



# The Player

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Frankie Bishop had only been married for a few months when he became a widower, leaving him with a mountain of debts, a business on the edge of ruin, and a parrot called Hank Marvin.

Three years later, the business is finally thriving, and Frankie finds himself ready to look for love again. It comes as a complete surprise to discover that he's developed feelings for Con — his late husband's best friend and now Frankie's business partner.

Why did he overlook the gorgeous man whos been by his side through everything? Even more importantly, how can he tell Con about his feelings when Con seems to have suddenly found love with another man?

The Player is a novella that first appeared in a promotional giveaway. A new epilogue has been added to it.

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# Page 1

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chapter

one

A summer breeze wakes me. It drifts through my window, rattling the wooden hurricane shutters and bringing with it the soft, sweet smell of the jasmine growing up the wall outside and the sound of Olympic-level gossiping.

“Well, I said to him, ‘Mr Waters, you should feel free to do what you want in your own garden, but I must inform you that I will be reporting the matter to the committee, and you will display those turnips at the village show over my dead body.’”

“Oh, Lucy,” her friend sighs, and I groan and pull the duvet over my head. Living in a Cotswold village might be a dream to many with its chocolate-box appearance and pretty houses, but it’s fucking hell on wheels if you hate people knowing your business. And no one knows as much as Lucy Scrimshaw. She lives two doors down from me, and her reach is immense.

After a few minutes, I venture out of the covers, but they’re still going strong.

“I tell you, I don’t care what she says. Molly Saunders has definitely had breast augmentation. They’re like two cantaloupes topped with cough sweets and always jiggling away under that angora jumper she wears. She should be ashamed. It’s tighter than a straitjacket .”

I give up and slide out of bed, making my way to the bathroom and starting the

shower. Fastening my shoulder-length hair in a bun, I step under the cool spray and sigh in relief. It's been one of those rare British summers where the hot weather has lasted beyond one solitary Saturday in May. It's September now, and the heatwave shows no sign of dissipating. The nearby fields are bleached, and the flowers in the village are a riot of colour.

Usually, I rush in and out of the shower, trying to get it done as quickly as possible so I can get on with my busy schedule. Today, however, I soap myself with languid movements, and I'm astonished when my cock stirs. I look down at it.

"What woke you up?" I whisper and snort at my stupidity. I suppose it's healthy to talk to the thing that's made most of my significant decisions since I was sixteen, but it's been in hibernation for such a long time, and it's almost painful to feel the old, sweet desire rush through my body and thrum under my skin.

I fill my palm with shower gel and fist my cock, feeling it in my slippery hand—the hard core and soft skin. It takes an embarrassingly few strokes before I grunt and come over the tiles. I wash the come away, feeling dizzy and almost as if I've woken up from hibernation myself.

"I used to have more stamina," I say to the room, and it seems to echo through the empty house.

The satisfaction lingers inside me, making me feel loose and limber as I dress in black pinstripe trousers and a black T-shirt and scrape my hair back in a topknot. Pulling some shoes on, I wander downstairs and into the kitchen.

This is my favourite room in my tiny cottage. It's an extension that the previous owner put on the back of the house. The estate agent was rather apologetic over the fact that it had made the garden smaller, but that was a massive relief to me as I'm as likely to embrace gardening as Monty Don is to wear leather chaps and a pink

cowboy hat. I've worn both in the past, and I smile at the memory.

The previous owner left two walls as exposed brick and opened the room up to the sandblasted rafters. Apart from that, it was an empty shell when I moved in. I installed a mixture of sage and cream painted cabinets and a pine worksurface and painted the remaining walls a light sage. I finished off with a breakfast bar and cream-coloured bar chairs, and the whole effect is one of light and warmth.

I make myself some toast and smear it with a liberal coating of lavender honey and then eat it leaning against the counter as I watch the news on the TV, enjoying the breeze coming through the kitchen window. Toast eaten, I pour some green tea into my travel cup, and, grabbing my keys, I make my way towards the front door. The picture in the silver frame on the bookcase stops me in my tracks.

I step closer and run a finger down the handsome face of my late husband in the frame. "Morning," I say softly. "I know somewhere you're laughing your fucking head off at me watching the news and drinking green tea." I lean closer. "I even do yoga now, David," I whisper. "That would make you laugh." I kiss my finger and press it to his lips, where they're curved in a smile that will never grow old and weary. "Have a good day." I move away and then pause. "Something is different," I say. "What is it?"

I realise with a sense of shock that the anger, grief, and then melancholy feelings that have been my companions for three years have gone. I examine myself as tentatively as if poking a wound, but there's no need for caution. I feel hollow inside but also as if I've woken refreshed after a very long sleep.

I stare at David's photo. "Well, what do you know," I say softly.

My phone beeps its reminder that I've got a meeting in an hour, and I clear my head of the strange thoughts I'm having today and grab my keys.

Letting myself out, I groan as the two women on the pavement stop their character assassination of yet another poor villager and turn with welcoming smiles to me. I falter slightly under the power of their gaze.

“Good morning, Frankie,” Lucy says brightly. She’s in her forties, with dark hair and a long nose that exists to stick into other people’s business. “How are you this morning?”

“Oh, very good,” I say, locking the door and trying not to engage in eye contact too much. Once that’s done, it’s all over. She’ll move in and embark on a quest for answers from me that would put Jeremy Paxman to shame. “Hope you ladies are well.”

Unlike the people you’re talking about , I add silently.

“We’re good,” Lucy says before her friend can get a word in. “Enjoying the weather. It’s going to make the village open garden weekend a huge hit.”

Shit! The open fucking weekend.

“Oh yes,” I mutter, edging past them on the pavement. “It should be lovely for you.”

“And for you too, Frankie,” she says sweetly. “After all, I’m sure I have your name on my list as someone who is going to participate.”

I stop dead, which I know is a mistake as soon as I do it. “You do?”

She nods. “Oh yes. I’m sure I spoke to you about it.”

“You mentioned it,” I say, hovering awkwardly. “You said it raised money for the village and then went on about people’s obligations who live in a village blessed by

tourism.”

“Oh, I’m sure I didn’t go on ,” she says, a steely note in her voice.

“No, no,” I say hurriedly. “That would never happen,” I add and then give a nervous-sounding laugh.

She waves her hand graciously as if to forgive my insult, but I know she’s got a memory longer than a fucking elephant, so I’ll suffer for it at some point. However, that’s a concern for future Frankie as my more immediate problem rears its head.

“So, when you say you have my name down on your list, you mean as someone you want to talk to about the event?” I say cautiously.

“Oh no. I have your name down as a participant . Your house was always such a popular stop-off point when Mr Finchley had it. The hollyhocks are a thing of beauty.”

I gulp because I’ve got a feeling those were the purple flowers I mowed down when I fell in them one night after a few too many glasses of wine.

She sighs tragically. “Such a shame that Mr. Finchley retired to live with his daughter.”

I have a feeling that he’d have happily retired to live with Vlad the Impaler if it got him away from Lucy.

“I’m afraid I might be busy,” I start to say and then sigh when her eyebrows rise queryingly. They look like startled caterpillars on her forehead. “But I’ll make sure I’m here,” I say, sighing. “My garden is your garden, Mrs Scrimshaw.”

She smiles triumphantly. “It’s Lucy , Frankie. I’ve told you so many times. Wonderful. You’re such a welcome addition to the village, young man. Now, if only we could get Conrad to do the open weekend.”

That’s about as likely as Chris Hemsworth begging me for a date, but I just nod and move a few paces away.

“Yes,” I throw over my shoulder. “He’s away so much, though,” I offer vaguely, unwilling to throw my best friend to the wolves.

“Well, he’s back now,” she says, and I stop dead, feeling energy run through my body.

“He’s back,” I gasp, and she smiles knowingly at me. A smile that tells me I’m going to be the subject of gossip as soon as I’ve gone. I examine her and her friend’s faces. Maybe before I’m even out of earshot.

“Oh yes. Philippa and I passed his house earlier, and the gates were open.”

“That’s definitely a sign,” I say, trying for a hearty voice. “Like Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory gates.”

She blinks. “Is Conrad thinking of branching into confectionary, then?”

I bite my lip. “No, he’s still making guitars. Well, I must be off,” I say quickly before she can say anything else. “I’ve got a meeting in ten minutes. Lovely to speak to both of you.”

I make it three steps down the pavement before her voice reaches me. “I’ll be around tomorrow to inspect the garden, Frankie.”

“I’m sure you will,” I say under my breath. I wave my hand. “I’m looking forward to it like a tooth extraction.”

“Pardon?”

“I said I hope I won’t be a distraction. Your work is so important, Mrs Scrimshaw.”

I move away, picking up my speed before she can speak again.

Even though I’ve lived in the village for a few years, the beauty of it still surprises me. The long high street is filled with a seemingly never-ending stretch of honey-coloured cottages. Lead windows sparkle in the sunlight, and although the architectural details of the cottages may vary, they still mingle in harmonious design helped by the ubiquitous heather-green paint on windows and doors. Everything looks pristine and content this morning. A relic from a long-ago time in England’s history.

I wander along the road, enjoying the tranquil early morning atmosphere before the tourists disembark from their cars, clutching cameras and ready for a day of peering into people’s windows with no sense of shame. They’re so different from the hikers who tend to emerge from their cars with a sense of steely purpose, unconcerned by everything apart from the Cotswold Way that starts outside the village.

I dodge around an old couple who are coming out of the Co-op. Even that looks like it’s a building in a BBC drama. It’s very easy to imagine a group of Jane Austen heroines giggling and wandering along the high street, ready to buy ribbons rather than the bottle of wine and packet of Hobnobs that are my usual purchase.

The old lady tuts at me for daring to be in her way. Her husband is wearing a pair of the salmon-pink chinos that most of the old men seem to wear around here. It’s as if when they got their house deeds, they were also issued with a pair of pink trousers

and told very sternly to wear them at all times.

Finally, I turn the corner, walking down the side street and seeing the familiar bulk of the building that houses our business. I smile involuntarily at the sight of it. It's two converted barns joined together by a glass walkway. A big sign sways in the breeze. On it is the silhouette of a guitar and the word Bridges .

Over the years, that word has meant more work than I've ever done before, a fair amount of heartache and worry, but most of all, a place in the world that is half mine and a business that had got me out of bed when I thought the world had ended. Mine and Conrad's business.

