion.

Trouble was that she'd tried it on while standing up, and at the party had discovered that when she sat, the dress rode up so high she was in danger of being arrested for flashing.

Crossing her legs only made it worse, so Willow was forced to spend most of the party on her feet.

By midnight, she was so weary and sore – and to be fair, quite drunk – that she

simply had to sit down, and the only place where no one could catch a glimpse of her hooah was under a table.

Willow crawled into her hiding place on all fours and bumped her head on – someone.

A young man, sitting cross-legged on the floor.

His head was tilted sideways to avoid the underside of the table, and he was gazing at her with a smile.

Which, Willow observed, created a ridiculously cute dimple in one cheek.

‘Lost something?’ he asked.

‘My dignity,’ Willow replied. ‘Have you seen it?’

‘Probably in the same place as my tolerance for people who work in finance,’ he said. ‘I’ve already tried to sneak out twice, but I keep getting spotted. It was either hide under here or barricade myself in the loos and listen to those same people do endless lines of coke.’

‘It’s my skirt,’ explained Willow, still on all fours. ‘If I sit down, it rides up to my neck. And if I stay on my feet any longer, I’ll never walk again.’

The young man not only had a dimple, but also kind brown eyes, delightfully shaggy hair that Willow itched to run her fingers through, and the most kissable mouth.

She’d never experienced such instant attraction before, and the sensible part of her warned that champagne was probably a big influence.

The rest of her was responding in a way that meant the sensible part could take a running jump.

She was going home with this man, she knew it.

And she was already imagining what he was going to do to her.

‘I’m Charlie,’ he said.

‘Willow,’ she replied, a little breathlessly.

Charlie cupped her face with his hand and kissed her. His mouth was soft and strong, and the touch of it ignited every nerve in Willow’s body. His tongue flicked against hers and she moaned, and then almost cried out when he broke the kiss.

‘Blimey,’ Charlie murmured, his eyes wide. ‘I think we’d better leave, or we’ll become the after-dinner entertainment.’

‘I’ll fend off anyone who tries to stop us,’ said Willow. ‘I did a self-defence class once.’

‘Good to know.’ The dimple was back. ‘Right, let’s make a run for it.’

The pair slid out from under the table. Charlie whispered, ‘One, two, three – go.’

Willow remembered laughing and stumbling through the partygoers, and once outside, hailing a cab to Charlie’s place, where they’d ripped off their clothes and devoured each other for hours with an intensity of passion that Willow had never before experienced.

And as she walked back from Harvey’s to the council offices, Willow wondered if

she would ever feel like that again.

### Chapter Eight

Willow and Charlie had moved in together as soon as they could.

And they'd moved out of London when Willow got the job at the advertising agency.

Charlie had been happy to follow her. He was at a big city law firm and torn between how much he hated it and how much they were paying him.

Willow's copywriter salary had been generous enough for him to be unemployed for a while, and when he took the job at the small local law firm, Willow had, much to her relief, been able to quit advertising and go part-time at the Council.

Between them, they could afford a cute two-bedroom maisonette in a quiet street, which Willow had loved living in.

But when Charlie left, he'd also left only enough money to pay his share of the rent until the end of their lease in three months' time.

Willow simply couldn't afford the whole rent on her own salary, so she gave notice, and was now sharing a house with two others.

She had a spacious bedroom and her own bathroom, and the house was modern and clean.

Her housemates were perfectly pleasant young professionals with busy jobs, whom she hardly ever saw.



Willow knew she had nothing to complain about.

But it didn't feel like a home the way the maisonette had. It felt crushingly lonely.

Charlie had taken barely anything with him.

The intensity of Willow's hurt had initially made her want to get rid of everything – rip it up, burn it in a field, fly tip it on a back road.

But hurt had quickly been overtaken by grief, and a wild hope that he'd come back.

So, when she'd had to leave the maisonette, she'd packed all his clothes, books and possessions into boxes, labelled them with his name and taken them with her.

Now, they sat stacked on the top shelf of her wardrobe, where she saw them every time she reached for her clothes.

Willow held open the wardrobe door and stared up at the boxes.

What had she been thinking, keeping them?

Why on earth had she tortured herself with daily reminders of Charlie?

He didn't deserve her attention. And if he wanted his stuff now that he was back, he should have organised for it to be collected. Time to clear some shelf space.

There were eight boxes in total, and as most of them contained books, they were heavy, which made Willow cross.

Her bedroom was on the top floor and now she'd have to lug all these boxes downstairs one by one.

Her housemates would be home in a couple of hours, but even after nine months, Willow didn't feel she knew them well enough to ask for help.

Oh well. Swimming had made her arms strong and given her good cardio fitness. She'd be able to manage it.

Three boxes were stacked in the hallway and Willow was just heading back upstairs when the front doorbell rang.

Her housemates hadn't said they were expecting a delivery, so it was probably someone collecting for charity.

Willow considered pretending no one was home, but she knew her silhouette was perfectly visible through the front door glass.

The doorbell rang again. Willow sighed and opened the door.

Standing there was a young man in tradesman overalls. Willow was immediately struck by his eyes. They were the exact same green-gold shade as Geillis's at the pub. And despite the rest of him looking nothing like her whatsoever, Willow felt compelled to ask, 'Do you have a sister?'

The young man blinked at her. 'Uh – no?'

Willow could understand why he might be bemused. 'Sorry. I'm not some weird matchmaker scouting for single women. You just look like someone I know.'

'Okay ...?'

This was not how his day usually went, Willow could tell.

‘Let’s start again,’ she said. ‘Hi, hello, how can I help?’

‘Uh, I’m here to fix a broken tap.’

‘Oh!’ Willow was surprised. ‘No one mentioned that to me.’

The young plumber glanced down at his phone screen. ‘Is this number 17?’

‘No, that’s next door,’ said Willow. ‘Easy to be confused, all these houses look the same.’

The plumber glanced around the street and nodded. He had a round face that would have been entirely ordinary if it weren’t for the eyes. Which lighted on the stack of boxes.

‘Moving house?’

‘Having a clear out,’ said Willow. ‘There are five more upstairs. My quads are getting quite the workout.’

‘Uh – do you want a hand? I’m early, anyway.’

Willow speculated on whether this was the kind of elaborate ploy a serial killer would use but decided she’d risk it. The boxes really were bloody heavy.

‘I’d love a hand,’ she said. ‘Thank you.’

The plumber carried most of the boxes down himself.

‘What are you going to do with them?’ he asked, as he stacked the last one. ‘Dump or donate?’

Willow hadn't got that far. Now she thought about it, she couldn't quite bring herself to dump everything. People could make good use of Charlie's stuff.

'Donate,' she replied.

'Uh, I volunteer at the charity shop,' he told her. 'I'd be happy to drop them off for you.'

Willow smiled. Some people really were wonderful.

'You're a star.' She held out her hand to shake his. 'I'm Willow, by the way.'

'Ash,' said the plumber, taking it. His hand was warm and a little calloused. 'Uh – I'd better get on.'

'Yep, that tap's not going to fix itself,' said Willow.

She watched until he'd loaded the last box into his van, waved as he headed to the neighbour's, then shut the door.

A strange feeling washed over her. Willow couldn't tell if she was relieved or sad that the boxes had finally gone.

Maybe she was simply touched by a stranger's out-of-the-blue kindness?

Whatever the truth, Willow was suddenly desperate for a cup of tea and a sit down.

She'd got the latest Olivia Hayfield novel from the library, and a bit of fun, clever escapism was exactly what she needed.

Half an hour later, Willow was comfortably engrossed in her book, when the doorbell

sounded again. This time the caller kept their finger on the bell, making one long, loud jangle that shattered Willow's peace to smithereens.

'What the—?'

She got off the sofa and, now feeling panicky, ran to the front door and yanked it open. There, finger still on the bell, was Charlie. Looking outraged.

'You got rid of my stuff!'

'What?' Willow was totally flummoxed.

'My stuff! My things! I was walking past the charity shop in the high street and saw some guy taking a bunch of boxes into it with my name on them!'

If she believed in conspiracies, Willow thought, this honestly would feel like a plot to force her and Charlie together. Which was nonsense, of course, but she had to admit the coincidences were pretty weird. And annoying .

'Charlie,' she said, firmly. 'You left your things with me a year ago, with no instructions. Can you blame me for getting rid of them?'

'But – you knew I was back.'

Charlie's expression was unusually mulish. Normally, it was hard to get him riled about anything. This had obviously struck a nerve.

And he did have a point, which Willow was never going to concede.

'Which reminded me that I had your things stored away,' she white-lied. 'And seeing you'd had more than one opportunity to ask for them, I figured—' Willow raised her

hands in a shrug.

Charlie had been taut with outrage and now he sagged against the door frame and blew out a breath.

‘Right ...’

He gazed down the street, looking suddenly so mournful that Willow’s heart did a little flip. Then he gave the door frame a quiet thump with his fist and met Willow’s eye.

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘For, you know, everything, but also for going off at you just now. It just—’

‘Just what?’ Willow prompted.

‘It hurt ,’ he said, roughly. ‘It hurt like hell, knowing you were getting rid of all traces of me. And I know I’ve no right to expect anything more, but ...’

His voice was starting to break, and he paused, ran a hand over his face.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, again. ‘I’ll leave you alone.’

And he strode off, his shoulders hunched in the way Willow knew meant he was embarrassed and angry with himself.

Willow was so close to calling out after him, calling him back.

But where would that lead? Possibly, if emotions were running high, to what Maeve would call an ‘ex-ccident’.

But it would only be temporary – she and Charlie were over, he'd made that clear – and then Willow would be back to square one, feeling sad and abandoned. She owed it to herself not to go there.

But why? Why was Charlie so hurt by her getting rid of his stuff? He was the one who made a clean break, so why should it matter to him at all?

Willow could see one of her housemates walking up the road. She didn't want to explain why she was loitering in the doorway, so hurried back inside. Tried to focus on her book again but her brain couldn't settle.

There was only one thing to do. Willow picked up her phone and called Maeve.

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*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

### Chapter Nine

Maeve, of course, had the answer. ‘To the pub!’ she told Willow. ‘It’s not a Tuesday but this is an emergency. Plus, I won’t be distracted by yon sexy beardy fiddler.’

The Oak and Whale was full, but Maeve had somehow commandeered their favourite booth.

She was wearing a sculpted crepe dress in lilac, and silver slingbacks.

Normally, Willow didn’t bother comparing her clothes with Maeve’s, mainly because there was no way she could afford what Maeve wore.

But today, Willow was even more acutely aware that she looked shabby.

She’d been aware of it when she’d met with Charlie in his perfectly tailored suit, and when she’d looked in her own wardrobe and seen nice outfits that she hadn’t worn for nearly a year.

Maeve had never, ever called Willow out on her frumpiness, but then she didn’t have to.

Next to Maeve, Willow may as well have been wearing a used potato sack with armholes cut out of it.

Maybe it was time to ditch the sweats and start taking more pride in her appearance.



‘So, quite the eventful time you’ve been having?’ Maeve said. ‘Encounters with rabid swans and your ex.’

‘The swans weren’t rabid,’ Willow corrected. ‘Just broody, like Geillis said.’

She glanced towards the bar. Geillis wasn’t on tonight.

Her replacement was a young guy with multiple piercings and dyed goth-black hair.

He was lean as a whippet, but Willow could tell from his stance that he knew how to handle himself.

Not that fights broke out regularly in the Oak and Whale, but it was good to be prepared.

‘He’s cute.’ Maeve had followed her gaze to the barman. ‘If you like the Nick Cave murder-ballad vibe. Personally, I prefer a more homespun look, beard, cap and weskit.’

Willow laughed. ‘Does anyone actually say “weskit” these days?’

‘If they don’t, they should,’ Maeve replied. ‘They should say “pismire”, too, and “cockalorum”. But back to you and my first question of many: how did Charlie know where you live?’

‘Oh ...’ Willow hadn’t actually considered this. ‘I suppose the plumber told him.’

‘Hmm,’ said Maeve. ‘Seems unprofessional. D’you think Charlie got heavy with him?’

‘He was pretty upset,’ Willow conceded. ‘But Charlie was never the one to pick a

fight. He was always the peacemaker.'

Charlie could definitely rail about the injustices of the world, but at heart, he'd been a problem-solver, someone who sorted things out, including arguments. Well, the Charlie she'd known had been, anyway.

'And how is he looking?' Maeve said. 'Question two this is, in case you've already lost track.'

A question Willow did not want to answer. 'Good,' she said, vaguely. 'He's thinner.'

Maeve was not to be deterred. 'Down to his fit fighting weight, you mean? Or emaciated like he's had a serious illness or drug habit? Which could explain his long absence.'

'He's lost some of his boyishness,' Willow replied. 'Got some bone structure in his face.'

'Has he now?'

Willow squirmed with discomfort under Maeve's knowing smile. Time to shut this down.

'He's still the Charlie who left me without a word,' she said, firmly. 'And who's now a spin doctor for a company that's deliberately polluting our waterways.'

Willow whispered this last bit. She'd told Maeve everything over the phone but that didn't mean she wanted the whole of the Oak and Whale to know.

Any of these people could be agents for the water company.

If what Harvey said was right, then they'd stop at nothing to shut down adverse publicity.

Including, Harvey had darkly hinted, threatening people.

'So, you won't be giving him a chance to explain?' Maeve was really digging in, damn her.

'No!'

Willow forgot to whisper. The barman looked over to check everything was all right. Maeve gave him the thumbs up, which provoked a wry grin.

'Actually, he is cute,' said Maeve. 'Probably not skint either. Should I focus my attention away from the fiddler?'

But Willow was dwelling on Maeve's previous comment, which bothered her more each time she thought about it.

'Why should I let Charlie explain?' she said, crossly. 'Up until now, you've insisted that he behaved like an arse, and I should forget all about him!'

'True,' admitted Maeve. 'But that was when he was god knows where, and now he's back. And wanting to explain.'

Willow remained tight-lipped. This wasn't fair of Maeve. She had no right to do a complete about-face.

'And let's be frank,' Maeve went on. 'The fact you moped about him for a whole entire year means you still have feelings for him, don't you?'

Willow couldn't decide what was worse: Maeve suddenly taking Charlie's side, or Maeve being right.

'Look, I completely understand why you're angry with him, and you have every right to be,' said Maeve. 'And I'm not suggesting you let him off easy – he owes you the biggest and best explanation in the world, the Kohinoor Diamond of explanations, at least a hundred flawless carats of grovel. But ...'

Maeve paused, frowned a little. Willow could tell she was serious about this.

'I wouldn't want you to lose the chance to find happiness again.'

For a moment, Willow felt like all the breath had been punched out of her. This was too much. She had to leave. Where was her phone, her bag—?

'No, please don't go.' Maeve put a hand on her arm. 'I was my usual full-frontal and I had no right to be. I'm sorry.'

Maeve's sincerity was genuine; Willow knew her friend. Her breathing calmed and she sat back down. No point in running, anyway, her anxieties would only follow her.

'I don't condone for a minute what Charlie did to you,' said Maeve. 'But I knew you both for yonks, and you were terrific together. And I can't even begin to guess what caused Charlie's act of insanity, but – well, maybe it would give you closure to find out?'