At the thought of him, I look at the little gravelled car park to the side of the building, but his old red truck isn't there—just my secretary Joan's little Polo gleaming blue in the early morning sunshine.

I let myself into the foyer, inhaling the ever-present scent of wood shavings and linseed oil. It seems to permeate the building, giving it a warm feel echoed by the whitewashed walls and sandblasted beams. Mandy, our receptionist, doesn't start until nine, so her desk is neat and empty. Not that she manages to do a huge amount of work when she's actually here. Her morning begins with gossip, and then the day really gets into gear with a little online shopping and posting on social media. Sometimes she even answers the phone.

I hear the sound of chinking cutlery and follow the scent of fresh coffee to the tiny kitchen at the back, where I find Joan waiting for the coffee to finish, her mug outstretched in her hand like she's begging for alms.

She's been my secretary for about four years now, and she's a sweet-faced lady with a grey-streaked bob and a kind smile. However, she's got the personality of a sabretoothed tiger if she hasn't had her first coffee, so I maintain a wary distance until she

pours the dark liquid into her mug, doctors it with milk and enough sugar to make jam set, and takes her first sip.

Then I step forwards. “Morning, Joan,” I say, smiling at her. “Busy morning.”

I put my travel cup down on the work surface and then become aware that she hasn’t answered me. I turn to find her gaping at me. “Alright?” I ask cautiously.

“You’re wearing red shoes,” she finally says.

I stare at her. “Is that a problem? Is there some sort of Cotswoldian law that says I can’t wear red on a Wednesday? For god’s sake, don’t tell Lucy Scrimshaw. She’s on the warpath already today over Molly Saunders’s new breasts.”

She seems to come out of her trance and gazes into her mug as if searching for the meaning of life. Then she looks up. “You haven’t worn any colour for three years, Frankie.”

I blink and then look down at my red suede brogues. I hadn’t even thought of that when I got up this morning. I’d just grabbed the shoes because they were a nice summery pop of colour.

“I didn’t think of that. I just woke up this morning and?—”

I stop, and she cocks her head to one side. “And what?”

I shrug. “I just woke up this morning.”

She gives me a brilliant smile. “Well, that’s just wonderful,” she says softly. Then she raises an eyebrow. “Do they not make trousers that come down to the ankles now?”

I look down at my outfit. “No. My ankles are my best feature.”

“Isn’t it usually someone’s bum?”

I wink at her. “Joan, I’m quite shocked. You’re obviously far more risqué than I ever imagined. Doesn’t a glimpse of ankles incite lust and depravity? I hope so. That was my main reason for wearing them.”

She rolls her eyes. “That was in the Victorian era. A time that you patently aren’t suited to.” She sighs. “You young people think you invented fun. In my day, we just had it rather than talk about it all the time.”

I laugh, and there’s a flurry of movement, a bright flash of colour, and then Hank Marvin lands on the counter, making her jerk and nearly spill her coffee. I should mention that this is Hank Marvin, the parrot, and not the country and western singer.

“Naughty Hank,” Joan says chidingly, but he gives his familiar little chirruping noise and sidles along the bench towards her, preening and cooing. Joan tickles his head, and he rubs against her fingers.

“He shot Alan three times. Stabbed to death with a carving knife,” he intones. “He lived for another five minutes.”

“Oh my god,” I say. “Joan. He’s been watching your true crime programmes again.”

“Oh dear,” she says. “He does like that documentary so much. He gets all excited every time I put it on. Hank, you mustn’t keep saying things like that. It upsets the customers.”

“Yes, like the couple buying a guitar for their ten-year-old last week. That was absolutely epic. It took me half an hour to calm the mother and daughter down after

Hank regaled them with the charming story of the chainsaw serial killer. He wouldn't shut up."

"It's just that he's so quiet I often don't realise he's in the room," she says apologetically. "That was such an interesting programme, Frankie."

"Interesting or disturbing? I'm amazed that you can sleep at night watching those programmes."

"I sleep like a baby," she scoffs.

"Why can't you be addicted to The Archers like most of the people around here?"

"I'd rather pickle my vagina in Sarson's vinegar."

I blink. "Oh, me too," I say fervently. "We definitely can't have that."

I look at the parrot, who is nibbling affectionately on Joan's ear. We got Hank Marvin when my husband accepted him from a rock star in lieu of payment for three guitars. David loved the bird and taught him to imitate an ice cream van, which has been less useful than you'd think and invariably makes small children cry. Conrad and I had been less enthusiastic because we'd needed that payment for the monthly wages.

Typically for him, David had no idea how to take care of a parrot. Luckily, Hank Marvin and Joan had fallen in love, and he now lives with her, travelling to work on her shoulder and occasionally scandalising the villagers by shouting "fuck off." Another thing taught by my husband.

I wander into my office, which is at the side of the building looking down on the little car park and into the pretty gardens of a row of cottages. They remind me of Lucy,

but I push the horrible thought away. Fiddle de dee , I think with strong overtones of Gone with the Wind . I bet Scarlett wouldn't have been half as resilient if she'd lived in this village.

Joan follows me in and passes me my diary. "You've got the Armstrongs this morning, and then I've pencilled you in for a meeting with Mr Fitch's people this afternoon."

"Jimmy Fitch the pop star?" She nods, and I whistle. "I wasn't aware he could walk and talk at the same time, let alone play the guitar."

She chuckles. "He can't play at all. Apparently, he's going on tour, and he wants them to be the same colour as the set and his outfit. Then he'll just hold them while he mimes."

I shake my head. "Con's going to love that."

Con was my husband's best friend. They were both born here and were founding members of a very successful pop-folk band. They came home when the band split up and started making custom-made guitars. Well, Con makes the guitars as David couldn't operate a toaster properly. The instruments are things of beauty. Con was a highly talented musician, but he's an even better craftsman, having a perfect ear. My husband was much better suited to sales and that only because he had the gift of the gab. Unfortunately, he was fucking awful with numbers, so when I came on the horizon, he swiftly left that side of the job to me and happily jaunted off all over the country, staying in posh hotels to sell the image and leaving me here.

It was lucky that I'd discovered an aptitude for figures because I inherited the Herculean task of getting the business finances back in the black after David's extravagances.

I think of Jimmy Fitch, the non-singing pop star, and smile. “He’s worth a bloody fortune.”

Joan nods. “And very happy to pay our prices.”

“Even better.” I pause to think. “Let’s keep Con as far away from the initial process as is humanly possible. I don’t think he’s that in favour of creating a musical work of art that matches someone’s trousers.”

She laughs. “When is he back? Has he sorted out Gene’s guitars?”

Con has been away travelling with an old mate of his who’s a famous rock star. Gene doesn’t trust anyone else with his guitars apart from Con, so he’s been gone for a month, and I’ve missed him more than I can say. It’s the first time we’ve been separated since David died, and it’s felt like I’m missing an important limb.

At the thought of the man who has become the best friend I have in the world, I feel my mouth ticking up. “He’s home, according to Lucy Scrimshaw.”

“Well, she’d know,” Joan says sourly. “I bet her perimeter alarms went off the minute he rolled back into the village.” She studies me. “You look happy to have him back.”

“Of course I am. He’s my best friend.”

“Oh, okay,” she says with a note of disbelief in her voice. Joan has always harboured romantic notions about Con and me that our years of friendship have done nothing to dispel.

I hear the sound of a car engine and then the crunch of gravel and whip over to the window.

“He’s here,” I say, looking down as Con’s truck pulls up in a flurry of gravel.

Joan comes next to me, and we both peer out as Con exits his truck. He’s tall, being easily six foot four with golden-brown hair that’s cut short with a quiff. He has the perfect level of stubble to be sexy rather than slovenly, and his eyes are the warmest brown I’ve ever seen. The same brown as a bar of Galaxy chocolate.

I feel my heart pick up speed, galloping away in my chest. The silly organ has been malfunctioning around Con lately. It picks up speed, and my palms get sweaty whenever he stands close, and I’m endeavouring to ignore the implications of that.

I watch him, enjoying the freedom to stare. He’s dressed in his usual faded Levi’s that do wonderful things for his arse, a grey T-shirt, and battered work boots. My eyes skip across his muscled frame, and I lick my lips. Then my eyes narrow as Con’s passenger door opens and a young red-headed man steps out. He stretches idly, showing a slim body, and reaches up to kiss Con.

I don’t know why, but I expect Con to put him to one side and laugh. However, he doesn’t do that. Instead, he kisses him back. It’s a brief, light kiss, but they’re both smiling when they separate.

Joan and I take a simultaneous gasp of shocked air as if we’re synchronising for the Olympic swimming team. Then we stay frozen at the window as the two men make their way to the front door.

I bite my lip, feeling my stomach dip and twist as if I’m going to throw up. Maybe I’m coming down with something. Hopefully, it will come on very soon and I can go home. I suddenly have a desperate need to be curled up in my bed with the covers over my head.

“Well,” Joan finally says disapprovingly. “Who was that with Con? I’ve never seen

him before.”

I swallow hard. “I don’t know,” I finally say. “But I think Con has intimate knowledge of his tonsils.”

“Stabbed through the heart with a pencil,” Hank Marvin says mournfully.

“You can say that again,” Joan mutters.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:01 am*

chapter

two

The sound of the front door slamming jerks me and Joan back to life as if we've been electrified. For a second, we look wide-eyed at each other, and then Joan pats my arm.

"I'll go," she says.

I shake my head and then pin a big smile on my face. "No need. It's just Con." There's a long pause, and I add briskly, "And his guest. It'll be very nice to meet him."

Joan rolls her eyes. "If you say so."

"I do," I jerk out and stop to take a breath. "I do," I say in a more moderate tone. "I'll go and see what's happening, and will you make them a coffee or something?"

She nods and walks off, muttering something that sounds very much like "arsenic" under her breath. I hope I misheard. With Joan's knowledge of crimes and that sweet face of hers, she'd make an extremely successful serial killer.

I wipe my palms on my trousers and walk towards the foyer. I can hear the sound of murmured voices and then Con's husky laugh, and I stop dead in my tracks. I don't want to meet this new man who Con kisses, I think furiously. I don't want to talk to someone who makes him laugh like that. Then I shake my head. "Don't be silly,

Frankie,” I mutter. “It’s just Con.”