Luckily, before Willow could answer, the barman arrived to clear their empty glasses.

'Get you anything else?' He spoke to Maeve, Willow observed, not to both of them.

'Where's Geillis tonight?' Maeve asked, after placing their order.

The barman met her eye. 'Coven.'

Maeve started to laugh and stopped. 'You're serious, aren't you?'

The barman half-smiled. One of his earrings was shaped like a horned goat. Willow found herself hoping he was a Capricorn.

'She'll be back tomorrow,' he said.

'Oh,' said Maeve. 'So, I won't see you again?'

Willow had to admire her friend's frankness. Especially when it wasn't directed at her.

'You'll find me,' the barman said to Maeve. 'If you want to.'

Then he sauntered off, snake hips in skinny black jeans.

'Gadzooks!' Maeve fanned her face. 'I think my panties just knotted themselves into two half-hitches and a bowline.'

'As long as you don't agree to meet him at a crossroads,' said Willow.

Maeve smiled and then became serious again. 'It's your decision,' she said. 'Whatever you decide, I'll support you. I mean it. I love you.'

'I love you, too,' said Willow. 'I need time, though. Okay?'

'Okay,' Maeve agreed. 'Now, where's that sexy devil with our drinks?'

### Chapter Ten

Next morning, Willow shut off her alarm and lay there, staring at the ceiling.

Since swimming had become a vital part of her life, she'd been out of bed soon as her alarm sounded, eager to get down to the river and dive in.

Today, though, she hesitated. For one, she didn't fancy the idea of swimming in a soup of human waste.

And two, she didn't want to return to the spot where she'd been fished up by Charlie.

Not that he was likely to be there again – Willow was convinced it had been a one-off scouting mission for his work.

But she knew herself well enough to know she'd be watching out for him, just in case.

Which meant she wouldn't be able to relax and enjoy the swim.

And she couldn't go back to her usual spot because of the swans. It was all bloody annoying.

To swim or not to swim, that was the question. Willow's limbs began to itch with a desire to get moving. Swim it was.

On the way to the river, Willow decided. She would go back to the spot where she'd

seen Charlie. It would be a good test for her to block out any thoughts of him and focus fully on the present moment.

She parked her car, and stowed her keys and phone in the swim buoy she'd bought when she'd begun river swimming and used once.

It was an inflatable thing that attached around her waist and floated behind her, out of reach of stroke range.

It provided dry storage for valuables and doubled as a flotation device if you got into trouble.

It was also a foot long and neon pink, and when Willow had first used it, a group of youths loitering on the towpath had pointed and laughed at her.

Willow had felt embarrassed enough by her obvious newbie status, so she'd shoved the buoy in a drawer, and trusted in the handy hole in the willow tree.

Last time in this new spot, she'd hidden her keys under her car's front wheel arch but there were signs all over warning that thieves were active.

Willow had no wish to walk home in swim shoes. She got the buoy out of the drawer.

At the river's edge, Willow scooped up a handful of water and gave it a sniff. Smelled like river. Didn't mean it wasn't an invisible stew of bacteria but until Willow knew that for certain, she wouldn't allow herself to be put off.

Despite it being a fine, still morning, no one else was on the water. No swerving kayakers, or abusive rowers. No hissing swans. Just the usual occasional blip and bubble on the surface. Willow strapped the buoy around her waist, pulled on her cap and goggles, and waded in.

It only took a few strokes for her to relax and find her rhythm.

Swimming really was a form of meditation – calming, freeing, steady.

Willow made short work of the three miles towards the lock, so she paused there for a moment, circling slowly while treading water, enjoying the serenity, the sunshine.

The lock was at a safe distance, and Willow appreciated the aesthetics of what was a significant feat of engineering.

She'd interviewed a lockkeeper who was retiring after sixty years of helping boats from one part of the river to the next.

He'd told her all about pound locks and flash locks, weirs and sluices, the dams the Vikings had built, and Willow wished she could remember more of it.

Charlie would have remembered. That sort of thing fascinated him.

Willow recalled seeing the couple on the overbridge, fastening their love token to the railings. It made her think, reluctantly, about what Maeve had said the night before – that knowing why Charlie had left might give her closure.

It might, Willow conceded. But it might also bring her nothing but pain.

Being angry at Charlie had helped Willow stop blaming herself but those doubts still nagged.

If she asked Charlie to explain and he confessed he simply hadn't been able to live with her anymore, then how would she cope, knowing the fault really did lie with her?



But that was only one possible answer, wasn't it. There might be another. Was she willing to take that risk?

In the distance, Willow saw movement on the overbridge.

Someone walking onto it, stopping there to lean on the railings and look down at the water.

The sun was glinting off the surface, making it hard to see, but it looked like a young man.

The way he'd folded his arms on the railings and hung his head; he seemed dejected.

A sudden nasty thought – he wasn't intending to jump, was he?

She hadn't heard of anyone trying to end it all by jumping off a lock overbridge but that didn't mean people hadn't tried.

Willow lifted up her goggles to get a better look, and saw the young man run a hand through his hair. His shaggy, light brown hair ...

Willow swam as fast as she could to the riverbank and clambered up onto the towpath.

She ran to the lock, ignoring the wet slap of her swim shoes and the buoy flapping around her calves.

She was puffing hard by the time she reached the overbridge but didn't stop to catch her breath.

The figure in the middle of the bridge had his head on his arms, turned away.

But then the buoy shot out in front of Willow and tripped her.

‘Fuck!’ she exclaimed.

Charlie jerked his head up, startled.

‘Willow?’

The stupid thing was tangled around her leg. She couldn’t look more idiotic if she tried.

‘Hi. Yes. It’s me.’

Charlie approached cautiously. ‘Er, that’s not a bright pink colostomy bag, is it?’

‘No!’ Willow wrestled it loose and threw it down. ‘It’s a swim buoy. And I officially hate it.’

Charlie was right in front of her now. He was wearing his fishing gear, a faded green T-shirt and waterproof cargo pants.

He hadn’t shaved that morning, Willow saw, and there were dark hollows under his eyes.

He looked weary and defeated, and instinctively, unconsciously, she reached out and stroked his face.

‘Are you okay? What are you doing here?’

Charlie grabbed hold of Willow’s hand and buried a kiss in her palm. Willow snatched her hand away – her skin felt like it’d been scorched – and Charlie briefly

shut his eyes, as if in pain, then turned away.

‘Fuck ...’ he breathed out.

‘Charlie–’ Willow’s chest tightened. ‘What’s going on? Tell me!’

He stared away from her, out over the water, and Willow was filled with an urge to both thump him and pull him into her arms. Her legs were trembling, from fear now as well as the sudden exertion of the run, and she put a hand on the railing to steady herself.

‘I’ve been a champion fucking idiot,’ he said, distantly. ‘Olympic gold medal level. Best in show.’

Willow wanted to find the sarcasm reassuring, but Charlie looked so utterly and completely desolate.

‘Are you in some sort of trouble?’ Willow asked. ‘Can I help?’

He turned and gazed at her, expression shifting between hope and what looked like anger.

‘You owe me nothing, Willow,’ he said, roughly. ‘I cringe to think about how stupid and arrogant I was to hurt you like that. I had this mad idea that when I told you, you’d understand. But I abused your trust and your good, loving nature, and if I were you, I’d never forgive me.’

‘Told me?’ The words had lit up like beacons for Willow. ‘Told me what?’

Charlie blew out a long, shaky breath. ‘I can’t,’ he said. ‘I want to so badly, but I can’t. Not yet.’

Willow's brain told her she should rightly be angry, but all she could feel was bewilderment. And the unsettling sense that the ground she thought was solid was now shifting under her feet. What was happening ?

Before she could form a sensible response, Charlie pulled her still damp body into his and kissed her.

Hard and urgently, his mouth hot, his tongue seeking.

Any resistance Willow had melted, and she gave herself up to the moment.

Slid one hand into his hair and other around his tight rear end to close any gap between her and him, her whole body aflame as she pressed herself against his swelling erection.

How badly she'd missed this, Charlie's kiss, his touch.

She wanted his hardness inside her right now, on this bridge, in full view of—

‘Shit ...’

Charlie broke the kiss. His breathing was ragged, his pupils dark.

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘I—’

Willow, desperate with desire and longing, tried to kiss him again, but he pushed her gently away.

‘Bad idea,’ he murmured. ‘I mean good , but also very, very bad ...’

‘Charlie, this isn't fair.’ Willow's frustration and bewilderment were fusing into fury.

‘You cannot keep treating me like this. Either tell me what the hell is going on or get out of my life once and for all. Stop playing with me! I’m not strong enough–’

Her voice cracked, but she refused to cry. She’d had all the humiliation she could bear for one morning.

‘A week,’ said Charlie. ‘Give me a week.’

Willow searched his face, wanting to trust him but not quite yet ready to.

‘A week for what ?’ she demanded.

‘For an answer,’ he replied. ‘It’s been way too long in coming, I know. So much longer than I anticipated. But I should have it by then. No,’ he corrected himself. ‘I will have it. I promise.’

‘And then?’ Willow said, softly.

Charlie’s face was a picture of bleakness. ‘And then – you decide. And whatever decision you make, I’ll accept it.’

The sun was shining down on them. The water glittered and sparkled. It was a beautiful day. Willow’s whole life hung in the balance.

‘All right,’ she agreed. ‘A week ...’

Then she said, ‘Charlie, will you be okay?’

It was less of a question than a plea for reassurance. She’d never seen him so unhappy. And a week seemed like an age away.

Her question took Charlie by surprise. ‘Yes, I’ll be okay,’ he told her. ‘I’m – glad you care. Amazed, actually,’ he added, with a wry twist to his mouth. ‘It’s way more than I deserve.’

Willow picked up the swim buoy. She loathed it but it did contain her phone and car keys.

Charlie watched her strap it round her waist again.

Willow half-expected another joke but he was silent.

She had nothing more to say, either, so she started to walk away.

As she did, she happened to notice the lovelock the couple had fastened.

It was heart-shaped, and Willow felt her own heart squeeze. But she kept on.

When she reached the end of the bridge, she heard Charlie call her name. Half-reluctant, half-eager, she turned around.

‘And you are strong enough,’ she heard him say. ‘You’re the strongest person I know.’

Willow’s breath caught in her throat. Was that true?

She couldn’t dwell on it. Not now. Willow hurried back down the towpath to where it was safe to enter the water, and without a single glance back at the bridge, dived in and swam away.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

### Chapter Eleven

Willow found herself at her desk with no clear idea how she'd got there.

The moments between leaving Charlie on the overbridge and saying hello to her colleagues were a blur.

The only thing she knew for certain was that she could still feel the heat of Charlie's kiss and the press of his hard body against hers.

And she couldn't decide whether it was the best or the worst feeling ever.

Definitely on the "worst" side was the still-present worry.

Charlie had assured her he'd be okay, so she'd have to trust that he wouldn't lie to her.

Not again. Not after everything he'd promised on the bridge.

Even though nothing he'd said made any sense.

Willow had turned every word of Charlie's over and over in her mind, but she was no clearer. What was he keeping from her? And why?

In a week, he'd explain everything. Willow had no idea what he'd have to tell her then.

Right now, she knew that the hurt was still too raw and her desire for him still way too present for her to make good decisions.

All the more reason to keep her distance, to give herself time to emotionally prepare.

Besides, there were fifteen emails she needed to answer, so her actual paid work had better be her focus until it was time to go home.

Four emails down and Willow's phone pinged. A text. From Harvey. Unlike him. He'd been known to request meetings by leaving a handwritten note at reception.

Willow squinted at the text. It appeared to be written in code. Either that or Harvey had very fat fingers. The message was '82nitecu@fat'. Another text immediately followed in all caps 'DELETETHIS!'. And another '&THIS!'

There was a filter coffee maker in the small office kitchen. The coffee was delicious or revolting depending on how long it had been sitting in the pot. Luckily for Willow the pot was full. A fresh brew. She poured a mug and sipped it gratefully, feeling her brain gradually unscramble.

She stared at '82nitecu@fat' and her now functioning brain decided it meant that Harvey wanted to meet her at eight o'clock tonight at the Fat Badger, the pub that was now a double Michelin-starred restaurant.

Willow hoped Harvey wanted to meet her only for a drink and that he was paying.

Even walking past the Fat Badger's door could make her feel poorer.

Willow texted back a thumbs up emoji, and then 'Have deleted all' because she knew Harvey would be sweating. And then, because she was suddenly curious, sat back down at her computer and searched under 'environmental activists UK'.



What came up first was the international group, Extinction Rebellion, but Willow could see from the images that they made a point of being extremely visible.

Next came Greenpeace. Again, not exactly clandestine.

Then Greta Thunberg and David Attenborough, who were probably recognisable from space.

Scrolling down the remainder of the results, nothing jumped out at Willow.

But, if they were as secretive as Harvey had claimed, then that wasn't so surprising.

Maybe, just maybe, Harvey wanted to meet because he had managed to gain her access?

A prospect Willow found equal parts exciting and bloody terrifying.

She considered calling Maeve and blurting out everything that had happened to her that morning and possibly begging her to provide moral support at the Fat Badger.

Then Charlie's words came back to her, You're the strongest person I know .

And a part of Willow was suddenly determined to prove him right.

The Fat Badger was only a ten-minute walk from Willow's house, and she would have been ready to leave in plenty of time if she hadn't had a sudden attack of wardrobe nerves.

The Fat Badger was fancy . Willow knew Harvey would be wearing his usual tweedy Victorian-style attire, but posh people could wear rags and still look stylish.

She, however, could not get away with jeans and a twenty-quid sweatshirt from TK-Maxx.

Over the course of an hour, Willow pulled out every single item in her wardrobe and ended up with a pile on her bed and still nothing to wear.

The only outfit that came close was a dress and strappy sandals she'd bought for a special dinner with Charlie.

The five-year anniversary of their relationship, as it happened.

Charlie had joked that they should spend it under the restaurant table for old times' sake, but they'd behaved themselves and had – a wonderful evening, Willow recalled.

Full of laughs and affection, and excitement for the future.

Charlie, in particular, was fizzing about setting up on his own, working with start-ups and not-for-profits who were making, as he put it, 'Real change in the world'.

He'd had a mad idea that he could even be a not-for-profit law firm himself, taking pro-bono cases that would be funded by donations.

How he'd pull this off he freely admitted he had no clue, but Willow had seen the gleam in his eye, and knew he'd find a way.

But then, barely two months' later, he left.

And all Willow's hopes for the future left with him.

She picked the dress up off the bed and held it against her, eyeing her reflection in the mirror.

It hadn't been expensive, but it was a flattering cut, straight with a boat neck, and the colour, a pretty coral pink, suited her.

Charlie had removed it that night in some haste and she'd never worn it again ...

Willow checked the time. Dammit! 7.45pm! On went the coral-pink dress and the strappy gold sandals. A quick brush of her hair and a smudge of lip-gloss and Willow hurried out the door and up the road to the Fat Badger.

The place even smelled expensive, Willow thought, as she pushed open the heavy wooden front door.

The young woman who greeted her looked like she'd just stepped out of plastic packaging, so perfect were her makeup and hair.

Willow remembered what Maeve had said to her once, before they were about to present to a particularly demanding client of the advertising agency: 'It's all in the posture.

Shoulders back, head up – pretend you're Wonder Woman about to swing the Lasso of Truth. '

Willow squared her shoulders and said, 'I'm here to meet—'

'Me!' Harvey bustled up. He'd obviously been keeping an anxious eye out for her.

'I'll bring you a menu,' the young woman told Willow.

'No, no!' said Harvey, hastily. 'We're all sorted, thank you.'

And he took Willow by the arm and practically dragged her to a table in the farthest,

darkest corner of the restaurant. All the other tables had small candles on them. Harvey had snuffed theirs out. Willow could barely see her own hands.

‘Harvey, I think the best way to not look suspicious is to – well, not look suspicious,’ Willow said. ‘In other words, act normal.’

‘I’ve never done anything like this before,’ Harvey hissed, as if it weren’t completely obvious. ‘I never even scrumped as a child!’

Then he frowned. ‘You look very pretty.’

Willow decided to ignore the fact that he made it sound like an accusation. Harvey wasn’t good with change. Even evolution happened too fast for his liking.

‘Thank you,’ Willow said. ‘Now, what is this all about?’

‘Hsst!’ Harvey held up a warning hand.

A waiter was approaching, with two plates that, as he placed them down, Willow saw held beautifully cooked duck breast, mixed greens, and chips the size of girders. Everything glistened with butter.

‘I took the liberty of ordering for you,’ said Harvey. ‘And it’s on me,’ he added to Willow’s relief.

‘Good thing this dress has a bit of give,’ Willow muttered.

The waiter came back and poured two glasses of red wine.

‘A modest Burgundy,’ Harvey informed her. ‘But I think you’ll like it.’

If Charlie had been there, he would have caught Willow's eye and grinned.

Wine Wankery, as he termed it, was a constant source of amusement to him.

To be fair to poor Harvey, "modest" was low down on the WW-scale.

To score highly, he'd have to employ terms such as "audacious" or, Charlie's favourite, "penetrating mouthfeel".

'Harvey,' said Willow, firmly. 'I can't eat or drink until I know why you've brought me here. So, spill!'

Harvey checked all around the room, including the ceiling, just in case there were spies clinging to the exposed beams. Then he leaned as far across the table as he could. To oblige, Willow did the same, hoping her boobs remained clear of the buttery duck.

'I spoke to Piggers,' Harvey whispered. 'He said to tell you that everything is very nearly in place, and when it is they will make their move.'

'What does that mean?' Willow whispered back.

'Not a clue.' Harvey shook his head. 'But he also said that they would appreciate someone keeping an eye on a particular stretch of river over the next few days. He wondered if you would care to be that someone? All you'd need to do is swim as usual and take note of any activity that seems suspicious.'

'What kind of activity would be suspicious?' Willow asked. 'Apart from actual tankers pumping raw sewage into the water, of course.'

Harvey fumbled in his back pocket and slid something under the table to her. It was a

small, old-fashioned mobile phone, and Willow slipped it into her bag.

‘Someone from Piggers’ group will be in touch,’ Harvey informed her. ‘And that’s all I know,’ he added, spotting that Willow was about to start interrogating him.

They stared at each other for a moment.

‘Thank you, Harvey,’ Willow said.

‘You’re most welcome,’ said Harvey. ‘But I’d be very grateful if you never mentioned this subject to me again. I feel I’ve aged ten years at least .’

As they ate their duck, which was delicious, Willow tried not to think about the phone in her bag, or who might contact her on it, or what on earth she may have just got herself into.

### Chapter Twelve

The text arrived at seven the next morning.

It gave a location and a list of things to watch out for.

If Willow spotted any of the above, she was to take photographs, note the date and time, and upload to a secure website.

The website passcode arrived in a second text, and she was instructed to memorise it and delete.

At least they didn't ask her to eat the phone, Willow thought, as she committed the code to memory.

The location was not an area of the river she'd swum in before.

It was out of town and relatively remote.

Willow had to park by the edge of a field and make her way to the river via an overgrown footpath.

Briefly, Willow wondered if she was in fact being set up, and any minute, the water company's hired thugs would grab her and bundle her into a van.

But as the only life forms that she could detect nearby either buzzed, chirped or mooed, Willow decided she was probably safe.

She'd had no choice but to take the neon pink swim buoy and for once, she was glad of it.

There was no one around to save her if she got into trouble, so the inflatable buoy could be her life raft.

Willow set off up-river, using a gentle breaststroke rather than freestyle.

She wanted to make sure she could observe everything.

Last night, too full of buttery duck and giant chips to sleep, Willow searched for more information on 'dry spilling' – water companies illegally dumping sewage when it wasn't raining heavily.

Seemed it was mostly sneaky, done quickly, so it wouldn't be detected.

But one website, set up by a group of surfers, claimed water companies were responsible for millions of tons of raw sewage in the waterways each year.

Harvey had said that the companies were rarely punished because they had too much political influence.

But this site claimed it was because no one had been able to prove it was deliberate company policy.

To prosecute, the regulator had to prove that the company owners and managers not only knew it was happening but had endorsed it as a strategy, to avoid paying the vast sums of money needed to upgrade their infrastructure and thus significantly reduce their annual profit and related bonuses.

Wow , was Willow's reaction, swiftly followed by, Bastards .



Money-grubbing, self-serving, shit-dumping asshole bastards.

At first, she hadn't much relished the prospect of swimming in water that was almost certainly polluted, but now, she'd plough through actual turds to help provide proof.

She'd just be sure to keep her mouth closed and have a very long, hot shower afterwards.

No turds were evident this morning. And, to be fair, they hadn't been on the list of things Willow had been told to watch out for.

Discoloured patches of water and very bad smells were, along with distressed wildlife, such as fish gasping for air.

Wet wipes and sanitary pads were also a giveaway.

You weren't supposed to flush them as they blocked the pipes, but people did.

Willow tried not to think about used condoms.

About a mile along, Willow spotted what looked like a sewer pipe sticking out of the bank.

She trod water, not wanting to go closer, but there didn't seem to be anything leaking out of it.

She was oddly disappointed. She'd expected to find proof right away, gallons of waste being spewed out, a noxious stink rising from blackened water thick with dead wildlife. Here was nothing but a rusty pipe.

Now, she had some insight into why it was taking so long for Piggers and his group

to collate evidence.

And why it was so easy for the companies to pollute and get away with it.

People who used the waterways were protesting, she'd learned that last night in her research.

But, as Harvey said, to force change you needed a lot of people to notice the problem and publicly object.

Not just a few surfers, who were probably stoned most of the time, anyway.

As Willow swam back, she wondered yet again whether she should check on Charlie – or get someone else to do it.

She'd lost touch with their friends over the past year, or, more accurately, they'd stopped contacting her, and it would feel weird to ask one of them to step in.

There was Maeve, of course, but her approach would be 'kill or cure' and it seemed unfair to inflict that on Charlie, no matter what he'd done.

What he'd done – Willow had been thinking hard about what that might be.

Up until lately, she'd assumed he'd left because he'd needed more than she could offer him.

She'd known he was dissatisfied at work, and yearning to do something more meaningful, and she'd imagined he'd left to do just that.

But thinking back, when he talked about his plans, he'd always included her.

What could have been so important to him that he'd leave without warning, and risk everything he seemed to hold dear?

And what was he doing now , working for a company whose values he should by rights despise? Maybe he needed the money? Maybe he'd got in debt and that's what he'd meant when he said he'd been an idiot? Maybe he'd got in debt to someone bad and—

Willow forced herself to shut down this train of thought. Charlie wasn't stupid. He wouldn't get involved with bad people; he simply wouldn't .

Then again, she was now involved with people she knew nothing about whatsoever. She didn't know their motives, or their end game. For all she knew, they could be terrorists. Another train of thought she did not want to pursue.

Willow dried herself and wrapped the towel around her to provide coverage while she changed.

Not that there was anyone watching her, only a few cows in the field, sedately munching grass.

It was beautiful round here, in the deep countryside, and to Willow, it never really seemed to change.

But her new-found knowledge told her not to take it for granted.

There was a war on: profit versus the environment.

And right now, profit was winning. She could only hope that the people she was providing intel to were good, and that their combined actions would make a positive difference.

Across the field, a lone raven flapped lazily. Its gleaming black plumage and confident attitude reminded Willow of Geillis. The town's resident witch, apparently. Who certainly knew a lot about swans. And – possibly – rivers.

If anyone was an undercover environmental activist, it would be Geillis, Willow decided.

After work, she'd pay yet another visit to the Oak and Whale.

Might not get her anywhere, but as she'd recently found out – if you don't ask, you don't get.

Even if you're not sure exactly what you're asking for.

### Chapter Thirteen

Geillis was busy serving customers at the bar, so Willow hung back and waited her turn.

Geillis normally wore clothing as black as her hair, but this evening, she had on what looked like vintage Vivienne Westwood, an oversize white tee covered in scribbled drawings and slogans.

Willow made out the words I AM NOT A TERRORIST and wondered if that was, in fact, correct.

As Geillis pulled a pint, Willow noticed a new tattoo on her arm.

A raven. Because of course. Willow had never had been particularly interested in fantasy or folklore, much preferring stories that felt real.

But she was starting to feel that ‘reality’ was more complicated than she’d previously believed, and that forces unknown might well be at work.

Either that, or she was reading far too much into what was genuinely a series of unrelated coincidences. It wasn’t as if Geillis could have planted those swans near her swimming spot, could she ...?

‘What can I get you?’

Geillis was right there, with the usual challenging glint in her green-gold eyes.

‘Um, do you have five minutes?’ Willow said. ‘I – need to ask you something.’

Geillis glanced at the door behind the bar, and as if summoned, through it came the pub’s new owner, the pink-haired woman who also sold flowers at the weekend farmers’ market. Willow had absolutely no clue how old she was, anything from forty to a well-preserved seventy.

‘Can you mind the bar for five?’ Geillis asked her boss.

‘Of course, dear,’ was the reply.

Unlike Geillis, the woman had a cheerful demeanour, but Willow was wary of her own ability to judge people. Who knew what lay behind the smile?

Willow followed Geillis through the pub to a far table.

Geillis had on skintight black jeans that showed off her perfect rear end.

In most pubs, a certain type of man would inevitably take advantage of a barmaid coming within bottom-pinching reach, but no one here even looked up as they passed by.

Willow wished she could command that kind of respect. It would make life a whole lot easier.

‘What’s up?’ Geillis said, briskly, as they sat down.

Now that she had Geillis’s attention, Willow was suddenly tongue-tied. Everything she wanted to ask her seemed either risky or ridiculous. But she could feel Geillis’s impatience, so she went with the first thing that came out of her mouth.

‘What do you know about the activist group taking on the water company?’

‘What do you want to know about them?’ was Geillis’s unhelpful response.

‘I–’ Willow thought hard. ‘I want to know what their end game is. Legal prosecution? Or something else ...’

Something violent hung unsaid in the air between them.

Geillis’s expression was unreadable. That and her silence dialled Willow’s anxiety up to eleven.

‘My ex – Charlie,’ she continued, trying not to sound pathetic. ‘He’s working for the water company. In quite a senior position. And I’m worried about what will happen to him.’

The lighting was dim in this corner of the pub, so Willow couldn’t have seen what she thought she saw. The tail of the tattooed cat on Geillis’s arm seemed to flick. Just the tip, just for a nanosecond. Willow’s mind was playing tricks on her.

‘You can’t control what other people do,’ said Geillis. Her tone was direct but not unkind. ‘You can only do what you think is best, and trust that the arc of history bends towards justice.’

That saying sounded familiar to Willow, but while she was trying to place the source, Geillis got to her feet. Their five minutes was up.

No, don’t go! Willow almost begged her. Now she knew that Geillis knew, she had so many more questions.

‘I can’t help you,’ Geillis said, reading Willow’s mind, or more likely, her pleading

expression. ‘And we won’t have this conversation again, okay.’

It wasn’t a request. Willow nodded and watched glumly as Geillis swept back through the pub to resume her place behind the bar. She and her boss exchanged a couple of words, and the pink-haired woman glanced Willow’s way, just briefly, before she left again through the door behind the bar.

Willow considered ordering a very large glass of wine, but she couldn’t face Geillis again, so she left.

Outside the pub, it was a beautiful summer evening, warm and light-filled; it wouldn’t get dark until after ten.

Willow had intended to walk straight back to the house, but a sudden restlessness made her change course, and she headed instead for the big town park.

On a Friday, and at this hour, it would be full of people of all ages enjoying themselves, and that was what she needed to see right now.

People having fun, making jokes, playing games – taking pleasure in being together.

Willow needed to see signs that the vast majority of humans were good and kind and open-hearted. Not greedy, selfish and cruel.

By the park entrance was a hot dog cart, and Willow bought and ate one, relishing the soft white bun and the tang of ketchup and mustard. Didn’t pay to think too much about what was in the hot dog itself. It was salty and delicious, that’s what mattered.

Willow followed the path past the playground, noisy with kids, past the back of the bowls club, past the statue of a famous sportsman who grew up in the town, and down towards the river and the towpath.



On the way, she spotted the ice cream van, and decided a ninety-nine was exactly what she needed.

She ate the Flake immediately, as was only right and natural, then found a bench to sit on, to finish off the swirly soft vanilla ice cream.

On the other end of the bench, a man sat down.

He was a solidly muscular individual in his fifties, Willow guessed, wearing a crisply ironed long-sleeved shirt that seemed overly formal for a summer evening.

He, too, had a ninety-nine, and Willow watched out of the corner of her eye to see what he did with the Flake.

Some people used them like a spoon to scoop up the ice cream – borderline.

Some saved them and ate them last – unacceptable.

The man chose the path of righteousness and ate the chocolate bar first.

Willow finished her ice cream. Her plan had been to wander the river path for a while, but for some reason, she stayed put.

Maybe she wanted to pretend, just for a moment, that Charlie was here with her instead of a stranger.

Her mouth still tingled with his kiss – nearly two days later, how could that be ?

She'd spent months starved of loving touch, that's how it could be, and now her whole body craved it, craved Charlie .

She craved his tongue and his caress on her bare skin, and his hardness filling her, and all the blissful ways he used to bring her to orgasm.

She'd been starved of Charlie and now that he was back, she was desperate for him.

Maeve was right. Despite all the hurt he'd caused her, Charlie was the only man she loved, the only man she wanted.

But that didn't mean she could have him back.

Because what if, in a week's time, Charlie's explanation wasn't something she could accept?

What if it horrified her so much that she had to turn away?

How would she cope, once again, with the pain of him leaving?

Forever, this time? For a year, Willow had held out hope that Charlie would come back, and he had.

And now the thought of losing him a second time was too much to bear.

Her heart felt like it was being crushed in a vice. Damn it, she was crying ...

'Here—'

The stranger beside her was offering her the flimsy paper napkin from his ninety-nine. Willow had scrunched hers into a ball, so despite her intense embarrassment, she took it. The napkin disintegrated as soon as she wiped her eyes. Good thing she hadn't tried to blow her nose.

‘Some things even ice cream can’t fix,’ said the man, with a rueful smile. He had the clipped speech patterns of someone who’d gone to public school or been in the military, or both. Which might explain the well-ironed formal shirt.

‘No,’ sniffed Willow.