I take a deep, steadying breath and pull open the door. Con and the redhead are standing close together by Mandy’s desk. She must have come in while Joan and I were talking, and now she’s putting her bag away and smiling at the two men. As I step into the room, the redhead says something, and Mandy laughs loudly. It rankles a little, which is ridiculous. But she’s our receptionist: mine and Con’s. Not his.

Con smiles at the two of them and then must catch my movement because his head turns towards me. His familiar, easy smile drops away when he sees me, and an odd expression crosses his face. I’ve seen it a lot lately, but it usually vanishes so quickly that I haven’t been able to catalogue it. It seems to combine sadness mixed with a bit of anger, and it makes my already uneasy stomach turn over when it’s directed at me.

I don’t know what I’ve done to Con. I’ve spent hours trying to work out what is wrong, but I can’t pinpoint it. One minute, he was my best friend, the person I spoke to most in the world, the one who’s got me through the last three years. And then the next, he was cross with me. I can’t ask him, though. I’ve tried to talk over the last few months, but he shuts me down each time and instantly becomes the old easygoing Con again. And I’m so relieved to see that version that I immediately forget everything. Until the next time it happens.

As if on cue, Con’s expression smooths out, and he gives me the wide smile that I’d first seen when David brought me home.

I met my husband at a concert. He was older than me and very handsome with black hair and bright blue eyes. He spotted me at the bar, and we spent the entire concert talking. I’d been immensely flattered that he’d noticed me at all. After all, I was scrawny, a quirky dresser, and had a very sharp tongue that one ex had said made me shrewish. So, not automatically a draw to most gay men. However, David had treated me as if I was the most fascinating and funny man he’d ever met.

I went home with him that night, and I never left. We didn't get out of bed for a few weeks, and a month later, we were married—the result of another impulsive gesture from David. He proposed in bed and wouldn't hear any of the arguments I put forward about getting to know each other outside bed first.

At the time, I saw it as him being head over heels in love and not wanting anything to stand in his way of keeping me. It would be a while before I realised that it was just the latest feckless gesture from a charismatic charmer and that his stubborn determination was nothing more than someone who'd been spoilt his whole life and never heard the word “no.”

Straight after the wedding, he brought me to the village to meet his best friend. I remember walking into the old pub, feeling my hands shake with nervousness and seeing this tall, broad-shouldered man stand up. He was tattooed and off-puttingly trendy-looking in a way that suggested he wasn't even trying to be that. However, his smile was warm, and his brown eyes were kind, and I'd instantly felt at ease.

There's just something very warm and steady about Con—a sense that he's someone who will take care of you. And that's been proved over and over again in the years since we lost David. I've never deviated from my first impression of Con despite having to overhaul my image of my own husband drastically.

“Frankie?” Con's voice recalls me to the present. He's once again giving me that affable smile of his that, for some reason, irritates me today. It's like a prickling under my skin as if I've swallowed nettles.

“Con,” I say. There's an edge to my voice that I don't think has ever been there before when I talk to him and when his eyes widen, I make haste to smile at him. Then, I extend the smile to the redhead, who's watching us curiously. “And?”

Con jerks. “Oh, this is Tim.”

“Very nice to meet you,” I say, but he just shrugs.

“Yeah, same,” he says with a casualness that’s within a hairsbreadth of being rude.

He turns his back on me to speak to Mandy, and there’s an awkward silence. I blink, but Con sprints into the conversation to save the day like a scruffy superhero destroying all conversational problems.

“I wanted to show Tim the workshop.”

“Oh.” I search for something to say. Anything would do as he watches me with that funny stare again. I settle for banality. “I wasn’t expecting you back so soon.”

“It was time to come back. Gene played the last gig, and he’s off to Barbados. He seemed very happy.”

“That’ll last for the next five minutes,” I say waspishly. “He wouldn’t stay happy if he was married to Pamela Anderson and had Delia Smith catering his dinners.”

He laughs, and just for a second, I feel at ease again—that old familiar feeling like coming through the door of my cottage and kicking my shoes off.

Then Tim comes up next to him and wraps his arm around Con’s waist.

Tim smiles at me, but there’s nothing warm about this one. It’s cold and dismissive.

“So, you know Gene?”

“A little bit,” I say, wondering where the barely veiled antagonism is coming from.

“Do you?”

He nods. “I’m his dresser on tour.”

I wonder whether he gave him that ugly hat that makes the rocker look like Worzel Gummidge on a week-long bender, but I refrain from asking. However, I can't stop my quick look at Con to see if he's laughing silently along with me the way he usually does in company. My stomach twists when I find him watching Tim instead with the warmth in his eyes that's usually reserved for me.

Con's had many men drift through his life over the years, but he doesn't tend to hold on to them very tightly, and they never last. I wonder with a sick feeling whether Tim will be the exception. I've become used to it being just me and Con.

Con pats Tim on his shoulder, and it's strangely startling. I'm more used to seeing his hands move quickly over a guitar than a man, the long fingers tracing invisible patterns on the wood with his tattoos bright on his hands and the dull gleam of his dad's wedding ring on his thumb.

Tim clears his throat, and I flush as I realise that I'm just standing staring at them and that Con is looking back, a steady note of almost challenge in his eyes. It feels odd, like I'm looking at a stranger with my friend's face. As if he's been taken over by the pod people in those old films he loves to watch. Unfortunately, this awkward silence will not be broken by Con eating Tim's brains, so I hasten into speech.

"So, is that where the two of you met?"

Tim laughs and runs his finger over Con's hand. "It's where we met, but I've had my eye on him for ages. And this time, he looked back."

Con shoots him a funny look, and a too-long silence falls that I unfortunately decide to break. "Lovely," I say faintly with zero enthusiasm in my voice. I notice Mandy watching us as if we're in an episode of Emmerdale .

I have zero desire to be the subject of any more gossip in this village. I've never

managed to live down the time that I locked David out of the cottage after a particularly spectacular row, and he decided to post flowers through the letterbox while naked. People in the village still treat me as if I'm Liam Gallagher. I, therefore, step back, breaking the staring contest that Tim seems to be having with me.

"Well, I'll let you get on," I say brightly.

"That would be good," Tim says, and there's a steely tone in his voice that tells me he's not just talking about a workshop tour.

Luckily the moment is broken when there's a flash of feathers, and Hank Marvin lands on Con's shoulder. Tim shrieks and jumps back as Hank kneads Con's shoulder and begins to croon the opening bit of "The Lightning Tree" by The Settlers.

"What the fuck ?" Tim breathes.

"I know," I sigh. "Hank Marvin is deeply in love with Con and for some reason thinks this is their theme tune. I do wish he'd learn another song."

Con looks up at me, the old familiar laughter lighting his eyes and making my chest feel warm and light again. "What song would you choose, then?"

"I don't know," I say, putting one hand on my hip. "What about 'Birdhouse in your Soul'?"

Con's roar of laughter fills the room. He's always liked it when I'm sassy, but a quick look at Tim shows he's not quite as enamoured.

"How funny," he sniffs and manoeuvres himself back under Con's arm. "I suppose you're old enough to remember that tune."

Con stiffens. “Tim, that’s rude,” he chides, but I shake my head, staring steadily at Tim. We both have each other’s measure now.

“Not at all,” I say lightly. “I may be the wrong side of twenty, but I still have all my own teeth.” I show them to him in a bright, cold smile.

“You’re twenty-seven,” Con says. “Hardly ancient.”

“Yes, but that’s five hundred in gay years.”

Con chuckles, and irritation floods Tim’s face. Along with the pettiness, it makes him much less attractive, but unfortunately, Con can’t see that.

“Well, I suppose when you dress like that, it’s easy to make a mistake,” he says.

I look down at my outfit and then at his baggy trousers that are riding low, displaying the band of his Andrew Christian underwear. “Do you mean like an adult rather than Justin Bieber?” I say equally sweetly.

Con stirs. “Tim didn’t mean anything by that, Frankie. He’s a costume designer, so fashion is important to him.”

“Of course,” I say, looking Tim up and down. “A good fashion sense is a rare and beautiful thing.”

The silence is broken by Joan walking into the room holding two cups of coffee. Hank gives a trill of delight. “Thirty-two stab wounds,” he cries. “And a final hammer blow.”

“What the fuck?” Tim breathes.

“Here we go,” Joan says sweetly. “One coffee for you, Con.” Her smile dims as she turns to Tim. “And one for you,” she says in a chilly voice, proffering the chipped old mug that I’m sure I threw away last week.

“Not for me,” he says carelessly. “I only drink green tea. My body doesn’t do well with toxins.”

“Just your tongue, then, dear,” she says, her tone dripping with sweetness.

Con chokes on his coffee. “I think we’ll have a look at the workshop,” he says quickly. “And then we’ll get out of your hair.”

“Not working today?” I blurt out, and I’m aware of Tim’s smirk as Con turns to me.

“No, I’m going to show him over the house. He’s staying with me for a few days.”

“He’s staying with you?” I say in astonishment. Then I cough. “How lovely,” I say, swallowing hard. “A few days together.”

“I hope that’s not too long, dear,” Joan says as she takes Tim’s cup away. “When virtual strangers are stuck together for a protracted period of time, then extreme bouts of violence can occur. Just ask the couple who took a hammer to each other while on holiday in Abergavenny.”

“Forty whacks,” Hank intones and flutters to her shoulder as she sails out of the room.

There’s a long silence. “Lovely,” I finally say faintly. When I look up, I’m expecting Con to be angry. Instead, he’s staring after Joan with a face of barely concealed laughter. He looks back and catches my eye, and for a brief, precious second, we are in complete accord on the need to laugh.

Then the phone rings and breaks the moment. Tim stirs. “I’ll just nip to the loo,” he says. He shakes his head. “This is a weird place, Connie.”

I dig my nails into my palms as Con gives him directions. No one else calls him Connie apart from me. It’s always been something special between the two of us, and now this stranger is using it with a familiarity that says it’s not the first time. Did Con tell him to use it?

“You alright, Frankie?”

I jerk as I realise that Con is staring at me and that we’re alone. Well, alone apart from the parrot who just flew back in and our receptionist, who is managing to hold a conversation on the phone while itemising our every word, ready to disseminate it in the Red Lion later on.

“I’m fine,” I say. I look after Tim. “So, that’s a bit of a surprise. You bringing Tim home.”

“Why?”

The word is just sharp enough to make me blink, and I tense.

“No reason,” I say quickly. “He must have made an impression on you. Like an iron on a silk blouse,” I say under my breath.

“Pardon?”

“Nothing.”