‘I’m afraid all I can offer you – apart from a napkin – is an old man’s wisdom. Life throws curve balls at us all the time, and it tends to work out best when we don’t duck but try to catch them on the full.’

With Geillis’ arc of justice and this man’s curve balls, it was obviously the evening for pithy sayings. But Willow had to admit she felt better. The napkin was now in sodden shreds, so she wiped her eyes with her hand.

‘Thank you,’ she said to him. ‘And you’re not old.’

The man raised a sceptical eyebrow but smiled at her. He was handsome in a solid way. His hair was dark with only a touch of grey and his eyes, Willow had already checked, were blue.

‘Well, I must be away,’ he said. ‘Causes to champion, battles to fight. All worth it in the end, though, don’t you think?’

He tapped his finger to his forehead in a farewell salute and walked off, back towards the park entrance. Willow didn’t stare after him, that would be weird. But some detail about him started to nag her. Something she should have noticed ...

It wasn’t until she was finally home and in bed that it hit her. When he’d handed her the napkin, she’d seen that his shirt sleeve had a silver cufflink – shaped like a pig.

She must remember to ask Harvey what his old school chum and very good friend

looked like.

### Chapter Fourteen

Willow woke from a nightmare in which Charlie, wearing Harvey's waistcoat, confessed to her that he was responsible for the Jack the Ripper murders.

Slinking around his legs was the black cat from Geillis's arm and in the background, she could hear pigs snorting and swans hissing, like a scary version of "Old Macdonald Had A Farm".

'Thanks, subconscious,' Willow said out loud. 'Super helpful.'

The cows were still munching in the field, and didn't bother to look up as Willow parked her car. Next to it the tyre tracks of another vehicle were gouged into the grass verge. Boy racer, probably. Wheels spinning as they hit the accelerator.

Willow put on her swim shoes and pushed her way past tall weeds down the footpath, got into the water, swam within about half a mile of the sewer pipe – and stopped.

What was that smell? She trod water and looked up ahead.

As she stared, a fish bobbed up to the surface, belly first, and floated there, not moving.

Willow was not about to swim closer and poke it; if it wasn't already dead it soon would be.

She swam to the overgrown riverbank, and with difficulty clambered up.

There was no path here, so she fought her way along through weeds and grasses, trying to avoid the stinging nettles.

On the surface of the water around the sewer pipe, she could see swirls of grey muck, spreading steadily downstream.

Sewage was rarely brown, the anonymous texter had said.

Another fish popped up, gasped, and rolled over. Willow was suddenly furious .

Carefully, she brought her phone out of the swim buoy's dry storage pouch.

She took photo after photo, and video for good measure.

Noted down the time and grid reference for the place.

There was no way she was getting back in that water, so Willow fought her way back along the bank to her start point, cursing as a stinging nettle she hadn't spotted whipped her bare leg. Ow, ow, ow!

She didn't bother to change. Got in her car in her damp swimsuit and drove home as fast as she dared.

Ran upstairs to her bedroom and uploaded all her material to the url she'd been given – yes, she remembered the password – then sat, heart thumping, still in fight mode, until it occurred to her that there was nothing more for her to do. Her part was over.

Willow felt ridiculously, frustratingly disappointed. And – she checked the time – it was still only 8.05am. She had a whole Saturday ahead of her and nothing exciting or even interesting planned.

Bugger that.

A quick online search reminded Willow that she really did live in a village. Her choices for fun today were an architectural documentary festival at the local boutique cinema, Zumba at the church hall ( Burn it up at any age! ), badminton lessons at the sports centre, and the farmers' market.

Willow seriously considered catching a train to London. But what would she do there? Wander the streets surrounded by crowds of strangers and feel even more alone?

She played eeny-meeny-miny-moe between Zumba and the farmers' market. Then she played it again to make the market win because she wasn't in the mood to be upbeat. Time for a shower. She'd grab coffee and breakfast from one of the food carts.

The stalls, this morning, were the usual eclectic mix.

Despite being officially termed a farmers' market, as well as fresh and artisan produce, you could buy beaded macrame potholders, chunky pottery, crystals and dream catchers, and tote bags made from old curtains.

There was even a woman who'd draw a portrait of your dog.

Willow wandered, coffee in one hand, bacon sandwich in the other, happy to browse, though she was definitely coming back for one of the massive chocolate chip cookies she'd spotted at the cake stall.

Willow did like to eat healthily, but not today.

Today, she needed sugar, caffeine and salty fat.

The bacon sandwich was satisfyingly greasy and, luckily, came with a robust paper napkin that Willow used to wipe her hands.

She found the rubbish and recycling bins with pictographs on the lids to show you what went in each.

Willow duly placed her empty coffee container in one, and the greasy napkin in another.

It might only be a small step for the environment, like her photos were, but everything added up, didn't it.

At least, she hoped so. It would be a terrible injustice if the polluters won.

But then again, if they lost, what would happen to Charlie?

Geillis had refused to answer her questions, so Willow was still in the dark about the activists' end game.

If it was prosecution, was Charlie senior enough to be implicated?

Even if the only punishment was a hefty corporate fine, it would still be a black mark on his employment record and his reputation.

His dreams of starting his own law business might never get off the ground.

Argh, this is unbearable . The not knowing, the worry, the confused feelings she still had for Charlie – Willow didn't know how much longer she could stand it. But there was nothing she could do to resolve any of it, and that sense of powerless was the worst thing of all.



A voice pulled Willow out of her head and into the world.

‘Can I tempt you with a flower?’ it said.

It was the pink-haired woman who now owned the Oak and Whale. This was her flower stall, of course, and it was bursting with vibrant summer blooms.

‘I’ve just got these beautiful irises in.’ The woman picked a bunch out of a galvanised metal bucket. ‘Irises stand for faith, wisdom and hope.’

‘Oh, I could do with double helpings of all of that,’ said Willow. ‘How much?’

‘My pleasure, dear.’ The woman wrapped the flowers in wax paper and handed them to her. ‘You’ve been unhappy. But I believe things are about to change for the better.’

Willow found it hard to believe any such thing, but she didn’t want to be rude.

‘Well, I now have a pretty bunch of flowers’ she said, with a smile. ‘And I’m about to go and buy a giant chocolate chip cookie, so yes, things are looking up.’

‘I’d highly recommend the peanut-butter stuffed brownie,’ the woman said. ‘It’s large enough to share.’

Willow had the oddest sense that this woman knew something she didn’t. But, let’s face it, her mind wasn’t terribly reliable right now, being awash with confusing thoughts and emotions.

‘Thank you,’ she replied.

The woman nodded and turned to greet another customer. Feeling suddenly self-conscious, Willow took her bunch of flowers and hurried away.

Back at the cake stall, Willow joined the very long queue. She should have bought a cookie when she spotted them earlier. By the time she got to the front, they might have sold out, which made Willow irrationally cross. She realised she was crushing her flowers, so she took a breath.

Two customers were served, then three. Willow's view was blocked by the people in front of her, so she could only see who was buying when they walked away.

The person being served right now was taking their sweet time.

Willow started tapping her foot. Not that it made any difference, but it did release some of her pent-up frustration.

At last! Captain Indecisive was finally walking away. Willow was flabbergasted to see he held only one small paper bag. One bag! How long do you need to choose a couple of items, max?

As if drawn by the force of her indignation, the man turned. He was wearing a faded T-shirt and cargo pants, and his hair was a shaggy light brown. And he was gazing at her with a desperate, naked longing.

All thoughts of cookies vanished, along with any lingering doubts. Willow ran right to him, threw her arms around his neck and kissed him as hard as she could. And Charlie grabbed and held her and kissed her right back.

### Chapter Fifteen

After a million years of fierce, hungry kissing, Charlie paused, and against Willow's mouth, murmured, 'I think we might be breaching a few bylaws. Ones relating to public indecency.'

Willow glanced around and saw several tut-tutting glares. Mainly from older folk who made a hobby of tut-tutting, but still, Charlie had a point. She released him and stepped back a fraction. To her surprise, the bunch of irises was still in her hand and still intact.

'Nice flowers,' said Charlie. He was holding the cake stall paper bag in front of his groin. Casually trying to conceal evidence of what had been serious hard-on, Willow noted with a smile. She also noted that the bag was somewhat – squashed.

Charlie glanced down. 'Yes, it seems we flattened my brownie. And now it's forced to become my modesty shield. It deserves better.'

'Was it the peanut-butter stuffed brownie?' Willow asked, though she already knew the answer.

'I couldn't decide between it and the banoffee slice,' Charlie said. 'But I could sense people getting antsy behind me, so I went for the brownie even though it's way too big for one person.'

'We could share it?' Willow suggested. 'Back at my place?'

‘Oh, god.’ Charlie threw her a helpless look. ‘Willow, are you sure?’

‘No ...’ Willow admitted. It wasn’t right to lie, no matter how much she wanted him. She didn’t want there to be any secrets between them ever again.

‘No,’ Charlie confirmed, softly.

He bent his head and touched his forehead to hers. ‘Let’s go take a walk. Somewhere, anywhere. We don’t even have to talk to each other. Let’s just – be together for a while.’

Willow slipped her hand in his. ‘I still want some of that brownie.’

‘Goes without saying,’ said Charlie. ‘Come on, let’s wander.’

It wasn’t far from the market to the river path. It was extra busy today – there was some kind of ultra-marathon on, and runners who looked as if they had regrets were slogging up from the north end. Charlie and Willow spotted a cheery sign that said, Only eight miles to go!

‘Poor bastards,’ said Charlie. ‘Those last eight miles are going to feel like eight hundred.’

‘That sounds like the voice of experience,’ Willow said, curious. Charlie before had played weekend football and ridden his bicycle. He’d hated running.

He screwed up his mouth in a wry smile. ‘It was the easiest way to keep fit,’ he told her. ‘And I turned out to be good at it. Who knew?’

That explained his present leanness, thought Willow.

It didn't explain anything else, like where he'd been, how he'd lived, who he'd lived with, why he'd come back and the million-dollar question – why he'd left in the first place.

But Willow was strangely content to let that unfold in its own good time.

Strolling along beside the river, Charlie's warm hand in hers, their bodies close, was all she needed right now.

She smiled up at him, and as he smiled back, she saw there were still hollows in his cheeks and dark rings under his eyes. He noticed her frown of concern.

'I'm okay,' he said. 'I'm exhausted, but I'm okay.'

And before she could protest or interrogate, he kissed her again, softly this time. Met her questioning gaze with another wry smile.

'I promised I'd tell you everything soon,' he said. 'But how about I tell you what I can now? Or I could just get down on my knees and grovel?'

'Maeve said you owed me a Kohinoor Diamond-sized apology,' Willow told him. 'That's a lot of grovelling. Hope your knees are up for it.'

'How is Maeve?' said Charlie, with a grin. 'Or do I not want to know?'

'Pursuing a barman with attitude and possibly demonic powers.'

'Well, she sold her soul when she joined the advertising agency,' said Charlie. 'Sounds like they're perfectly suited.'

Another group of runners sweated and puffed past them.

‘The end is in sight,’ Charlie murmured, watching them go. ‘Even though it still seems a million miles away.’

With a quick intake of breath, he turned to Willow, squeezed her hand. ‘Shall we go find a quiet place to sit? If we can?’

As he spoke, two swans floated by close to the riverbank, looking serene and not at all homicidal. One turned its long neck and, Willow could have sworn, stared right at her with its bright black eyes.

‘They mate for life, you know,’ said Charlie, following her gaze.

‘I do know,’ said Willow. ‘They also, quite frankly, scare the shit out of me.’ She tugged on his hand. ‘Come on. I think I know where we can go.’

Willow led Charlie to the park bench she’d sat on to eat ice cream and cry. Given it was a summer Saturday morning, every bench should have been taken, but Willow had never doubted that this one would be free.

‘Why is no one sitting here?’ Charlie peered at the bench surface, suspicious. ‘Fresh paint? Bird shit? Whoopie cushion?’

‘Luck.’ Willow sat and patted the bench beside her. ‘It’s our lucky day.’

Charlie’s face lit up. It was the first time Willow had seen him smile properly, and his new leanness, she was delighted to see, hadn’t got rid of the dimple. He sat and put an arm around her shoulders, dropped a kiss on her hair, and leaned against her with a sigh.

‘It’s weird, you know,’ he said. ‘I had no plans to visit the market. I was headed to the Tesco Metro to buy milk but on the way this woman on one of those cargo bikes

screeched to a halt and shoved a leaflet for the market at me. She basically insinuated that I'd be run out of town if I didn't support my local producers.

So, while she glared at me, off I went.'

'What colour eyes did she have?' Willow asked.

'Eyes?' Charlie thought about it. 'I don't know. She was wearing sunglasses. Why?'

'No reason,' Willow replied. Not a rational one, anyway.

Charlie pulled her to him and buried his face in her hair. 'God, I've missed you,' he breathed. 'Every minute without you has been utter hell.'

'Then why did you leave , Charlie?' was Willow's heartfelt, urgent question. ' Why?'

Slowly, Charlie released her and sat up. He leaned forward, rested his forearms on his thighs and pressed his palms together, as if asking a higher power for strength.

'I'll tell you what I can,' he said.

### Chapter Sixteen

‘Before I start,’ said Charlie, ‘I have to make it clear that a lot of people are depending on me. They’re especially depending on me to protect them. So, I can’t give you any concrete details – I can’t even hint. Are you okay with that?’

‘How can I know ?’ Willow’s pent-up frustration found voice. ‘You’ve kept me in the dark for a year , Charlie! I can’t even imagine what you have to say to me now, after all that time, so how can I know how I’ll react?’

Her frustration boiled over into anger. ‘You should at least do me the decency of finally trusting me. You left without a word because you didn’t trust me. That’s right, isn’t it?’

Charlie’s face was taut with unhappiness, and a hint of defensiveness. ‘It’s not as simple as that,’ he began.

‘ Isn’t it?’ Willow wanted to goad him.

‘ No !’

A flock of starlings feasting on the grass nearby took off in startled flutter.

‘I did trust you,’ Charlie insisted in a low, urgent voice. ‘I trusted that you’d understand, once you knew the truth. I trusted that you loved me and that you’d keep on loving me. But I never expected it to take this long – that’s what’s fucked everything up. It’s all taken way too long.’



He blew out a shaky breath. 'Willow, I couldn't tell you then for the same reason I can't give you details now, not yet. I know that sounds ridiculously over-dramatic but it's the truth. What I'm involved in – it's complicated—'

'Dangerous ?' Willow's anger gave way to anxiety.

'Risky,' he said. 'There's a lot at stake. But no one's going to die. It's nothing like that.'

It felt to Willow as if her mind was full of pieces of a puzzle, all floating around, refusing to settle into some kind of cohesive picture.

What could be so important to Charlie, and to whoever else he was involved with, that he'd upend his entire life, not knowing if he could ever get it back?

Apart from Charlie, there wasn't anything in her life she felt strongly about. Was that a good or a bad thing ...?

She did care about the river. Enough to want to help bring its polluters to justice.

But would she ever do more than take pictures of dead fish?

Willow couldn't see herself throwing red paint over works of art or lying down in the middle of busy city street or crewing on an anti-whaling vessel on a choppy, cold sea. Or—

Oh shit. Or taking a job at a water company, so you were right there, on the inside, gathering all the vital evidence needed to expose them ...