“It didn’t sound like nothing.”

I go to move back in a huff, and he grabs my hand. It's a gentle grip, but it manages to stay me because a tingle shoots down my arm, and I stop still. I stare at him. This sniping is completely unlike our usual relationship, and it feels horrible.

"Con?" I say, and his face clears slowly. Like he's pushing clouds away with an effort. Then, finally, he straightens up and lets go of my hand.

"Never mind," he says, his words containing a snap that's alien to his customary lazy good nature.

There's a brief silence that I rack my brains to fill. Of course, I don't usually have to do it with Con as our conversation flows as naturally as the sun's path.

I finally think of something. "We've got a big contract with Jimmy Fitch up for grabs," I say, the words tumbling over themselves.

For a second, it looks like he's struggling to follow me, and then he sighs, and the tumultuous emotions I've briefly glimpsed disappear like steam from a kettle. "That's good." Then his brow wrinkles. "But he can't play the guitar."

I shrug. "I know, but he has got a lot of outfits to match the right ones."

"Fucking hell," he groans, and I grin at him, so relieved to have a bit of normality back that I'd turn cartwheels if it wouldn't ruin my hair.

"Oh yes, Con. Six guitars to match six lucky outfits."

"Is it to camouflage his distinct lack of any musical ability?"

"You may say it in that tone of voice, but our bank balance will certainly never agree with you."

He runs his fingers through his hair. It makes the strands stick up in a curiously endearing way. “Just for once, I’d like the ability to say no to a ridiculous job like this.”

“Well, unfortunately, David didn’t leave us that choice,” I remind him softly.

David had been away a lot before he died, and we were to find that his time away had primarily been taken up by running up huge debts. It’s taken us three years to break even again, and that’s with a lot of creative manoeuvring.

I grab his hand. “Soon,” I whisper. “We’ll get there eventually, and you’ll be able to wave away any attempts to make you craft Chanel guitars.”

He smiles wryly at me. “Promise?”

I become aware that I’m standing far too close to him and that he’s watching me with a wary look on his face. I step back flustered, and unfortunately, I collide with the bin. It’s only with a lot of flailing that I recover myself without falling on my arse, and of course, it’s in time for Tim to come back and witness it.

“Oh dear,” he smirks. “Someone needs dance lessons.”

“They’d be no good,” I say lightly, trying to ignore my red cheeks. “I’ve got about as much dancing ability as John Sergeant on Strictly Come Dancing .”

“It’s true,” Con laughs. “He’s hardly Anton du Beke.”

“I’d have been a terrible partner for him. He’d have lost that fixed smile of his very quickly.”

“Yes. You’re much too sharp.” It’s said almost too affectionately, and Tim frowns.

“So, are we going to see this workshop?” he says sharply.

Con looks at me. “Only if Frankie has finished with me?”

I’d like to start ,I think and then jerk. What the fuck?

“Of course,” I say and then pause. “Why are you back? You never said.”

“It’s your birthday tomorrow.”

I groan. “I’m ignoring it. Please, can you do the same?”

“No,” he says implacably. “I’m bloody sick of ignoring it.”

“We just have so much other stuff that we need to focus time and money on.”

“Did you not just say that we’ve got someone interested in me making six guitars? I’m sure that was you.”

“Well, yes, but?—”

“Great,” he interrupts. “So, we can focus on your birthday now. Wonderful.”

“Oh no,” I start to say, but with his usual immaculate timing, he exits the room, sweeping Tim after him and leaving with the last word.

I look over at Mandy, and she offers me a sympathetic smile. “It’s no good arguing with Con,” she informs me wisely. “He’s got a way of winning any arguments.”

I shake my head and walk into my office, closing the door with a snap. However, that layer of wood isn’t enough to stop me from hearing Tim’s husky laugh. I look down

at my hands that have tightened into fists.

What is happening here? I wonder. Why do I feel so antagonistic towards Tim?

“Beyond him being a bit of a wanker,” I say out loud and then sigh.

It can't be jealousy. There have been lots of men in Con's past. I've even met a couple of them, and beyond disapproving of them as not worthy of Con, I've never felt any anger towards them. In fact, I went the other way and tried to befriend them during their usual short duration as Con's boyfriend. Con was David's best friend, and he's now mine, and I've always wanted his happiness more than anything.

So, what's changed. Why am I so bothered at seeing him with Tim?

A knock comes on the door, thankfully stopping my thoughts from going round and round like a hamster on a wheel.

“Mr Fitch's people are here, Frankie,” Joan calls.

“Coming,” I shout. I straighten my T-shirt and try my best Tom Cruise impression. “Show me the money.” It doesn't work. Probably because the only thing we have in common is our height.

## Page 3

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chapter

three

It's early evening by the time I make my way home. I manoeuvre down the high street, dodging the inevitable tourists, some of whom move slower than Britain's economic growth. The sun is low, bathing everything with its golden glow. The village looks beautiful with the windows and paintwork of the cottages gleaming and flowers spilling in colourful abundance over the baskets dotted everywhere.

I look around in appreciation. I know that living here can sometimes be a nightmare when the tourist hordes descend, but I love everything about the place. I was born and brought up in London, and when David brought me here, it seemed like another world. However, I quickly grew to love the gossipy closeness of the residents, the way the village seemed to be given back to us in the winter when the snow came, and the sense of being known here.

I pull my keys from my pocket as I approach my front door. My home is an eighteenth-century terraced cottage built of Cotswold stone, and it's tiny.

Letting myself in, I throw my keys into the purple glass bowl on the side table. The lounge is shady and cool and scented by the pottery bowl of dried lavender on the coffee table. I look around in appreciation.

David bought the cottage on a whim when it came up for sale, and at first, he'd loved living in it with me and doing it up together. Then, like so much else in his life, it started to bore him. He grew tired of the decorating discussions, the villagers, and the

tourism, and being so far from the bright lights of London. It came as a huge surprise to him that I disagreed with him. I was young, and I'd previously gone along with him over everything. But I loved this place passionately from the first moment I set foot in it. It felt in my tiny cottage that I'd finally found my place, and I refused to travel with him all the time. I wanted to stay put for the first time in my life.

I suppose it would have cost me my marriage eventually because the cottage was just the visual representation of how different we were. I'm a homebody and love cooking and reading. David thought he'd found a wild boy when he met me at the concert, but that's far from who I really am. It's redundant to theorise anyway because, in the end, I went the same way as the cottage in boring him.

I shake my head and dismiss the thoughts, climbing the steep winding stairs to my bedroom. This is a low-beamed room at the back of the house that looks over the garden. The big sleigh bed takes up most of the room, but I wouldn't have it any other way. I'd splurged on an expensive mattress and the nicest bed linen, and now it's like sleeping on a cloud. I love lying in it covered by the soft duvet and reading my book.

A year after David died, I overhauled the cottage. I got rid of his decorating choices that centred around the colour navy and made my skin itch. Instead, everything is now decorated in warm, light colours and filled with well-stuffed furniture that welcomes weary bodies. There's rather a lot of fairy lights draped around pictures, but I'm the only one living here, so who cares?

After showering, I dress in a pair of old black shorts that hang from me and highlight my unfortunately skinny legs. I pair them with one of Con's old Leeds University T-shirts that I pinched years ago and pad downstairs barefoot. I made a frittata yesterday, and there's enough for supper tonight.

I wander into the kitchen and pull out the food, only to pause and stare at it. For the

first time, it occurs to me that maybe there's something sad in having frittata leftovers. Isn't it a dish best served fresh with a partner who'll eat all of it and never leave leftovers? I wonder what Con and Tim are doing and quickly push the thought away, but my appetite has gone, and I shove the food back in the fridge.

I pour myself a glass of wine instead and open the kitchen door to walk out into the garden. This is the one area I haven't done anything to. I know bugger all about gardening, so it's a bit of a wilderness that Mr Fitzroy, one of my neighbours, tuts in disapproval about.

"Lucy Scrimshaw is going to go fucking batshit crazy," I say out loud, startling a pigeon who takes off with a heavy flutter of wings.

The doorbell rings, and my heart picks up speed. Is it Con? I race for the door, stubbing my toe in the process. I'm still swearing when I open it and find the devil on my doorstep. Or Lucy Scrimshaw, chairwoman of the village committee if you want to be more precise.

"Lucy," I say and then gape as she steps neatly past me and into the house. "Oh, do come in," I say, but it's lost on her as she walks through the lounge.

"You've done such a lovely job with the house," she says admiringly before walking into the kitchen. "And this is wonderful, Frankie. I don't mind admitting I was a bit concerned when David brought you home."

"I beg your pardon?"

She waves a careless hand. "I'm not being rude."

"Really?" I'd like to say I said that out loud, but she scares me, so I whisper it, and she continues undeterred.

“Yes, you’re such a flamboyant dresser. I thought you’d be painting the cottage purple. But you’ve proved to be a real asset to the village, and you certainly cheered Con up after the death of his parents and David.” She pauses, obviously realising that she’s crossed a line a few miles back. “Sorry,” she says. “Sore subject.”

“Not at all,” I say coolly. “Did you want something?”

She rolls her eyes. “Silly me. I’ve got a head like a one-day-old chick.” And the hide of a crocodile, I think as she continues. “I wanted to see the garden.”

“Oh, I don’t think that’s necessary,” I say quickly, trying to step in front of her, but it’s too late, and she steps outside, and an appalled silence promptly falls.

“Oh, my goodness,” she breathes.

“Yes, I know it’s a bit wild.”

“A bit ? It’s like a set from Jumanji .”

That startles a laugh out of me, and I suddenly realise this might be my salvation. “It’s terrible ,” I say mournfully. “I don’t think I’ll be able to do the open garden thing, Lucy. I’d just let everyone down.” I look at the garden. “And possibly lose some of the tourists in the shrubbery.”

“Hopefully, it’s the same ones who I just found looking through my kitchen window,” a voice comes from behind us.

We both jump and spin around to find Con leaning against the doorjamb. He’s wearing khaki shorts and a Wedding Present T-shirt, and his hair is wet, showing the stark beauty of his tanned face.

“Con,” I gasp, folding my arms quickly over my T-shirt so he can’t spot it. “What are you doing here?”

“Visiting you,” he says. “You left your door open.”

“Yes, Lucy visited,” I say, leaving it vague in the hope he gets what happened and that the open door is so she doesn’t delay her departure. The twitch of his mouth shows he does.