Willow knew it was the truth, just as surely as she knew the park bench would be free.

Charlie was part of Harvey's friend Pigger's activist group.

The secret, undercover network working to bring cheating, greedy, sewage-dumping bastards to justice.

Or at least to bring their actions to the notice of the nation and hope the outrage would force politicians to act.

It was such a relief, to finally know what was going on.

Hard on the heels of that relief, though, was another certainty.

Charlie had put the needs of the cause above her own.

Willow did not love the idea that she'd come second, but she could understand why Charlie might have made that decision.

He'd always been impatient to do something meaningful beyond protest, to make real change in the world.

Willow wondered if he'd planned it for a while, or whether he'd been caught up in the impulsive heat of the moment.

The latter was more like Charlie. And he had just admitted that he hadn't known exactly what he was in for.

He'd had no idea how long it would take.

Now she knew the truth, could she forgive him?

No one would judge her if she didn't – Charlie had abandoned her for an ideal, and

that would be hard for anyone to excuse.

But here he was, apologetic, still very much in love with her and wanting her back.

And promising that it would all be over soon ...

‘Willow?’

She heard the plea in Charlie’s tone, and the slight tremor of worry. She could tell him that she knew his secret, get it finally out in the open. But if there was a risk he and his friends would be compromised, she’d never forgive herself. Willow decided to err on the side of caution.

‘No more questions,’ she told him. ‘But I want you to promise me one more thing.’

‘What is it?’

Charlie sounded wary. Fair enough. She might be about to ask him for a trip to Paris, or a Labrador puppy.

Willow looked him in the eye. He held her gaze firmly, but she could see a muscle in his jaw working.

‘You will never keep secrets from me again,’ she said. ‘You told me I was the strongest person you know, so act like you mean it! Okay?’

Willow noticed Charlie’s startled blink with gratification. She’d never been a demanding person, but she was leaving no doubt now about what she wanted. What she deserved.

‘Er, I have to keep secrets from you for a little while more,’ said Charlie,

apologetically. 'But after that? Yes, I promise.'

'You promise what?' Willow was finding her newfound power heady.

'That I will never keep secrets from you again,' repeated Charlie. 'That I will tell you everything.'

The corner of his mouth twitched. 'Does that include my dreams?' he added. 'I have a lot of dreams about Premier League football, for some reason, but if you want the details ...?'

Willow narrowed her eyes. 'You know how you said no one was going to die?'

'But you like Marcus Rashford – ow! '

Charlie clutched his leg, where Willow had just given him a horse bite. Then he raised his hands protectively. 'Not the face, not the face!'

'Idiot,' said Willow, settling for a sharp poke in the arm.

'Ow,' said Charlie, softly, then he cupped her face and kissed her.

Willow kissed him back, and felt the heat spread through her, as Charlie's tongue sought hers, and his hand started to slide over her breasts. Desire for him practically lifted Willow off the bench, but Charlie suddenly tensed all over, and muttered, 'Uh oh.'

'You didn't?' Willow laughed.

'No!' protested Charlie. 'Well, if we're being scrupulously honest – almost. No, er, I just realised I've been sitting on the brownie.'

He reached round under him and, sure enough, retrieved a ruined mash-up of soggy paper and chocolate goo.

‘I felt something oozing through my trousers,’ he said. ‘Which is going to look like I shat myself, isn’t it? And to think, only moments ago, I was worried about showing the world my stiffy.’

Willow untied her sweatshirt from round her waist and knotted it around his.

‘It’s pink,’ said Charlie.

‘Suck it up,’ Willow told him. ‘And you owe me half a brownie.’

‘Among other things,’ said Charlie, with a rueful smile. ‘We could swing by the market again on our way back?’

Willow tried to keep the question casual. ‘Way back where?’

‘Somewhere there’s a shower? And heavy-duty stain remover?’

Charlie was trying to be casual, too. Both of them were failing.

‘I was a little hasty before, inviting you to my place,’ said Willow. ‘It will almost certainly have people in it. Housemates,’ she added. ‘I’m in a house share.’

Charlie nodded. ‘I’m on my own.’

‘How far?’

‘Ten minutes,’ said Charlie. ‘Er, you’ve been there before.’

### Chapter Seventeen

‘Now, in my defence,’ Charlie said, ‘I’ve only just moved in.’

They were outside his front door. Which used to be their front door. Charlie was living in their old maisonette, their old home. Willow was angrier about this than anything else Charlie had done.

‘You shit,’ she said, through clenched teeth.

‘I cried for bloody days when I had to leave here. And I had to pack up all your bloody stuff! I should have burned everything. I should have run over it then burned it. How dare you be here? I am –’ Willow struggled to find a word strong enough ‘– livid!’

‘I’m so sorry,’ said Charlie. He sounded genuinely wretched, but Willow would not be appeased so easily. ‘I was looking at online rental listings last month and it came up. And I thought ...’

‘You thought what?’

‘Every stupid thing,’ Charlie replied, with a sigh.

‘That if I was living here, then you’d be more likely to come back to me.

That I could make up for you having to move out because I ran out of money for my share – I’m sorry, I never meant that to happen.

I never meant a lot of things to happen.

That if you didn't come back, then at least I'd be where we used to be. Where we were happy ...'

He paused and raked his hand through his hair. Made it stand up like a mop.

'I was deludedly optimistic, and it bit me in the arse,' he said. 'Story of my life.'

'Fuck's sake ...'

Willow felt the fight drain out of her. Charlie was sincere, no doubt about that, and it was a good apology. Not 100 carats-worth, but not bad. Plus, the way his hair stood up made him look cute. A little like a Muppet, fair to say, but still cute.

'I am going to eat half of the new brownie while you watch,' Willow said. 'And then I am going to wrap up the other half, take it home, and send you the video of myself eating the rest of it. Slowly, with great enjoyment. And probably whipped cream.'

Charlie's shoulders sagged in relief. He raised a tentative questioning eyebrow. 'You wouldn't consider letting me lick a few crumbs off your naked body?'

'Don't push it,' said Willow. Then added, 'Possibly.'

'Er,' Charlie hesitated. 'So – do you want to come in? Just checking.'

'Yes, Charlie,' Willow replied. 'But I may well get cross again, so be warned.'

He nodded. 'I'll watch my step.'

Charlie unlocked the front door and invited Willow to go first. Her heart began to

pound, and her breath quickened, but in she went.

And there it was, the oh-so-familiar living room with the blue-and-white painted fireplace, polished oak floors, and clean white walls.

And there was the tiny dining room, galley kitchen and beyond it the sheltered courtyard.

Upstairs, Willow knew, were their bedroom, the spare room they'd used as a study, and the bathroom.

She knew exactly how the fourth stair from the top would creak, and how hard you had to push to open the right-hand side window in their bedroom.

She knew the bath would take an age to fill but that it was worth the wait.

It was as if the place had kept itself unchanged for her, knowing she would one day come back.

Willow swiped the tears away, but they wouldn't stop coming. All the hurt and aching sadness of the past months poured out and there was nothing she could do.

Charlie reached out to hold her, but she batted him away.

'Dammit , Charlie!' she choked. 'I hate you!'

'And I love you, Willow Taylor,' he said, quietly. 'Always have. Always will.'

'Ohhh ...'

Willow sank down on the living room couch. Not their old couch, a new one. Dark



blue velvet. It suited the room perfectly. Willow hated it on principle.

Charlie was keeping his distance, watching her. Willow turned her head pointedly away. Her tears had turned into those irritating hiccups that persist way longer than they should.

‘Can I get you a glass of water?’

‘No!’

Willow knew she was being childish but today had all been a bit bloody much. You could forgive a girl for taking a while to process.

She heard Charlie move, and snapped her head round and glared at him. He held up his hands in the surrender position.

‘I, er, I’m going to change, and put these pants in the wash,’ he said. ‘I’ll wash your sweatshirt, too,’ he added. ‘It’s suffered collateral chocolate damage. Is that okay?’

He was genuinely asking her permission. And Willow was running out of energy to stay mad.

‘Don’t use hot water,’ she said. ‘It sets the stain.’

‘Good tip. Thank you.’ Charlie was still treading carefully. ‘I’ll be back soon ...’

Willow heard the fourth stair from the top creak, and pictured Charlie in their old bedroom.

He always used to take his trousers off sitting on the edge of the bed.

Didn't have the balance to pull them off while standing, he claimed.

It was nonsense, he just liked any excuse to bounce on the bed.

Sometimes, he'd even take a flying leap from the middle of the room and twist in mid-air so he could land on his back.

If Willow was reading, she have to hold tight to her book or it'd be bounced right out of her hands.

Dammit, Charlie ...

Willow walked into the kitchen and splashed water on her face. As she dried her face and hands on a tea towel, she glanced out at the courtyard. Charlie had bought a cane egg chair, suspended from a stand. They'd always talked about getting one.

She climbed the stairs slowly and breathed deep before peering through the bedroom door. Charlie had his back to her. He was in his underwear, rummaging through a drawer, cursing under his breath.

Willow took a moment to admire the muscle definition of his back and legs. Then she said, 'Let me guess. All your other shorts and trousers are also in the wash?'

Charlie leapt around, startled. 'Shit ...' he breathed out. 'And yes, that does appear to be the case.'

'Thing is, if you want clean clothes,' Willow said, 'you have to do laundry on a regular basis. Otherwise, you get a situation where nothing is clean, and your laundry basket is very, very full.'

'I've been busy,' Charlie said, mustering his dignity.

He rummaged in the drawer again and drew something out with a triumphant, 'Ah ha!'

'No,' said Willow. 'Absolutely not.'

'What have you got against cycling shorts?' Charlie said.

'Everything ! Put them away !'

Charlie's grin faded. He fidgeted with the Lycra monstrosities in his hand, then said, 'I'm honestly not sure if I can ever make it up to you, Willow. But I really, really want to try.'

'I know,' said Willow, softly.

Charlie stared at her. 'I have no pants.'

Willow made her way over to him. Took the terrible cycling shorts and chucked them in a corner.

Slipped her hands inside the waistband of his boxer briefs and traced the hollows down from his hipbones with her fingertips.

Heard his sharp intake of breath and saw the stirring as his cock began to rise.

'That,' she said, 'will not be a problem.'

### Chapter Eighteen

Willow eased down Charlie's boxer briefs and ran her thumb up the underside of his erection, now freed from its confines, relishing the way it bucked under her touch.

She bent her head and licked the small drop off the tip, but before she could take it in her mouth, Charlie cupped her face, and said, roughly, 'I'm on an absolute hair trigger here. Do that and it's all over.'

Willow raised her head to see Charlie's expression shifting between manly defiance and desperate pleading, the latter currently winning by a mile.

'Oh my,' she said, failing to hide her amusement. 'We can't have that, can we?'

'Glad you find it funny,' muttered Charlie.

It was true, Willow was enjoying the sense of power she had over him. Every atom in her body ached for him, but she was prepared to take it slowly because doing so would be torture for Charlie. She still hadn't quite forgiven him for the house.

Charlie had already whipped off his T-shirt and boxer briefs, and the sight of his beautiful naked body, lean, muscular and very ready, sent such intense pulses of lust to her centre she thought she might actually come on the spot.

Her fingers trembled a little as she began to undress, but she deliberately didn't hurry.

She could hear Charlie's ragged breathing as he watched her.

He had a firm grip on the base of his erection, forcing it to behave.

Willow imagined him inside her, filling her with his silky hardness, and she fumbled to undo her bra strap.

Then she was naked, too, and she and Charlie stood and stared, drinking each other in.

Everything so familiar, and yet feeling like the first time, with all its self-consciousness and nerves.

‘Look at you,’ Charlie breathed.

He closed the gap between them, and with a fingertip, traced a burning trail across her collar bone, and over her left breast, causing her nipple to harden and Willow to shiver with an almost painful pleasure.

Charlie’s brown eyes were almost black with desire and there was a light sheen of sweat on his skin.

Willow moved closer still, close enough to reach her arms around and grip his taut rear end.

Charlie groaned as she ground herself against his erection.

His legs were shaking with the effort of keeping control, but just as Willow was about to reverse her decision to take it slow, he dropped down onto his knees and slid his tongue into her sodden cleft.

Willow let out a moan of longing and twined her fingers in Charlie’s hair to steady herself.

The firm, confident flicks of his tongue, over her centre and down into her sensitive depths, sped her towards orgasm, and then a thrust of his fingers tipped her over the edge, and she cried out as she burst into a thousand points of light.

She was barely aware of Charlie's soft continued finger strokes drawing out her pleasure.

What she did know is that she wanted him inside her right now.

'Fuck me,' she demanded, breathlessly. 'Fuck me, Charlie, hard as you can.'

He stood up, placed one hand on her left buttock, and with the other hooked her right leg around his hip.

And then he was inside her, and the electric feel of his hardness made her gasp.

Charlie's grip on her was almost painful but she didn't care.

Every strong, powerful thrust was feeding her need for him, her need to be filled to the brim with him, and she wanted him never to stop.

She could feel the heat inside her building again and she responded to his thrusts with renewed urgency.

Charlie cursed under his breath but kept up the pace, and as Willow's second orgasm blazed through her, he gave a shout and climaxed with a set of last fierce thrusts.

They clung together in a hot, damp fuse of bodies, trembling with exertion and the aftermath of orgasm. Then Charlie lost his grip on her thigh, and as they stumbled, he slid out of her. Willow moaned with regret. Charlie laughed softly and kissed her.

‘Good thing I changed the sheets this morning,’ he murmured. ‘We really made use of that bed.’

Willow hung her arms around his neck. ‘My knees are giving out,’ she said. ‘Lying down sounds like a fine thing.’

‘If I were a gentleman, I’d carry you,’ said Charlie, holding her lightly at the waist. ‘But my knees are in a worse state than yours. They’re not supposed to be bent at that angle for so long.’

‘I don’t think it was more than five minutes,’ said Willow, with a grin.

‘Stop casting slurs on my manhood, woman.’

Charlie kissed her, once, hard. ‘God,’ he said. ‘I feel like a ninety-year-old man.’

‘Bad luck,’ said Willow. ‘All you’ve got is a thirty-year-old woman.’

Charlie laughed, and the pair of them stumbled to the bed and flopped down on their backs with relief.

It wasn’t their old bed. Willow had wanted badly to sell it when she moved out, but beds were expensive, so she’d kept it and made do with new sheets.

This bed was firmer. One of those orthopaedic mattresses, Willow guessed.

And very classy bed linen that was actual linen, blue with a fine white stripe.

When she and Charlie had met, he’d had a duvet cover with SpongeBob SquarePants on it.

And he'd been quite reluctant to give it up.

She rolled on her side and propped herself up on her elbow so she could look down at Charlie.

He had his eyes closed. His hair was a shaggy tangle, with a couple of stray locks, still dampened with sweat, stuck to his forehead.

As Willow smoothed them back, Charlie opened his eyes to gaze up at her.

His mouth rose in a smile, and Willow pushed her fingertip into the dimple that appeared.

'You're so much leaner,' she said. 'I thought this might be gone forever.'

Charlie's smile faded and he stared at her with a hard, bright intensity. 'I thought you might be gone forever,' he said. 'Is it possible this is a dream?'

Considering the sequence of mad, possibly magical, events that had brought them back together, Willow had to concede that it could be.

She'd often been naked in dreams and very often in bed with Charlie.

But her dreams didn't smell like sweat and sex and, very faintly, Rexona Sports Defence 48Hour.

And she wasn't being forced to sit an exam she hadn't studied for or scoop up teeth that had fallen out.

She felt confident enough in her answer.



‘It’s real,’ she said. ‘We did have sex standing up, and you definitely still owe me half a brownie.’

Charlie’s eyes widened. ‘Shit! We didn’t use anything!’ He gazed at her horrified. ‘Willow, I’m so sorry. I should have—’

‘I’m on the pill,’ said Willow. ‘Still. And I suppose I thought you ...’

She broke off, suddenly embarrassed.

‘You thought correctly,’ Charlie said. ‘I haven’t had sex with anyone else.’

‘Good,’ said Willow, evenly, meeting his eye. ‘Because if you had , I’d be heading downstairs to grab a kitchen knife.’

‘Hmm,’ said Charlie. ‘Suppose now’s not the ideal time to ask you the same question?’

‘You will never ask me that question,’ said Willow. She smacked him lightly on the head. ‘Because you know the bloody answer!’

Charlie reached up, stroked her hair, caressed the side of her face, and ran his thumb lightly over her lips.

‘I love you, Willow Taylor,’ he said. ‘I can’t believe you waited for me, but I’m so, so grateful that you did.’

Willow kissed him. ‘I love you, too, Charlie McKay.’

Then she slid her hand lightly down over his firm abs, feeling them twitch with desire beneath her touch, and met his erection as it rose to greet her.

‘Now, considering how long I’ve been waiting,’ Willow told him.’ I think you’d better start seriously making up for lost time.’

### Chapter Nineteen

They stayed mostly in bed for the rest of the weekend.

In between, they ordered food deliveries and lay on the blue couch and watched old series of Taskmaster .

Willow had a bath. It took ages to fill but it was worth it.

Charlie managed to fit in there with her, but he didn't stay long as he was up at the end with the plug, which was poking him, in his words, 'right in the butt and not in a good way'.

He helped dry her, though, and then took her back to bed and made her all sweaty again.

Willow lost count of the number of orgasms. She was in a blissful haze, occasionally pinching herself just in case she'd been wrong about it being a dream.

After a while, the sex stopped being urgent and became ridiculously lazy. Sunday afternoon saw them both lying on their backs, legs entwined in a way that gave Charlie access but required them both to do nothing but slowly move against each other.

'Is this what Tantric sex is supposed to be like?' Charlie murmured.

'I know nothing about Tantric sex,' said Willow. 'And I'm happy to keep it that

way.'

She guided his hand from her breast down to where it was needed, and he brought her to a languorous climax. Willow waited for his to follow, but it didn't. She turned her head and saw he had his eyes shut.

'I can't be bothered,' he said, sensing her question. 'Too much effort.'

'Want me to help?'

'I honestly think it's worn out,' he said. 'Just let it rest where it is. Like a squirrel curled up in its warm, cosy tree hole.'

'Charlie!' Willow protested with a laugh. 'I like squirrels, but that image is bad.'

He opened one eye and grinned at her. 'Admit it – you've missed my sense of humour.'

Willow gave him a look. 'Get your squirrel out of my tree hole, Charlie. One way or another.'

Charlie chose the most pleasurable way and sank back into the pillows.

'That's it,' he said. 'I'm spent. I'm a husk.'

'You're an idiot,' said Willow.

Charlie turned his head and kissed her shoulder. 'But you love me.'

'I do,' said Willow. 'Maybe I'm the idiot?'

Charlie didn't respond. Willow knew him well enough to tell his good mood had turned, and he'd become thoughtful. She didn't have the energy to try and anticipate what he'd say next, so she lay there until he was ready.

'You haven't asked me anything about what I've been up to,' he said. 'Not one question.'

'Because you said you couldn't tell me yet,' Willow pointed out. 'And I agreed to wait.'

There was a pause. 'If I were you, I would have.'

'Good thing I'm me , then,' said Willow, with a hint of impatience.

She turned her head, too, so they were nose to nose. 'Do you want me to ask you a question?'

Charlie's mouth was downturned in a way that made him look about twelve. 'No,' he said. 'Maybe ...'

He rolled on his back again and expelled a frustrated breath. 'I just – I want you to think well of me,' he said. 'I want you to be proud of me. But I want that right now , and I can't have it.'

It would be so easy, Willow thought, to tell him that she knew. But if she did, it would worry him, and Willow guessed he'd need to be fully focused this coming week.

That said, she did have one question that wasn't directly related to his – what would you call it? Undercover mission? It also wasn't the kind he was fishing for, but too bad. He was the one who'd brought the subject up.

‘Charlie, you really did break my heart when you left,’ she said, and saw him wince.

‘Amazingly enough, your very short note wasn’t enough to stop me from blaming myself and having the most miserable year of my life.

I understand everything you’ve said about confidentiality and risk, but could you not have given me some kind of message?

The occasional email from a fake address?

Even an old-fashioned letter? One bunch of flowers on my bloody birthday ?

’ Willow was breathing hard now. ‘ Who would have found out about that ?’

‘Fuck ...’ Charlie screwed his eyes shut for a second, then looked at her.

‘I wasn’t allowed,’ he said. ‘I know, I know!’ he added, hastily, seeing Willow’s outrage. ‘I’m a grown-ass man and can make my own decisions, and I could have found a way to message you – I could have.’

He expelled a breath. ‘But I was afraid. That if I did, I’d put everything at risk. I’d never had such responsibility before, never had so many people counting on me. Never wanted to succeed so badly, either ...’

‘You put being a hero before me,’ said Willow quietly.

‘Fuck!’ Charlie yelled it to the ceiling. ‘Yes. Yes, I did. And I’m ashamed and sorry but also – fuck it.’

He propped himself up and frowned down at her, his jaw set.

‘Willow, you’ll probably get straight up and leave when I say this, and I wouldn’t blame you.

But I will say it – I would do it again .

There’s no one more important to me than you, but I needed this.

I needed to feel like I wasn’t being crushed by the world, and by people who think that power gives them licence to do whatever they want.

I’m a very ordinary person with no special abilities, and I wanted to prove that people like me don’t have to roll over and take it.

I’m not sure what the hell I’ll do next, but my life has changed forever, and I’m not going back.

I want you with me so badly, but I understand if that’s not what you want.

’ He paused, out of steam, breathing hard. ‘I’ll understand ...’

Willow took her time to respond. She had to test out her feelings, poke around and see if there were any tender spots still, any lingering hurt.

To her surprise, there was very little that flinched when she prodded it.

Probably, she guessed, because she knew Charlie meant what he said.

And that this time, he’d given her a choice, a say.

She absolutely could remain resentful that he hadn’t done so the first time, and that he hadn’t put her first. Or she could move forward with him on a more equal footing.

Because he would tell her everything from now on, wouldn't he? He'd promised. No more secrets.

'I'm still hurt and pissed off,' she said to him. 'But I'll get over it.'

Charlie's face was a picture of amazed relief. 'Willow—'

She held up a warning finger. 'One condition, though. Not negotiable.'

'Okay?'

'I want in,' she told him. 'Whatever it is you and your people are doing next, I want to be involved.'

More than I already am. But she decided to leave that unsaid for now. Besides, all she'd done so far was take pictures of dead fish. It wasn't exactly John Le Carré.

'But ... you don't know anything about our work,' said Charlie, puzzled.

'I know it's important,' said Willow. 'I know it's risky and that's exciting. Terrifying, too, I'm sure, but I feel that if I can swim in a freezing river infested with murderous swans and boorish coxless fours, then I can handle anything.'

Charlie opened his mouth, then shut it again. 'I – don't know what to say,' he finally managed. Followed soon after by, 'Coxless fours?'

'Joke writes itself, doesn't it?' said Willow. 'Now, go get us snacks. I'm starving.'



### Chapter Twenty

Monday came too fast, and then the rest of the week crawled by.

Willow and Charlie had agreed not to contact each other until Charlie gave the okay.

Willow decided she'd done her duty in the dead fish part of the river, so swam every morning in the stretch up to the lock.

Then she busied herself at work, while constantly refreshing her local news sites to see if anything came up that was to do with sewage dumping.

The closest she got was a dispute where one neighbour accused the other's cat of crapping in their prize-winning marrow patch.

The headline was CAT-ASS-TROPHY and would not be in line for a Press Award.

Tuesday should have been pub night, but Maeve called in a rain check. She was cagey about it, too.

'Have you got a date with that barman?' Willow asked her straight out.

'Not yet,' said Maeve. 'But I'm hot on the trail.'

Following the scent of brimstone. Willow wondered if her friend knew what she was doing and then decided that wasn't fair.

Maeve trusted Willow and wanted her to be happy , so Willow should do the same.

Maeve could also wrap all of her advertising clients around her little finger without even trying, so a possibly demonic entity would prove a rare worthy challenge.

On Wednesday, Harvey sent her proofs of the quarterly magazine to check.

Willow had kept her word and not mentioned the subject of environmental activism again, despite being tempted to do so at least once a minute.

She even searched online for local people whose surnames could feasibly have something to do with pigs and found way too many people called Hogg, Hoggard, Piggott and even Piguet.

Willow, of course, image searched every single one, but with no luck.

No solid, ex-military type with a well-ironed shirt.

Thursday, she decided to return to her old swimming spot and see whether the swans still wanted to kill her.

She peered around the willow trunk but could see neither swans nor traces of a nest. Perhaps bloody Geillis had planted the birds there?

One day, Willow would summon the courage to ask her.

For now, she'd hide her car keys in the hollow and thankfully retire the pink swim buoy.

Friday, and Willow could stand it no longer. Charlie had said a week, and it was more than a week now! But what could she do – phone him and berate him for missing his

deadline? She'd have to be patient. If it killed her. Which it felt like it might.

Four o'clock and Willow was half dead already. Then her phone pinged. A text from Maeve. BBC right now! SHIT HITTING FAN!

Willow fired up her browser and found the BBC site.

First story was under the headline: WATER COMPANY UNDER OFFICIAL SCRUTINY .

There was a video. Willow hit play. And saw Charlie, speaking on behalf of the water company as their external communications manager.

He looked handsome and amazingly calm, as he delivered the company's official statement, which in words a weasel would find insincere said that the company had nothing to hide and would welcome the official regulator's investigation into their practices.

The company, according to Charlie, expected to be fully exonerated.

Then the video cut to a representative of the regulator, who laid out the complaints against the company, and made it clear that this was one of the most egregious breaches of public trust in recent history.

Then it cut to a gleeful-looking reporter, who knew they'd just been handed a ratings bonanza on a plate.

Ping. Another text from Maeve. Hz Charlie really sold his soul?? A bit rich, thought Willow, coming from a demon fancier.

No! she texted back. But keep schtum!

Maeve sent back a GIF of someone zipping their mouth, with an actual zip. Then another GIF of Kermit the Frog waving frantically. Then a text: PUB NOW!!!????

Willow sighed. Clearly, Maeve would not rest until she knew all. Before she could reply, her phone pinged again, and Willow almost did a Kermit the Frog herself. Charlie!

His text read: Fell on sword & resigned. Need drink. And you xxx

Willow texted back: Oak and Whale in 15. Prepare 4 Maeve.

Fuck was Charlie's succinct reply. Then: OK . Will buy armour on way.

Friday was the pub's busiest night, but once again, Maeve had managed to grab their usual booth. Does she charm people into giving it up , Willow wondered? Or is she just ridiculously lucky?

Willow was glad she'd started making more of an effort with her clothes, though her pleated green midi-dress and matching sandals were no match for Maeve's form-fitting shift in cream lace and orange kitten-heeled slingbacks.

Geillis was at the bar – and so was Maeve's snake-hipped demon-bloke, Willow saw. But then, nothing should surprise her these days, should it?

'His name's Xander,' said Maeve, with more than a hint of smugness. 'His father's a Lord.'

'Of darkness?' said Willow, amused.

'Close,' Maeve replied. 'North Yorkshire.'

Then she leaned across the booth, and hissed, 'Now, tell me about Charlie !' in a stage whisper audible to the entire pub. 'What gives ?'

Willow's eye was caught by a man standing in the pub doorway, looking around the crowded room with the weary despair of someone who'd had a very long day. She waved until he finally, and with obvious relief, spotted her.

'Why don't you ask him yourself?' Willow told Maeve.

'Char-lee !'

Maeve leapt to her feet and threw her arms around Charlie, who mouthed 'Help' over her shoulder at Willow.

'Come! Sit!' Maeve pulled him into the booth beside her, and said, 'Now, what on earth are you doing shilling for those water-defiling scoundrels?'

Before Charlie could reply, Maeve's bloke appeared. Judging by the expression on his face, Willow guessed he'd come to check that she and the handsome man Maeve had just enthusiastically hugged were nothing more than old friends.

'Xander!' said Maeve. 'You know Willow. And this is Charlie!'

As usual, Xander paid Willow no attention, but fixed Charlie with a stare that went several miles beyond hostile.

'You were on TV,' Xander said to him. 'Fucking hell, man, have you no shame?'

'I don't have to explain myself to you.' Charlie sounded calm. Willow could tell he was anything but.

‘Oh, you don’t, do you?’ Xander was spoiling for a fight.

‘You don’t have to explain why your company has deliberately been dumping shit – actual shit – in our waterways for years.

And for the simple fucking reason that they chose to take money for upgrades and pay it out in fat bonuses, instead?

Sure, man, no need to explain any of that! ’

Xander all but spat on the table in front of Charlie. ‘If I were you, I couldn’t show my face around decent people again. If this was my pub, I’d kick you out on your corrupt, evil arse.’

Willow had had enough.

‘Shut up !’ she hissed at Xander. ‘Charlie’s not working for them, he’s working against them!

He’s the one who’s collected all the inside evidence!

It’s because of his courage and persistence that this investigation is happening at all !

Charlie’s a secret whistleblower, you self-righteous shithead! You should be thanking him!’

The stunned silence that followed her little speech was broken by Charlie himself.

‘Willow,’ he said. ‘How the fuck did you know?’

### Chapter Twenty-One

‘You mean it’s true ?’

Xander had abandoned his fighting stance and was now glancing, bewildered, between Charlie and Willow. Who had eyes only for each other.

‘Of course it is,’ said Maeve, briskly. ‘It’s the only thing that makes sense. Charlie’s never been a corporate animal. I should have realised.’

‘Willow?’ Charlie prompted. ‘How?’

‘Um, long story,’ Willow replied. ‘And, honestly, quite a bit of guesswork.’

‘And the reason you didn’t mention this before was ...?’

‘I didn’t want to worry you. I thought you had enough to worry about already.’

A small smile tugged at the corner of Charlie’s mouth. ‘Unbelievable,’ he murmured. ‘And thank you,’ he added. ‘You were right. It’s been a hell of a week. I’m looking forward to the peace of hopefully temporary unemployment.’

‘You’ve resigned?’ This was Maeve. ‘They don’t know , do they? They think you’re just bailing out in a cowardly fashion because it’s all gone pear-shaped, right?’