“Hello, Con,” Lucy says, fluttering her eyelashes so hard I’m sure the breeze stirs the honeysuckle behind her. She pats his arm flirtatiously. “Goodness, you’re all muscles.”

“And occasional sarcasm,” I add.

Con laughs and then smiles at Lucy, who melts as usual. “I heard the words ‘open garden.’ Is it that time already, Lucy?”

“It does seem to come around with alarming regularity,” I say. I try to sidle past him in the hope of dashing upstairs and changing my shirt, but he puts out a foot and stops my progress. I glare at him, but he just gives me a lazy smile.

Lucy chuckles. “And are you still set on not taking part, Con?”

He winks. “Of course. The last time my garden was sorted out, it was the year we won the World Cup.”

“Well, of course, if that’s the way you feel, I completely understand.”

“Hang on. How come he gets away with saying no once, and you accept it?” I forget myself and say indignantly. “Meanwhile, I’ve said no in every possible connotation,

and yet you're still here inspecting my garden for the committee."

"Oh, Frankie," she says in a reproving voice. "You always say no, but you don't mean it."

"It's got him in such a lot of trouble in the past," Con says smoothly, and I shoot him a glare.

Lucy steps onto the lawn gingerly as if she thinks it's going to suck her under. "It's this weekend, Frankie. What on earth are you going to do?"

"Shut and lock the doors and windows," I offer, but Con speaks over me.

"I'll help him. We'll soon get it knocked into shape."

"You'll do what?" I gasp, and he looks at me.

"I've got to go to the garden centre anyway, so we might as well pick up some plants too. It won't take that long."

"Oh really? Are you putting hanging baskets in the middle of the thicket formerly known as your front lawn? Better watch it. That's the first step towards being bitten by the gardening bug," I say sweetly.

He grins. "How would you know? The last thing that bit you was that Chihuahua."

"Mr Sparkles is vicious. I wish people could see past the sequinned coat and painted toenails. I'm afraid Mrs Thomas is harbouring a tiny canine thug in her handbag."

We break off, realising that Lucy is watching us, her head cocked to one side like a nosy parrot.

“Yes?” I say, and she smiles.

“I just think it’s lovely how the two of you are friends. You know the new lady at number ten?”

“She’s lived here for five years,” I point out.

She waves a dismissive hand. “She thought you two were an item. Can you imagine?”

She gives a trill of laughter, but her eyes are avid, looking between the two of us. Con shifts position, and she jumps. “Time for me to go,” she cries. “My husband will be wondering where I am.”

She moves into the kitchen without a backward glance. “I bet Mr Scrimshaw is making a break for freedom even as we speak,” I mutter.

We trail after her, and Con leans in. “I think I recognise that shirt,” he whispers, his eyes twinkling.

“Oh really?” I say airily. “I’m sure there are a lot of them about. The university shop must be full of them.”

“I never knew that you went to Leeds University too. I’m amazed I never met you.”

“You’re far too old to have met me,” I say sourly, and he gives a disgusting snort of amusement.

“It’s really astonishing, though, Frankie. Yours has even got the same tear in the hem that mine had.” He puts his hands to his face in mock astonishment. “What an amazing coincidence.”

I open my mouth to give him both barrels, but Lucy saves him as she stops at the door. “I’ll stop by after the summer hop and inspect your work, Frankie,” she says cheerfully. Well, as cheerful as a sergeant major can get.

The door shuts behind her, and I sigh. “Like she’s my fucking headmistress, and I haven’t done my homework.” Con laughs, and I turn to him, suddenly feeling awkward after the events of this morning.

“Where’s Tim?”

He shrugs. “Having a shower and then looking for takeaway options.”

“Well, you should be with him,” I say awkwardly. “I can do this myself.”

He examines my face, and I realise how close we’re standing in my lounge. The evening shadows play over his face, and I catch the woody scent of his cologne.

“I want to help,” he says, that stubborn edge to his voice.

“Well, at least it will make David’s mother happy. She made one of her royal visits yesterday and said how disappointed David would be with the garden.”

“The only use David had for a garden was somewhere to drink beer. Is she still sour with you?”

“The word ‘still’ implies there was a time in the mythical past when she wasn’t sour.”

He shakes his head. “I just wish she’d make a fucking effort to get to know you. She’d love you so much if she did.”

He stops and goes bright red, and I stare at him. “You alright?”

“Yes, fine. Why?” he snaps.

I raise my hands in surrender. “No reason. I suppose I console myself with the thought that if David had brought Brad Pitt home, she’d have still found fault. He’d have been too handsome, and the kids would definitely have been a stumbling block.”

He laughs, his eyes creased in humour, and I look at him standing in my lounge, so big and wonderful. “Garden centre, then? Seeing as you’re determined to reinvent yourself as Monty Don.”

“Hardly, and that’s going to be very evident when Lucy comes to inspect.”

“Oh, fuck her. I’ll do as I’m told, but she’ll have to put up with the garden as she finds it. Maybe she’ll fall into the buddleia and stop calling on me.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re rather passive-aggressive?”

“I really wish the aggressive side would come soon with Lucy. She just signed me up for a stand at the Christmas fair.”

I shake my head at his laughter.

An hour later, we stand in the huge garden centre outside Stow-on-the-Wold. It’s warm from the sun on the glass, and the air is heavily scented.

“So, what do you need?” he asks, leaning on his trolley as if he’s got all the time in the world.

I grimace. “Some big shrubs that I can throw myself into when Lucy comes a-calling.” He chuckles, and I smile at him. He’s incredibly dear to me and looks so warm and rumped. I tear my eyes away and look around. “Let’s get very established

shrubs and bushes. Then I can forget all about them until this time next year.”

“Okay.” He starts to wheel the trolley away, and I grab it. He looks at me enquiringly.

“Let’s make them scented. If I’m doing this for the village, the least I should get out of it is something nice to smell.”

“You and your addiction to nice smells,” he says, steering us down one of the aisles. Plants crowd over us like a green wall. “That’s one of the things I love most about your house. It always smells gorgeous. Like one of your candles.”

“You could have that in your own house,” I say pointedly. “You just have to put in some walls and doors first.” I pause. “And buy some furniture.”

He rolls his eyes. “I’ll get round to it eventually.”

I shoot him a soft look. Con lives in his parents’ old house that he inherited when they died. It was in a state of disrepair as they’d been doing it up, and although Con carries on the work, he does it in such a slow fashion that snails must envy him. It’s a way for him to keep them with him, the same way that he wears his father’s wedding ring.

“You are right, though,” I say. “I do love nice things. It’s silly, I know.”

He stops dead. “Why is that silly?”

I shrug. “Well, David always used to take the piss. Said I was a terrible homebody.”

“What’s terrible about liking your home?” He shakes his head. “It’s a sad fact that if he’d liked his home a bit more, he’d probably still be with us.”

I stare at him, imagining that scenario. But the truth is that I wouldn't be comfortable living with David now. If I ever really was. I've grown far beyond the boy he knew.

"You alright?" Con asks, and I look at him, standing tall and golden amongst the flowers, the tattoos on his arms as familiar to me as a loved painting.

I'm comfortable with you , I think wistfully.

"Fine," I say. "Let's pick some plants that Lucy will fucking hate."

He chuckles, and we spend the next hour wandering the garden centre companionably.

It's getting dark by the time he pulls up outside my house. I release my seat belt and look at him as a thought occurs to me. "You never got your plants, Con."

He looks startled. "What plants?"

"The ones you were going to the garden centre to get."

"Oh, those plants." He rubs the back of his neck. "Well, it's probably for the best. The weather will turn soon."

"And what has been your excuse for all the other years?"

He grins at me. "I don't have green fingers."

"I don't think you'll have a hand left if you attempt to tackle the blackberry bushes around the back of your house. I'm pretty sure Princess Aurora is there and still waiting for her prince's kiss."

His eyes sparkle. “Oh, yes, and where is he?”

“He made one attempt and then gave up. He’s currently in witness protection to save him from Lucy Scrimshaw.”

He laughs out loud, and I jerk as he reaches out and brushes a loose strand of my hair back. “Con?” I ask.

The silence seems to spin out into a moment that thrums with sudden energy.

“Frankie, I need to tell you that?—”

We both jump as there’s a bang on the bonnet of his truck. When I look, I see a tall, good-looking man with shaggy dark hair grinning at us.

I lean out of the window and glare at my neighbour. “Can we help you, Max?”

“I thought I’d interrupt,” he says in his usual lazy drawl. “Courting couples die in hot cars, you know.”

Con scrubs his hand through his hair, glaring at Max, and I shake my head. “I’m pretty sure it’s dogs that do that, and I don’t think Con and I qualify as either canines or a courting couple.”

“You sure about that?” Max asks. He’s staring at Con, but when I turn, I can’t see why as Con is just watching Max with a smile now tugging at his full lips.

“Anyway,” Max continues. “I thought I’d see if you want to come for a drink?”

“Well, I will,” I say. “I’m not sure Con will be able to. He’s got a man at home waiting for him.”

“Oh, yes? I think I met him coming out of your drive, Con,” Max says. “He was muttering something about rose bushes and trouser fabric. He got in a taxi and drove off.” He looks at Con with his eyebrow raised. “I’d say you’ve got time for a drink, son.”

Con rolls his eyes and turns off the engine. “Just one,” he says warningly to Max.

Max holds his hand to his chest. “I’m sure I don’t know why you’re directing that remark at me.”

“I do,” I say brightly, happiness running through me at the thought of more time with Con. “It’s because last time we went to the pub with you, Con did Knock and Run on Lucy Scrimshaw’s door.”

“Shit!” Con gasps, looking around frantically as Max laughs. “Don’t say that so fucking loudly, Frankie.”

I snort. “Pah! She’s not here.”

“She has spies everywhere.”

“Where were they when you banged on her door shouting that you were there to liberate Mr Scrimshaw and nothing was going to stop you this time.”

“There was no one around, and I was very glad of the fact.”

We climb out of the truck and fall into step beside Max.

I sneak a look at him. He’s been my neighbour for a few years now and is in direct contrast to Mr Fitzroy on the other side. Max is a retired war journalist and very famous. He’s equally determined not to be treated as such. He has a blithe, lazy air

that completely covers up a razor-sharp mind.

“How’s Mrs Finch?” I ask, thinking of his dour housekeeper.

He shudders. “Don’t mention her name. She’s like Beetlejuice.”