‘They don’t know,’ Charlie said to her. ‘And I sincerely hope they’ll be too busy covering their arses to start asking tricky questions.’

He looked at each of them in turn. 'So, I'd really appreciate it if you kept this to yourselves.'

'Won't breathe a word,' promised Maeve. 'Nor will Xander – will you?'

'No,' he muttered, gracelessly.

'Xander?' Maeve said, in a sing-song tone. 'Do you have something else you'd like to say to Charlie?'

Willow had no idea how much time Xander had actually spent in Maeve's company, but enough, it seemed, for him to know when to heed a warning.

'Apologies,' he muttered, again. Charlie responded with a curt nod.

Xander glanced over at the bar, no doubt drawn by the stare Geillis was using to burn a hole in his back, Willow observed. How much did Geillis know, she wondered again. Everything was the obvious answer.

'Got to go,' said Xander. 'See you later?'

This was addressed to Maeve, and Willow detected a slight note of pleading. This whole incident had done serious damage to Xander's sang-froid.

'I'll text you,' said Maeve.

Her smile offered no reassurance whatsoever, and Xander's walk was noticeably lacking in swagger as he retreated.

'He'll learn,' Maeve said. 'Now!' she clapped her hands. 'Drinks are on me! My price, of course, is full disclosure. Leave nothing out, not a single thing!'



Charlie and Willow exchanged glances. Charlie's was more than a little desperate.

'Maeve,' said Willow, firmly. 'Charlie can't break confidences. This is all super hush-hush. Even I don't know the half of what's going on.'

'Well, tell me the half you do know,' Maeve said. 'I'm your best friend, and I'm not afraid to use that as emotional blackmail.'

Willow looked to Charlie for permission. He smiled and shrugged. 'I'd quite like to hear your story myself.'

So, Willow told them about Harvey and his old chum, Piggers, whom she may have eaten a ninety-nine next to, and the burner phone and website, and the sewer pipe and the dead fish.

And how, because she was hurt and angry, she'd almost believed that Charlie had gone to the dark side, but deep down, she was certain he hadn't.

'The truth about what you were doing was a guess,' she admitted. 'But an intuitive one. Based on what you'd said to me, and what you'd implied. And on what I knew about you.'

'You mean, you knew I was a total idiot, who didn't look before he leapt?

' Charlie was smiling but his eyes told a different story.

'Who got himself trapped in a situation he'd had no clue was so complicated.

And who made unforgivable decisions when it came to you. That's what you knew about me, right?'

‘I knew you were principled and determined,’ said Willow, softly. ‘And brave and clever. And I can see now that I always knew you’d come back to me. It was a long, tough wait, but I made it through. And now, here you are, and you won’t be leaving again.’

There was a sniffing sound beside them. Maeve was dabbing away tears with a handkerchief.

‘Good lord,’ said Charlie. ‘You never cry. It’s flying in the face of nature.’

‘I know. I’m in love,’ said Maeve. ‘My hormones are playing havoc.’

‘With shithead ?’ Charlie screwed up his face in pained disbelief. ‘Really?’

‘Wait, no,’ said Maeve. ‘Not love, lust. That’s the word I’m looking for. And Xander is environmentally active up the wazoo, so you two will get on like a house on fire once you get to know each other. Or a nuclear powerplant exploding,’ she said, as an afterthought.

‘I think I prefer the fiddler,’ said Willow, with a grin.

‘Not out of the picture entirely,’ said Maeve. ‘I think one should always strive for balance. A sweet beardy fella on one side, and a very bad boy on the other.’

She gave a little shiver of pleasure and sent a text. A second later, Willow saw Xander check his phone and smile, swagger instantly restored.

‘He’s not wrong about one thing, though,’ said Charlie, dolefully. ‘My name’s going to be mud around here.’

‘You weren’t responsible for the company’s actions,’ Willow insisted.

‘You were their PR person, not senior enough to be let in on top management decisions, and you resigned as soon as you knew. Take the initiative and speak out against them. Offer to testify – the regulator will be glad of the help. Not knowing, of course, that you were the one who fed them the evidence in the first place.’

Both Charlie and Maeve were staring at her. ‘What?’ Willow said.

‘This is a newly fierce and devious side to you,’ said Maeve. ‘Has a parasite from the river lodged itself in your brain?’

‘It’s a good thing I love you,’ said Willow, with a smile.

They all jumped as Geillis materialised as if by magic. She put down a tray of drinks – ‘On the house’ – gave Charlie a brief hard, knowing stare and left.

‘Who is that?’ Charlie whispered. ‘This is the first time I’ve been in here for a year, and I don’t recall anyone that terrifying working here before.’

‘She’s a witch,’ said Willow.

‘True,’ confirmed Maeve. She raised her glass of wine. ‘To old friends and new beginnings! Sláinte, skol and bottoms up!’

The three of them held eye contact and clinked glasses. Charlie downed half his pint in one go.

‘Oof,’ he said. ‘Needed that. Need food, too. Haven’t eaten all day.’

‘Well, there’s only cheese and onion crisps here,’ said Maeve. ‘So, finish your drinks you two and hop it. And afterwards go have sex in a darkened doorway, it’ll do you good.’

‘We can’t leave you here,’ protested Willow.

‘You can and you will,’ said Maeve. ‘I’ve just this minute spotted yon beardy fiddler and he’s looking this way, so let the evening’s fun commence!’

‘Xander’s a dick,’ said Charlie, as he and Willow left the pub. ‘But I’m not sure even he deserves a punishment like Maeve.’

‘I’m not having sex in a doorway, either,’ said Willow. ‘My knees haven’t recovered from Saturday.’

Charlie halted and drew her into his arms. ‘Where would you like to have sex, then?’ he murmured.

‘I think ...’ Willow paused as Charlie kissed her. ‘I’d like to do it on your bed ...’

He kissed her again.

‘And I’d like to be on top, so I can be in full control ...’

Charlie’s hands slid down to her rear and his grip tightened.

‘And I’d like you to touch me everywhere you can reach ...’

Charlie pressed his mouth against her neck and let out a small groan.

‘And, I want to be able to touch you, particularly—’ She whispered in his ear. ‘And, of course—’ Another whisper.

Charlie shuddered. ‘Shit, Willow,’ he breathed. ‘I’m hard as a rock, and I genuinely think my balls are about to go off like grenades.’

‘I’ll call the restaurant for delivery,’ she said, reaching for her phone. ‘I’ll ask them to leave it on the doorstep. Pretty sure we’ll be done before it gets cold.’

### Chapter Twenty-Two

‘This water’s like ice !’ Charlie exclaimed. ‘How do you do this without a wetsuit?’

‘Once you’re in, you quickly warm up,’ Willow said.

Charlie dipped his toe – ‘There, I’m in’ – and removed it. ‘Now, I’m out. Which is much better.’

‘Chicken,’ said Willow. ‘Lily-livered giant weenie.’

‘Madwoman,’ Charlie retorted. ‘Ice bath-loving nutcase.’

Willow dived in, swam a few strokes out, then turned and bobbed in the water, grinning at Charlie, who was making a point of shivering dramatically on the bank.

He had on a pair of blue swim shorts that would have shown off his gorgeous body if his arms hadn’t been wrapped protectively around his chest and he hadn’t been scowling like a sulky toddler.

‘Don’t think about it,’ Willow called out. ‘Just jump in.’

She could practically hear Charlie’s inner argument – macho bravado versus a reluctance to die of hypothermia. Willow floated on her back until, inevitably, macho bravado won out and Charlie snapped on his goggles and jumped in.

‘FUCK!’ he yelled, causing a couple of ducks to take flight. ‘It’s freezing !’

‘Swim!’ Willow ordered. ‘Get moving!’

‘I’D RATHER BE FISHING!’ he yelled back, but he got moving.

Willow did, too, making sure she kept ahead, so as to encourage his competitive instinct and prevent him from making a beeline back to the safety of the bank.

She’d chosen the stretch of river that led up to the lock.

It had sentimental meaning now – it was where she’d been fished up by Charlie, where she’d witnessed him in one of his darkest moments, where she’d kissed him for the first time in nearly a year and knew for sure that he still loved her, and she still loved him.

It was a stunning summer morning, and the water in fact wasn’t cold at all. Wait until Charlie tried it in winter, Willow thought. She would let him wear a wetsuit then. Probably.

The river was busy, a small pleasure craft slowly cruising, rowboats, kayakers and a wobbly paddleboarder.

Joggers sweated along the towpath, skirting walkers, dogs, baby buggies and wayward toddlers.

There were several other swimmers, some serious-looking triathlon types and a gaggle of elderly women, chatting while they breaststroked along.

One was wearing a swim cap studded with bright rubber flowers. Willow was envious.

She paused every so often to check her route ahead was clear, and to check on

Charlie, still behind her, despite his best efforts to catch up.

He had good technique, Willow observed. But it seemed his goggles weren't fitted correctly, and he had to keep stopping to tip water out of them.

Or else he was puffed and using that as an excuse to take a breather.

Willow recalled her early days of river swimming.

Six strokes and she'd been knackered. She'd come a long way, in every respect.

She'd proved she could be tough, and loyal, and determined. Willow was proud of herself.

She was also not above being petty. Charlie had stepped up the pace, and she was in danger of being caught by him. Willow waited until he was almost beside her, then she outstripped him with a series of strong, swift strokes.

Willow made it to the spot where they'd need to turn around. The lock was in sight, and there were a lot of people on the overbridge. She trod water until Charlie caught her up. He ripped off his goggles and glared at her.

'You did that on purpose,' he accused.

'Whatever can you mean?' said Willow, with a grin.

'You waited for me, then took off like a missile,' said Charlie. 'Or a swordfish, whatever. Something streamlined and mean.'

Willow paddled over to him and leaned in for a kiss as they both trod water. Charlie's lips were cold, but his tongue was warm.



‘Hope you’re not expecting any underwater funny business,’ he said. ‘My cock’s shrunk to the size of a cashew nut.’

‘Admit it,’ said Willow. ‘You’re having fun.’

Charlie turned slowly and took in the view. ‘It has its good points, I suppose.’

Willow flicked water at him.

‘Oy!’ Charlie flicked water back at her.

Then they had a mad splashing water fight, which Willow was totally winning.

‘Now, now children,’ came a nearby voice.

Panting a little, Willow and Charlie stopped and looked around. Coming alongside was a rowboat, and in it was ...

‘Harvey!’ said Willow.

He was wearing cricket whites, complete with grass stain on one knee, and holding a bottle of cider. On the oars was another man, also in cricket whites. A solid, muscular man with grey-speckled dark hair. He manoeuvred the boat to a stop beside them.

‘Willow, may I introduce my old chum from school,’ Harvey said to Willow. ‘P–’

‘Jasper,’ the man said, with a smile.

‘Hello,’ said Willow, with a smile of her own. ‘And this is Charlie. Charlie, this is Harvey and – Jasper.’

As she said it, she looked for a hint of recognition, but neither man showed any sign that they'd met before.

Willow remembered that Harvey had said the group operated in separate cells.

Perhaps she was the only one who knew the connection?

She quite liked that idea. And, of course, would never, ever tell.

'Match finished early?' Charlie asked. 'Thought cricket usually went on until teatime.'

'There was a bit of a fracas about an LBW call,' said Harvey. 'The umpire had to retire on medical grounds. By which I mean he was carted away with a broken nose. Nothing to do with us,' he added hastily. 'So, we decided to spend the morning messing around in boats.'

'Unlike this maniac,' said Charlie, gesturing to Willow, 'who thinks being in water is preferable to being on it.'

'The river's a gift,' said Jasper. 'We should give thanks for how lucky we are.'

And he pulled on the oars to put the boat in motion.

'Toodles!' Harvey waved.

'Toodles? Truly?' Charlie asked when the men were out of earshot.

'Harvey's from a different era,' said Willow, fondly.

'And I'm in the ice age,' said Charlie. 'Seriously, I'm one giant goosebump.'

‘Weenie,’ said Willow. ‘All right, let’s go back.’ She grinned, wickedly. ‘Race you!’

‘That’s cheating !’ Charlie yelled after her, fumbling with his goggles. ‘You are a VERY BAD PERSON!’

Willow dried herself as she waited for him on the bank. Handed him a towel as he trudged out of the water. He accepted it with a grunt and sat down heavily on the grass.

‘I can’t believe you do this every day,’ he said. ‘I barely have the strength to lift my arms.’

‘Do you want me to dry you?’ Willow asked.

‘Sure,’ said Charlie. ‘And while you’re at it, you can screw up the remains of my dignity and chuck it in the bin.’

She kissed the top of his damp head. ‘Get dressed and let’s go for a walk in the lovely sunshine.’

‘A walk ?’ protested Charlie. ‘You’re an exercise zealot !’

‘You don’t have to use your arms to walk,’ Willow pointed out. ‘And I only want to go to the lock and back. It’s not far.’

‘I was in a bad place last time I went to that lock,’ said Charlie, gloomily.

‘Exactly,’ said Willow. ‘We can put old ghosts to rest.’

Charlie gave her an appraising look. ‘If I agree to this, can I go fishing for the rest of the afternoon?’

‘Of course,’ said Willow. ‘But if you come home smelling all fishy and rank, there’ll be no action tonight.’

‘I hardly ever catch anything.’

‘Then that’s lucky all round,’ said Willow. ‘For you, me and the fish.’

When they arrived at the lock, the people who’d been on the overbridge had gone. They had it all to themselves. Except for ...

‘A cat?’ said Charlie. ‘What on earth is a cat doing here?’

It was a black one, and very friendly, twining itself through their legs and purring.

‘Maybe it belongs to the lock keeper?’ Willow suggested. She bent and fondled its velvety ears. Its eyes were a bright green-gold. ‘Or maybe not ...’

‘Look,’ said Charlie. ‘Someone’s fastened a love token to the railing.’ He lifted up the red, heart-shaped padlock. ‘M.L. and W.S. Whoever they are.’

‘I actually watched them do it,’ said Willow. ‘Thought it would have been removed by now.’

‘Here’s another one.’

Charlie lifted the second padlock, this one in gleaming brass. ‘Hey! It’s ours!’

‘Wha-at?’ Willow peered at it. Sure enough, the initials on it were C.M. and W.T.

‘Coincidence, of course,’ said Charlie, letting the padlock go.

Willow watched the black cat stroll towards the lock keeper's gatehouse. Its tail was swinging lazily side to side in a teasingly eloquent way. She slid her arms around Charlie, and he drew her into an embrace. And they kissed for quite some time.

'I want to spend the rest of my life loving you, Willow Taylor,' said Charlie. ' And having loads of sex.'

'Good thing you told me about the sex,' said Willow. 'I would never have guessed otherwise.'

'It's not cashew-nut size, anymore,' said Charlie.

'I noticed,' Willow said, with a smile. 'And I love you, too Charlie McKay. Don't leave me again.'

' No chance,' said Charlie. 'And guess what? I might have thought of something more fun to do this afternoon than fishing.'

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

GRUMPY SUNSHINE, SWEETLY SPICY, TINY BIT MAGICAL WORKPLACE ROMANCE ...

‘Stupid crappy padlock! Useless tiny key!’

Evie tried to pull the heart-shaped padlock off the bridge railing, but it wouldn’t budge.

Now, she was trying to scratch her ex’s name off, but the key was too small and flimsy to make a mark.

Ironic that this cheap piece of crap would last longer than her relationship.

Or maybe not. With the benefit of hindsight and rage, she could see that the signs had been there from the start.

Yes, the signs had been there, all pointing to the fact that Shithead was not a keeper.

And all ignored by her in the face of his tousled blond handsomeness and, to be fair, his unfailing good humour, and generosity in bed.

They’d been together just over a year, long enough and happily enough for Evie to assume the relationship would go longer.

But two weeks ago, Tuesday morning, after giving her several orgasms, Shaun announced he was leaving her.

He was out the door before she could form a clear thought.

Evie supposed it was like the old saying: easy come, easy go.

‘How can I make jokes when I’m heartbroken?!’ she demanded out loud of the universe.

‘Was it a good joke?’

If the universe had a voice, it would probably sound like this one.

Calm, and with a richness that made Evie think of a high-class chocolate cake with one of those fiendishly tricky mirror-gloss finishes.

Part of her didn’t want to turn and see who the voice really belonged to.

Right now, a little bit of magic would be very welcome.

The man she encountered seemed friendly. Face pleasantly ordinary apart from a striking pair of greeny-gold eyes. He was wearing what looked like council-worker overalls, and in his hand was some kind of tool with long handles.

‘Joke was passable,’ Evie said. ‘Not my best work, but I’m not in my best mood.’

The council worker’s gaze took in the tiny useless key that Evie was still clutching in one hand, and the piece of crap padlock that remained unscratched.

‘Would this help?’

He lifted up the long-handled tool, and Evie saw it was a bolt cutter. It was mid-morning Saturday, and the bridge was crowded with pedestrians, so Evie was fairly

confident she was not about to be assaulted with a deadly weapon. But still—

‘Why are you carrying a bolt cutter around?’

‘It’s my job.’

The-hopefully-not-a-serial-killer leaned in and with one firm snip, severed the padlock from the railing. He offered the broken piece of crap to Evie.

‘I assume you don’t want it?’

‘You assume correctly.’

The now-confirmed council worker tossed the padlock into a plastic wheeled bin behind them that Evie had so far failed to notice. She stepped closer and peered in. It was half-full. Of padlocks.

‘This is your job?’ Evie asked. ‘Cutting padlocks off bridges?’

‘Do you know how much they weigh combined?’

Evie did not, but she had once correctly guessed the number of jellybeans in a jar at her local pub and won the lot. She didn’t even like jellybeans, but that wasn’t the point.

‘Ninety-three thousand pounds?’

‘Good guess.’ The council worker looked impressed. ‘Heavy enough to cause damage. A few years back, a bridge in Paris lost a whole railing. Collapsed into the Seine.’



Evie assessed the suspension bridge they were standing on.

When the first lot of people had walked on London's Millennium Bridge, it began to sway alarmingly, so the officials hustled everyone off and added extra strengthening.

But obviously not enough to bear the weight of over forty tons of padlocks.

Below them was the Thames, a venerable, almost mythical river, but not one you'd want to plunge into unless you'd enjoy a week-long bout of gastroenteritis.

'How do you choose which padlocks to remove?' she asked. 'I mean, you didn't need to be Sherlock Holmes to guess I wanted this one chucked in the bin, but it seems a bit unfair to couples who're actually making a go of it.'

The council worker stared at her, as if puzzled by the question.

'Isn't it obvious?'

Evie smiled politely. He was messing with her, had to be.

Even the most cursory glance showed that none of the padlocks looked special.

Whether they were heart-shaped, round or square, shiny and new or rusted and pitted, to Evie, every padlock gave off the same tacky vibe.

Of course, she hadn't thought so when she and Shithead had fastened theirs.

Then, she'd seen the gesture as the height of romance, and a guarantee of her happy ever after.

'If it was obvious, would my padlock now be in your bin?'

Evie sounded grumpy, she knew, but in the circumstances felt a small rant was justified.

‘I can’t believe I genuinely thought I’d found The One,’ she went on. ‘How could I have been so blind, and stupid, and deluded?’

‘What were you looking for with Shaun?’

Evie was wide-eyed. ‘How did—?’

‘Your names are on the padlock,’ said the council worker with a smile.

‘Oh. Of course. Um – what was I looking for? He was kind, and super positive. Like, nothing would faze him. He never, ever got upset.’

‘Did he encounter anything to upset or faze him?’

Evie thought. And frowned. ‘Now that you mention it, no. Shaun knew how to avoid life’s rough spots. I envied him that.’

The council worker’s eyes seemed to flash bright green.

‘Kindness and a positive temperament are important, but those who are rarely troubled are often those who skate only on life’s surface.

And when life demands more of them, they skate away.

Part of you knew this from the start, but you ignored it. Why?’

In order to reply, Evie had to shut her mouth, which had fallen open.

‘Are you saying this is all my fault?’ she protested. ‘I wasn’t the one who bailed on a year-long relationship with three minutes’ notice!’

‘Shaun knew what he wanted, and when he didn’t want it anymore, he left. With little regret, I imagine. Question is: what do you want, and why? When you know the answer to that, your life will regain its direction.’

I didn’t come here to be lectured by a council worker, was Evie’s first response. Quickly followed by: And what kind of council worker psychoanalyses you while bolt-cutting padlocks off a bridge?

‘Is this your only job?’ she asked. ‘You seem – overqualified.’

The council worker smiled again. ‘It gets me out and about.’

He offered her the hand not holding the bolt cutter. ‘A pleasure to meet you, Evie. I’ve no doubt you will soon find what you’re looking for.’

Evie shook the hand. It was rough with callouses. She guessed that long hours of bolt cutting would do that to you.

As the council worker moved away, Evie was tempted to follow and take note of which padlocks were singled out for the chop.

But she had a tiny shred of dignity left.

And besides, she’d promised to meet up with Nicky for lunch.

Nicky was the kind of tough-love friend who allowed a set time for venting about exes and then made you shut up.

She'd be intrigued by the bolt-cutting council worker, who seemed uncannily well informed about her relationship with Sh—

Wait. The padlock wasn't engraved with their names. Only their initials. E.M. for Evie Martin. S.W. for Shaun Walsh ...

Evie scanned the bridge both ways for the council worker, but no sign. It wasn't a super-long bridge; he might be at the Tate Modern end having a sandwich. He might be up the other end having a moment of peace at St Paul's.

Or I might have imagined him completely .

Evie remembered the rough feel of the handshake and decided she wasn't hallucinating. Life was full of unexplained incidents and coincidences. She was sure there'd be a very sane and boringly normal reason why a complete stranger knew her name and her ex's.

She texted Nicky: on my way

And added: order me a glass of wine – big one – HUGE!

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:23 am*

### FORCED PROXIMITY, BURNED BY LOVE, SWEETLY SPICY, MAGICAL MATCHMAKING

How could your heart not lift at the sight of a bucket of sunflowers? If sunflowers were a song, they'd be 'Dancing Queen'.

The cheery little Abba earworm wriggled in, only to be squashed by the voice in Chloe's head answering, Quite easily , actually , if today is the one-year anniversary of the day your heart got broken into a million pieces .

'Closing in quinze minutes !' called Aunt Daisy from behind the peonies. 'You can bring the rest of the seaux in now.'

Seaux . Buckets.

Chloe's aunt, the colourful, fragrant owner of Coeurs et Fleurs (the conveniently rhyming French for Hearts and Flowers) used a French-English mash-up when conversing with Chloe, in the hope that this would help her pick up the language quickly.

Chloe let out a sigh. ' Oui , je suis on it.'

Even after a year, her French was nowhere near fluent. Not even conversant. Probably because, apart from turning up here for her job as trainee florist, she hardly ever went out, preferring to spend her evenings curled up on the sofa with only Patapouf and Netflix for company.

The shop bell tinkled as she headed outside. Such a pretty sound. Everything in Paris seemed just that little bit more charmant than in Huddersfield.

But she wouldn't think about Huddersfield, today of all days. This was a day to be got through, to be endured, and thoughts of home wouldn't help with that. Not at all.

Mindfulness. That was what she needed. To focus on the here and now, appreciate the beauty of these sunflowers – tournesols – the sublime scent of the old English roses by the door. To be thankful for the fact that she was here, doing a job she loved, in the most beautiful city in the world.

Practising her French – that helped. What was the French for bell? Cloche . Like the thing you use for forcing plants, or one of those nineteen-twenties hats.

The bell – cloche – rang again as Chloe struggled back inside, a tin bucket of blooms in each hand, pushing the door with her bottom. As she did, one of the buckets tipped, slopping water onto the floor.

'Prop it open!' called Aunt Daisy, her tone exasperated.

Chloe put the buckets down with a clatter, parked a trolley of house plants in front of the open door and fetched a cloth.

She didn't blame Aunt Daisy for losing patience.

Chloe had been all kinds of hopeless today, moping around the shop in her cloud of sad.

Distracted, clumsy, forgetful. Her mournful expression had probably wilted the flowers, put the customers off.

At least, those customers who weren't already unhappy, which in fact applied to an

awful lot of them, given the shop's location.

But she couldn't help her despondency. She'd known today would be horrible. An absolute pig – cochon – of a day. Twelve months since the wedding day that wasn't. Her first un-wedding anniversary. Thank goodness closing time was in sight.

She mopped up the water then headed outside again to bring in more buckets.

In front of the shop, the Rue de Rondeaux wasn't busy.

Sundays in central Paris were generally quieter, and most shops were closed.

Coeurs et Fleurs was an exception, being opposite a cemetery that saw many visitors over the weekend.

Family members, tourists ... lovers. It was a popular spot for a romantic stroll.

At first, Chloe had found that strange. Who'd want to kiss among the dead? Make out behind a mausoleum? (Unless you were into that sort of thing. Turned on by thoughts of vampires, maybe. Rumours abounded of such goings on at night, on the far side of those high, spiked walls.)

But if you ignored the thought of the million bodies apparently buried there, viewed the cemetery as just another park – Paris's largest – it was a lovely, verdant place in which to lose yourself.

A city oasis with a maze of tree-lined pathways and thriving bird life.

She even saw the occasional fox as she cut through on her walk home.

Chloe blocked the image of loved-up couples wandering those paths before it could further embitter her, and turned back to the flower displays in front of the shop.

It had been a good day for rose sales – there were hardly any left. Those lovers again. Roses for the dead, roses for the living. And as always, white lilies had done well, the number-one bestseller of every funeral-friendly florist.

Aunt Daisy had struck floristry gold when she'd found premises opposite the entrance to Père Lachaise cemetery.

The constant stream of flower-buying visitors included the tomb tourists.

Many famous Parisians were buried there: writers, composers, artists, revolutionaries, and other movers and shakers who'd made the journey from the City of Light to the City of the Dead.

She picked up another bucket of sunflowers (popular with visitors to Oscar Wilde's grave) and one containing the few remaining red roses, and headed back inside.

Aunt Daisy had come out from behind the counter.

'Here, laissez-moi ,' she said, taking the buckets and putting them to one side.

She flipped the notice on the door to Fermé.

'I'll finish off.' She touched Chloe's arm.

Her tone had softened from exasperated to sympathetic.

'Look, sweetheart,' she said, 'I know today's been hard.

I do understand. Why don't you get off home.

Pop into the patisserie on your way, and ...



take some of these with you.’ She took two bunches of sunflowers from the bucket and put them on the worktop. ‘They’ll cheer you up a bit.’

Chloe pinched the bridge of her nose as tears gathered. This switch to sympathy was harder to handle than the earlier impatience.

Aunt Daisy slipped off the elastic bands from the sunflowers and began adding other flowers to make a small bouquet, deftly mixing and matching, holding different blooms together to compare, cutting the stems to suit the shape of the arrangement, adding in sprigs of greenery.

For a moment Chloe forgot her misery as she watched the bouquet take shape.

This, she reminded herself, was why she was here. Not just to escape Huddersfield and its painful memories, but also because of her love of plants, her dreams of being a landscape gardener, or perhaps owning her own florist one day.

Aunt Daisy had inspired her since childhood.

She wasn’t a ‘proper’ aunt; she was her mum’s oldest friend, and Chloe’s godmother.

She was a free spirit – as different to Chloe’s conventional, suburban mother as it was possible to be.

They were like a sunflower and ... maybe a neatly clipped privet hedge.

She smiled as Aunt Daisy cocked her head to one side, assessing her arrangement.

She was tiny – a pocket rocket. Her eyes were an unusual greeny-gold with dark flecks, like slices of golden kiwifruit, and her pink hair was held back from her rosy cheeks with a yellow headband.

As always, she was wearing her denim dungarees with a pouch on the front, in which nestled her little cutters, her fold-up floristry knife, scissors, spools of tape and wire – Aunt Daisy’s dungarees were the floristry equivalent of Mary Poppins’ carpet bag.

While Chloe’s mother’s reaction to last year’s disaster had mostly been embarrassment, and deep, frequently voiced annoyance at the inconvenience of it all, Aunt Daisy had swooped in and offered her heartbroken goddaughter a job in Paris.

And, as if by magic, she’d also found her a tiny fifth-floor apartment in the 11<sup>th</sup> Arrondissement, just across the cemetery from the flower shop.

Its owner, a regular client of Aunt Daisy’s, was heading to the US for a while, and had been looking to sublet to someone who would also care for the cat. Le chat . Patapouf .

‘ Voilà ,’ announced Aunt Daisy, tying an orange ribbon around her exuberant creation. The colour palette was eye-watering, but somehow she’d made it work. Beautifully.

‘ Pour vous, ma chérie ,’ she said, handing over the bouquet.

‘I remember how it feels to have your heart broken.’ Her own eyes glinted with sudden tears, and she turned away.

‘Me too. But tomorrow is a new day. Forgive me, je plonge into cliché.’ She faced Chloe again.

‘Off you go, my pet. Au revoir , see you lundi .’

Choked, Chloe could only nod. She wondered who’d broken Aunt Daisy’s heart. She’d known nothing about that until now.

She sniffed. ‘Thank you. You’re so kind.’ She gave her a watery smile. ‘ Très gentil .’

‘Be off with you. Allez! ’

Chloe hooked her little backpack over her shoulder and, clutching the bouquet, headed out the door. Aunt Daisy followed, and set about taking in the rest of the flowers.

‘ Je t’aime, Tante Daisy! ’ called Chloe, turning briefly as she headed across the road. Aunt Daisy blew her a kiss.

The heady scent of the flowers formed a fragrant cloud around Chloe, as if trying to displace the bubble of misery in which she’d been suspended today.

The warm sun on her back lifted her mood a little more.

It was a balmy September evening, and although sunset wasn’t until around seven thirty, the cemetery would be closing at six.

That usually gave her just enough time to walk from one side to the other on her way home, but today she could take it more slowly.

As she passed through the gates, most visitors were coming in the opposite direction. Nobody wanted to get locked in here overnight. She checked her phone: five fifteen.

She’s on her way. The girl with the sad eyes and dark hair in a messy ponytail. Plain blue shirt, jumper tied round her waist, jeans, trainers, and a bunch of sunflowers. You’ll need to slow her down by a few minutes. Got that?

Get Tangled with the Wrong Guy here !