“What have you done now?”

We come to the pub, and he holds the door open for us. “Nothing too dreadful. I spilt a tin of paint last night when I got back from the pub and then stood in it. It’s not my fault I didn’t realise and tracked it through the house.”

I laugh. “What did she say?”

“She said if I ever did it again, she would use the leftover paint to draw around my brutally murdered body to save the police the job.”

Con shakes his head. “One drink,” he insists again. “We’ve got gardening to do.”

“ You’ve got gardening to do? You and Frankie?” Con nods, and Max roars with laughter. “That’s brilliant,” he chuckles. “One of you has flowers that would give triffids cause for concern, and the other has a garden that was last attended to when Charles the First was on the throne.”

“One drink,” Con insists.

Two hours later, he sets his pint glass down on the table with the care that only the truly pissed can manage. The table is crowded with empties. “I think my night has gone slightly off the rails,” he observes, giving a hiccup.

Max leans forwards, trying to put his elbow on the table. It slips, and he narrowly

avoids knocking himself out. Con and I prop him up, and he smiles his thanks before lifting his glass to his mouth.

“I saw David’s mother today,” he tells me.

I drain my wine and set the glass on the table. “Was she dancing in a circle and invoking my name?”

He laughs. “No. I opened the door of the bank to her. It appears she doesn’t like politeness because she glared at me like I’d farted in church.”

“She actually doesn’t like much of anything, but I’m definitely top of the list.”

“Surely she doesn’t hate you that much.”

“Oh, she does,” I say, and Con nods and then puts a hand to his head.

“Ouch,” he says plaintively. “How can I have a hangover when I haven’t even finished drinking yet?”

“It’s one of the seven wonders of the world,” Max says.

I flap my T-shirt, trying to get some air on my body. “Why is it so fucking hot?” I complain.

Max returns to his subject. “Why does she not like you, Frankie? You’re brilliant.”

“He is,” Con says loudly, grabbing me and hugging me. He’s hot and sweaty, and I want to climb him like a monkey, so I quickly disentangle myself.

“She blames me for David’s death,” I say, trying to pour some more wine and

pouting when I discover that the bottle is empty.

“Frankie,” Con gasps. “What the fuck ?”

“Why?” Max asks. I can see why he was a journalist because he’s incurably nosy.

“Because if I hadn’t thrown him out of the house, he wouldn’t have been on the road at that time when a drunk driver hit him.”

Con gapes at me, and then anger clouds his face. “Is that true? She actually said that?” I nod. “That is absolute and utter bollocks,” he says.

I grab his pint glass and take a swig and then grimace. “I hate beer,” I say plaintively. “Where’s the other bottle of wine? There were two a while ago.”

“You drank both bottles,” Max slurs. “Why did you throw him out?”

“Max ,” Con warns.

I pat his arm. “It’s fine, Con. It was a long time ago, and I’m well over it.” I turn back to Max. “He was having an affair. I found out and threw him out.”

“And you were right to do so,” Con insists loyally. “Stupid sod. I still can’t believe he was such a twat. He had you at home. Why the fuck would he look elsewhere? Why would anyone look elsewhere?”

His voice is impassioned, and I stare at him. Then I shake my head. “You should never have taken my side over that. It flabbergasted David.”

“I’d take your side over and over again, Frankie. Every single time.”

I smile at him. "I would stick up for you too," I say expansively and then poke my face. "My cheeks are numb," I say sadly. Max leans over and prods my face. "Ouch!" I say.

"Not that numb," he says, settling back as Con slaps his hand away. "Would you have got back together with David?" he asks.

I study him, my mind slow with drink. "No," I finally say. "Once he'd done that to me, I could never trust him again." I hold up my finger. "But I'm pretty sure I'd have forgiven him in the end."

"Really?" Con asks, and I smile.

"Yeah. It was really fucking hard to stay mad at David. He was like a small child. His mum never said no to him, and he expected life to follow suit. He wanted life to be fun and a laugh a minute and was so happy in pursuit of it. His apology would have been absolutely spectacular if he'd only had the chance."

Con snorts. "Like the time he bought you that statue of Eros to apologise after you'd had a row. He put it in the lounge and then forgot and went to the pub."

I groan. "I thought it was a fucking intruder. I hit it so hard with my Waterstones bag that I took its head clean off. David was not happy. However, it really reassured me about how I'd cope with a burglar."

Con starts to laugh, and Max leans his head on his hand, staring at me in fascination. "You don't seem mad about the affair?"

"Max, I am amazed that no one ever murdered you while you were a journalist," Con observes, and I laugh.

“I’m not mad. Oh, I was mad and hurt at the time, but a part of me always knew that David wasn’t going to be my stopping place.”

“You’ve never said that before,” Con says, putting his glass down and staring at me as if I’ve suddenly become a stranger.

I shrug. “He wasn’t, and you know it, and so did he. He wanted variety. I didn’t fit into that, and I didn’t want to. We’d have split if he hadn’t died.” I lean forwards. “But we’d still have ended up friends. Maybe we should have stuck at that rather than marrying. We’d have been better off.”

“He loved you,” Con says solemnly.

“And I loved him, but it wasn’t a forever thing. I’ll always remember him as a wild part of my life. A man of a moment in my life rather than the whole thing. But he brought me here, and this is home.”

“I’ll always be grateful for that,” Con says in a low voice.

“And I’ve made a decision,” I say, waving my hands as if I’m conducting an orchestra.

“What’s that?” Max asks lazily.

“I’ve decided that it’s time for me to date.”

There’s a muffled curse from Con and the sound of a smash as his glass falls to the flagstone floor. “Sorry,” he says immediately as some of the locals give a muffled cheer and the landlord calls to him to kick the glass under his chair. Con immediately turns to me. “What did you say?”

“About what?” I say blankly. I have to think for a second as my mind is rather hazy. “Oh, I said it’s time for me to date.” I consider my words and nod for good measure. “I need to get my life back on track, Con. I did mourn David probably more as a friend than a husband, but I grieved either way. And for the last three years, I haven’t had time for men anyway because of the money problems. But they’re almost sorted now, and I know David would tell me to get on with it. I think it’s time to get back to being me again.”

I look anxiously at him to find him watching me, his brown eyes bleary. “I cannot believe your fucking timing,” he says slowly. Max laughs, but I don’t know what he finds so funny.

“Oh my god, you don’t approve, Con,” I gasp. “You think I should wear black and retire from public view and still put his clothes out every day.”

“I think that was Queen Victoria,” Max offers helpfully, but I ignore him.

“Con?” I say and gulp when he takes my hand. His eyes are glowing.

“I think it’s the best fucking thing you’ve ever said, Frankie.”

I cock my head. “Are you sure because I’ve said some fairly stupendous things in the past.”

“I’m sure,” he says, and the finality of it makes me stop my flood of words. “Frankie, I—” He stops and runs his hands through his hair. Max is leaning forwards so far that he’s going to be in his pint glass soon.

“What?” I ask, biting my lip. Con opens his mouth to say something, but the light catches on his watch, and I jerk. “Shit, what about Tim?”

“Who?” Con asks blankly, and Max snorts.

I shake my head. “Your boyfriend, Con.”

“My what ?” he says. “Tim’s not?—”

“So here you are,” a voice snaps from behind us. We all spin to find Tim glaring at us with his hands on his hips. “I’ve been looking everywhere in this bloody village for you,” he says shrilly.

“You should have started with the pubs,” Max advises him, and I snort.

Tim’s nostrils flare. “Are you ready?” he says to Con.

“Ready for what?” he asks.

“To go home,” Tim snaps. “Where you’ve left me on my own all night.”

“Max said you’d gone off in a taxi,” Con says in a puzzled voice.

“I haven’t been anywhere.”

As one, we all turn to look at Max. “Oops,” he says cheerfully. “My fault. Now I come to think of it, it was Mrs Simpkins getting in the taxi. What a silly goose I am.”

He shrugs, but it sets his balance off, and he lists to the side. I put my hand out to steady him, and he gives me a bleary smile of thanks.

Tim inhales sharply. “Well, it’s time to go. Con?”

He holds out his hand for Con, and for a very long, uncomfortable few seconds, Con

just stares at him. Then he looks at me and shrugs. “It isn’t the night to say things,” he says rather enigmatically. “Night,” he says, giving us a huge drunken smile.

We mumble goodnights and watch them walk out of the pub. It’s noticeable that they don’t hold hands or touch in any way.

“Hmm,” Max finally says as he gets up, and we walk out too. Con’s and Tim’s figures are already shadows in the distance.

“What does that mean?” I ask, taking out my keys as we come to my house. “Don’t you like Con’s man?”

“I like him very much, but that’s not what you mean.”

I blink in confusion. “What?”

“I mean that I’m looking at Con’s man right now.”

It takes me a few seconds, and then I get what he’s saying. I roll my eyes. “Don’t be ridiculous. He goes for the pretty, arty types who like intense conversations about art and music. I’m the wine-drinking slob who has intense conversations about The Only Way is Essex. I’m about as close to being Con’s type as Bernard Cribbins.”

“Well, I’m not denying that Bernard is very attractive, but even he couldn’t get Con to take his eyes off you.”

I open my door, bracing myself on the doorjamb when everything tilts. “Shit,” I gasp. “We’re having an earthquake.”

“I’ll save you,” he says fervently, and I laugh.

“Thank you, my drunken knight in armour.”

“Con wants you, Frankie,” he says, suddenly serious. “He’s always wanted you. I needed to get the two of you together tonight.” He gives a petulant shrug. “It’s a lot harder to matchmake than it looks in the films.”

“So, let me get this straight. Your version of matchmaking was to talk about my dead husband’s infidelity?”

He bites his lip. “It seemed like a good idea at the time.” He gives me a wink and then forgets to open his eye fully again, so he’s now squinting. “But at least he now knows you’re looking to date again. You’re welcome .”

“And you’re drunk.”

“Yes, and probably will be again tomorrow, but it doesn’t stop me seeing what’s in front of me.”

“Con thinks of me as a friend.”

“Bollocks.”

“Oh really?” I judge that the ground has stopped moving and I can let go of the door. “I’m not sure about taking advice from someone who is still desperately in love with his ex and does nothing about it.”

“A fact that I think I regret telling you about.” He bops me on the nose, which sends his balance further off, and I watch as he staggers back a few steps. He does a sort of drunken pirouette and then falls face first into the huge flower basket that’s been set in front of the lamppost by my door.

“Shit,” he mutters.

I reach down and pat his head. “You alright down there, Max?”

“Spiffing.”

“Do you want the good news or the bad?”

“I think I’d like the good first,” he mutters into the flowers.

“The good news is that the flowers’ life span was coming to an end anyway.”

“What’s the bad news?” he slurs, sitting up with a lonely scarlet begonia stuck to his forehead.

“That basket is Lucy Scrimshaw’s entry for the Cotswolds in Bloom contest.” I give him an affectionate slap on the back and stagger off to bed.

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chapter

four

I rush up to the front door at work and let myself into the reception area.

“Sorry I’m running late,” I call, turning to shut the door behind me. Unfortunately, it doesn’t close, and I fiddle with the catch while still talking. “I was trying to do something with the plants that Lucy Scrimshaw demanded. And by that, I mean I stood in the garden drinking tea and staring at them. I even tutted a few times.”

I turn around and come to a dead stop. The reception area is deserted, and now that I notice it, the whole building has a hushed quality.

“Hello,” I say, taking off my sunglasses and wincing a little at the light. “Where is everyone?”

I walk behind reception and poke my head into the kitchen—nobody. My office and Joan’s office are the same. “Weird,” I say out loud. “Is it a bank holiday that nobody informed me about? Or has the world been taken over by zombies? Bagsy, they eat Lucy Scrimshaw first.”

I place the box from the bakery in the village on the kitchen work surface. “I’ve brought cakes,” I call. “As per the office rule that I had nothing to do with drafting. How is it fair that the person with the birthday has to buy cake for other people? Especially as I am suffering with a hangover that no mere mortal man should have to deal with.”

No one answers, and I make my way down the long glass corridor that links the reception and offices to the second barn at the back and Con's huge workshop. Grabbing the big metal door, I slide it back on its runners and stop dead as an explosion of colourful confetti blinds me, and everyone who I now see is hiding in here breaks into a loud chorus of happy birthday.

I wince at the noise and then stand stock-still in shock, my hand held to my heart as if I'm a debutante about to faint. "What the fuck?" I breathe.

Hank Marvin gives a displeased squark and comes to rest on my shoulder. "She was a good-time girl who met a terrible end," he mutters.

"As will whoever has done this," I say as the chorus comes to a stop. I look around at everyone clustered in the workshop and open my mouth to mention that I don't celebrate birthdays and haven't done it for ages, and then something strange happens to my face. I smile widely instead.

"Oh my god," I say, laughing as another boom sounds and confetti drifts over me in a sparkling cloud. "This is going to be fucking awful to get out." I wave my hand. "But that is definitely not the birthday boy's problem."

Joan laughs, and my gaze tracks everyone who is clustered in the room. Joan is standing holding a huge carrot cake with candles blazing. Next to her is Evan, Con's apprentice, and on his left is George, who works with Con, and Mandy. My smile widens as I see Con standing to one side wearing a jaunty party hat with a pink party blower hanging from his mouth. The smile dims slightly as I see Tim next to him, clinging to his arm as if he fears an imminent earthquake.

Con steps forwards, removing the blower from his mouth. "Did I hear right? Birthday boy? What happened to the man who hates birthdays and won't celebrate them?"

I smile at him. “I had a bit of an epiphany this morning, and I realised that I am too damn fabulous not to celebrate that.”

He laughs before drawing me into a tight hug. “I’m glad,” he whispers into my ear. “You’re definitely right about the fabulous bit. And it’s about time.”

I inhale and hug him back, loving the feel of his arms and the familiar scent of his cologne.

“Are you feeling as terrible as me?” he mutters, and I laugh.

“I feel fucking appalling, but I’m sure that birthday boys should rise above such things.”

He laughs, and I almost make a sound of disappointment as he pulls back so everyone else can hug me. But luckily, I stop myself and then become aware that he’s staring at me.

“What?” I ask, putting my hand to my hair. “Is something wrong with my face?”

He shakes his head. “You’re wearing colour again.”

I look down at my outfit of red checked skinny trousers, white T-shirt, and red braces and feel myself flush. “I think it’s time,” I say. “Time to move on.”

A funny expression crosses his face. “You said that last night. Why now when I just?—?”

His words break off as Joan comes over to hug me, and I look over her shoulder at him.

“What were you going to say, Con?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he says, his usual smile pinned to his face.

The last one to offer birthday felicitations is Tim, who thankfully doesn’t hug me. I think we’re both glad of that fact. Instead, he offers me a lukewarm pat on the shoulder. “Happy birthday,” he says in a tone of voice that suggests he hopes I die horribly. He looks around him. “Not exactly a place I’d select for a party,” he sniffs.

I shake my head. “Well then, you’d be wrong,” I say softly. “This is the best room in the building.”

It’s a huge room that takes up most of the barn. It’s open to the rafters and full of rather ferocious-looking machinery and worktables. Guitars hang from slots on the wall in various stages of creation. There’s an air of happy industry about this room that’s palpable.

Everyone clusters around me as Joan brings over the cake. “Blow,” she says.

I bite my lip. “It’s a bit early in the morning, Joan.”

She rolls her eyes. “Thank you so much for your restraint,” she says tartly.

I lean forwards and pause. “Thank you so much for using this huge number of candles,” I mutter.

“Well, you’re getting on a bit, dear. We’ll need a fire extinguisher next year. And I’ll need help carrying the cake, or I’ll put my back out.”

“Such a witch,” I say admiringly and blow out the candles. Everyone cheers, and Con shouts, “Make a wish.”

I look at his sweet face framed through the smoke drifting from the candles. I wish for you , I think fervently, and everything screeches to a halt in my head. Where the hell did that come from?

His smile drops away slowly, and he straightens up, and I flush, breaking the connection by standing up in a panic.

“Ooh, what did you wish for?” Joan asks.

“Oh, no wrinkles until I’m fifty,” I say flippantly.

“Too late,” Tim mutters.

Joan watches me, her wise eyes sharp and knowing. “I hope it comes true,” she says, and I know she isn’t referring to wrinkle cream.

I blink, and she bustles away, saying she’ll cut the cake while Evan grabs my arm and drags me over to a table where a pile of colourfully wrapped presents is waiting. “All yours,” he says cheerfully. “Lots of presents and cake for breakfast. Brilliant .”

I smile at the young apprentice, still reeling from the lightning realisation that I want Con. “You’ve got that right.”

Everyone clusters around me as I open them. I end up with some bottles of wine and lots of chocolate, which indicates that my workmates have an alarming knowledge of my eating habits. Joan’s present is a box of Thornton’s rum truffles that I have an addiction to and some leg tanning cream. “Why?” I ask.

She looks pointedly at my ankles. “Because you persist in wearing trousers that don’t go down to the ground and have limbs that are paler than a pint of milk.”

“What a truly splendid present,” I cry, and we grin at each other.

The second to last present is from Evan—a red bow tie that spins around with alarmingly sharp edges. I look over at him. “That’ll be very useful when I run away to the circus,” I say as he laughs.

The last present is a big parcel set on the floor with Con’s name on the label. I open it slowly and gasp. It’s a huge wooden wine cabinet, the wood gleaming in the light. Carved around the slots for bottles are vine leaves, and along the top is carved, “The rose-coloured glasses of life.”

I trace my fingers along the words. “That’s F. Scott Fitzgerald, isn’t it?” I say, looking straight at Con. He’s leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, and his eyes are intent on me.

He shrugs. “Very roughly paraphrased.”

“I can’t believe you made this for me, Con.”

He smiles, and it’s warm and soft and just for me. “It’s for all the champagne you’re going to drink for the rest of your life.”

“Will I be celebrating for all that time?”

“I hope so,” he says steadily. “It’s the least that should happen to you.” I swallow hard, and he smiles. “Do you like it?”

“I don’t like it. I love it,” I say quietly, still staring at him.

For a second, it’s like we’re in a little bubble dappled with the wood dust that floats in the air and scented with linseed oil. Then it’s broken as Joan bustles in carrying

plates of cake. I straighten up, running my finger along the carving. Con is saying something to Mandy that makes her laugh, but I can't help noticing that his breathing has picked up.

Joan comes up next to me and hands me a plate with a huge piece of cake on it. She nods at the cabinet. "He worked for weeks on that."

"It's beautiful," I say quietly. "I'd know his work in the dark."

"Well, there's a reason for that."

"Pardon?"

She shrugs. "More cake to hand out. Can't talk."

I stare after her departing figure but turn as George comes up next to me.

He's a big handsome man with silver-grey hair and a slightly stooped posture from bending over workbenches all his life. He's an immensely talented carpenter who's been with us from the beginning, and Con adores him, saying he couldn't do without him.

"Happy birthday, lad," he says, clapping me on the back and nearly slamming me into next week.

"Thank you," I gasp.

He nods at the cabinet. "Do you like it?"

"It's beautiful. It'll look wonderful in my kitchen."

“I’m glad. The lad’s been fretting and worrying over it for ages. It had to be perfect.”

I smile. “Con doesn’t fret over things. He’s the most chilled person around.”

“Ah well, it’s you,” he says casually. “You’re Con’s exception.”

“I am?” I say, startled, my heart pounding. “What do you mean?”

However, I’ve lost his attention. Joan has come back into the room handing out more plates of cake, and as usual, George’s attention is entirely on her.

I shake my head. “Why don’t you ask her out, George?”

He looks back at me. “Two reasons, really, Frankie. One, I’m not thirteen, which I think is the last time I asked anyone out.” I laugh as he says the latter in a disgusted voice.

“What do you old ’uns do, then, George?”

“We court,” he says. “Which brings me to the second reason. What if she says no?”

I smile at him. “I think you’re missing the point.” He looks at me. “What if she says yes?”

“Well, lad, that’s even more terrifying.”

I watch Joan approach Con and Tim with their cake and groan when she offers Tim the chipped plate that we feed Hank Marvin on. On it is the thinnest slice of cake I’ve ever seen. You could feed it through a paper shredder.

“Only a supermodel would be happy with that slice,” I whisper, and George shakes

his head.

“She’s a terrifying woman. Brains and courage. It’s an unbeatable combination.”

“Is it?”

“You should know.”

“Why?”

He smiles at me. “Well, you’re the same. Sharp and clever.”

“Thank you, but in the gay world, that doesn’t rank quite as highly as a tight bum and a nice haircut.”

He blinks. “Maybe you should look for someone who appreciates it, then.”

“Easier said than done, George. I am twenty-eight now. That’s approaching dinosaur age in the kingdom of the gay.”

“Maybe you should look closer to home.”

He nods over at Con, and I blanch. “Oh no, George,” I stammer. “You’ve got the wrong idea.”

He chuckles. “I think I’ve probably got the right one, Frankie.” He claps me on the shoulder again. “Isn’t it lovely getting advice?” he says serenely and walks away.

“Oh, you think you’re so clever,” I call, and he laughs again, wandering over to Joan, whose face immediately lights up when she sees him.

“Say no, my arse,” I whisper.

I look over at Con. It’s an instinctive gesture. Wherever I am, I’ve looked for Con since the day I first met him. He calms me and makes me happy. I frown as Mandy moves, and I see him and Tim. They don’t look happy. Tim is glaring and hissing something at Con while Con rubs the back of his neck, looking uncomfortable. Tim says something else that makes Con frown and say something back that makes Tim flush an unbecoming red.

“Trouble in paradise,” Joan says, wandering over to me and handing me a cup of tea.

I jump. “Oh, I don’t know,” I say.

“I do.”

“You look far too happy about it.”

“I am,” she says cheerily.

“You don’t like him?”

“I don’t like what he’s standing between, Frankie.”

I shake my head. “No,” I say firmly. “We are not doing that. Con is a good friend of mine. I’m the widower of his best friend, and he wouldn’t look twice at me.” I pause. “Not to mention that I only see him as a friend,” I conclude heartily.

“Okay,” she says, giving me a suspiciously meek nod of her head. I narrow my eyes at her, and she brightens. “Oh, they’re definitely arguing now.”

“He hit them with an iron. Boom,” Hank Marvin says gloomily from his perch on a

chair, where he's eyeing the cake.

I'm in the kitchen that evening, hanging on my fridge door and once again contemplating the meaning of life when a knock comes at the door.

I look up nervously. If it's Lucy Scrimshaw, I don't think my nerves will take another inspection. It's how I imagine the army to be if a five-foot-seven martinet ran it.

I creep closer to the window and try to peer through the shutters.

"It's no use. I can see you," comes a voice, and I instantly relax.

"What are you doing here?" I say, swinging the door open.

Con is leaning against the wall outside dressed in his customary jeans and an old striped shirt that has a rip in the side that offers an intriguing glance of his corded abdomen. I wipe my suddenly damp palms on my shorts.

With a rush, all the feelings from earlier come rushing back, and I find myself itemising the veins on his big hands, the broadness of his shoulders, the narrow hips, and the fresh scent of his cologne.

How did I miss you? I wonder. The thought is quickly followed by Oh god, what am I going to do?

His hair is wet, and I wonder with a sharp pang whether he and Tim have had a shag and they've showered together afterwards. I dimly remember doing the same back in my dating days, which currently seem like a millennium ago. My stomach twists and dives in a now-familiar motion.

He straightens up. "I've come to do the garden."

“Oh, there’s no need,” I say nervously.

He raises one eyebrow. “Are you doing it yourself, then?”

I bite my lip. “Probably not,” I admit. “I was just thinking of emigrating to Antarctica instead.”

“It’s probably better. Not so many tourists,” he says, glaring at two women who are currently looking through my window without a shred of shame.

“Come in,” I say, holding the door open.

He bends to pick up something.

“Ooh, what have you got?” I ask, craning to see what it is. “Is it more cake and presents? Oh,” I add disappointedly. “A spade.”

He moves past me into the house, smirking as he goes. His body is big and warm as he passes me. “You seem very well adjusted to celebrating your birthday for someone who’s ignored it for the last few years.”

“You know me. I’m easily adjustable.”

He rolls his eyes. “You’re about as adjustable as an old saucepan.”

“Lovely,” I say sourly.

I follow him through the kitchen as he stops and eyes the open fridge. “Air conditioning would probably be cheaper, Frankie.”

“You’re so funny you should have your own show.” I pause. “On Channel Five.”

“Ouch.” He walks out into the garden and whistles. “Christ, I’d forgotten how wild it is.”

“It’s not that bad.”

He looks beadily over at me. “I’d hate to see your definition of very bad, then.” He shakes his head. “Fucking hell. You could lose a person in that lilac bush. Has anyone seen Lucy lately?”

“If she’s stuck in that bush, we’re never chopping it down.” I look around as he laughs. “I’m just not a gardener. My only interest in the garden is as somewhere that I can drink my wine.”

He crouches down to grab one of the plants. “Show me where you want this.”

I’m distracted by the bulging of his biceps and the sheen of sweat on his golden skin. He’s so hot. I must have been blind all these years. I become aware that I’m staring when he clears his throat.

My eyes dart up to him to find him gazing at me. His eyes are dark and his expression very focused. “You okay there, Frankie?” he says, and there’s a roughness to his voice that makes me shudder.

I swallow hard. “Yes,” I say. “I’m fine,” I babble. “Absolutely fine .” He crouches down to move another plant, and I watch the muscles in his thick thighs move. “Utterly fine,” I say again. “Wait. What are you doing?”

He pauses. “Taking my shirt off.”

“ Why ?” I’m sure there’s something in the animal kingdom that is higher sounding than me, but I’m pushed to think of anything at the moment. I eye him open-mouthed

as he slowly removes his shirt, and I send my eyes greedily down his torso. If sculptors could see him now, they'd fight to carve his figure. He's beautiful with broad shoulders and a muscled torso that narrows down. His sleeves of tattoos are a bright splash of colour on his golden skin and his jeans are loose and hanging from his hips, showing off the V of his pelvis. I tried hard to achieve that V when I was in my teens but had to admit defeat when I realised you didn't get it through eating chips.

I narrow my eyes. "Are you ... are you flexing?" I squeak, and he starts to laugh.

"I'm just giving you a show."

I draw in a breath which is no good because now I can smell his light sweat. "Well, rein it in a bit, Captain Chippendale. You've got gardening to do," I finally say hoarsely.

He eyes me for a very long second, the silence stretching between us, and then he nods. "You're the boss."

And although he sounds normal and we garden in perfect harmony, laughing and joking as usual, I can't help feeling this extra current from him. It feels almost like satisfaction.

Finally, he puts his spade down. "I think we're done," he says, wiping his hand over his forehead and smearing dirt over it in the process. It's criminal how attractive he is, even with a fucking dirty face.

I wipe my sweaty hands on my shorts. "Ugh!" I say. "I'm filthy."

He laughs. "I must say in all these years, I've never seen you this messy."

“And you never will again. You’d better put a reminder in your phone to come and prune my bushes regularly.”

“Is that a euphemism?”

I shake my head. “No, it’s an instruction because we both know I will never pick up a pair of shears again.”

I watch as he puts his spade into my shed. “Aren’t you taking that with you?”

“Nope. It’s more useful here.”

“I’ll say. Your garden is like the Amazonian rainforest. I’m sure we’ll find some new species in there if we look hard.”

He shrugs. “The difference between us is that I haven’t got Lucy Scrimshaw on my back.”

“Yes, and why is that?”

He taps me on the nose. “Because you, Frankie, are too nice.”

“I am not,” I say crossly.

“Oh yes. So, who was it who shopped for Mrs Tatler when she broke her ankle or listened to her collection of James Herbert audiobooks so she’d have someone to talk to about the plots?”

I slump. “Please don’t tell anyone.” I grimace. “Those audiobooks were seriously scary. I had to sleep with the light on for weeks.”

“Maybe I will keep your secret. Maybe I won’t.”

“It’s just that Lucy reminds me of my grandmother, which means I can’t say no to her.”

“She’s only in her late forties. I’m not sure she’d be flattered by the comparison.” He nudges me. “Which means you must, of course, tell her.”

I smile. “No, it’s just her way of getting things done. She reminds me of Grandma Cath.”

He looks at me curiously. “You were brought up by her, weren’t you?”

I nod, bending to pick up the bucket. “Yes. I never knew my dad, and my mum got bored of having a rather fabulous five-year-old, so she buggered off too, which left my grandma.”

“That’s terrible,” he says softly.

I shake my head immediately. “Terrible would have been being left with my mother. She’d have forgotten me on the underground or something one day, and I’d have been condemned to roam around raiding the bins.”

“You would never raid a bin.”

“Not unless it was behind a designer outlet store.”

He laughs and then cocks his head to one side. “So, your grandma was good to you? I can’t believe we’ve never spoken about this before.”

“We’ve had other things to do. Minor things to talk about like how to pay the staff

and bills and stave off bankruptcy.”

“Not a problem now, so spill.”

“She was wonderful,” I say, her face in my memory for a second. “Very sharp and clever and didn’t take shit from anyone. When I was bullied, she sorted it out herself. This little old lady tore strips off these hulking twelve-year-olds. I think it’s safe to say they’re probably still shitting themselves, and they never spoke a word to me again.”

He smiles, and it’s far too tender for my pulse. “Like grandma, like grandson, then.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” I say lightly, shutting the lid on the garden waste bin. “I’m not as fierce as her. I wouldn’t have put up with David for so long if I was.”

“Love makes us put up with a lot, and you’re exactly like her. You’re fierce whenever someone you care about is threatened. I should know that. When David died, you could have waltzed back to London without a backward glance, taking the life insurance money and starting a new life. I would never have begrudged you that because of what he put you through.” He shrugs, staring intently down at one finger that’s tracing along a rose petal. “But you stayed,” he says, looking up, his eyes dark. “And you invested in the business, and you fought side by side with me to keep it. I’ll never forget that.”

I swallow hard and push my hands into my back pockets, regretting the move when it forces my hips forwards, and his gaze seems to cling, so it almost feels like I can feel his touch on my sharp hipbones.

“I’m sure you’ve blocked the dating lectures I’ve given you over the years,” I say, laughing nervously.

He stares at me for a long second. “Of course I did,” he finally says. “You weren’t telling me what I wanted to hear.”

“And what was that?”

But he doesn’t answer. Instead, he wanders into the kitchen, and I follow him, desperately trying to think of something to keep him here. I missed him while he was away, and I need more of his company. I’m coming to the awful conclusion that I’ve developed feelings for my husband’s best friend somewhere along the way. Feelings he’ll never return.

Oblivious to my turmoil, he stops and opens the fridge to peer nosily into it. “What’s this?” he asks prodding a container.

I peer past him. “It’s the remains of an old pasta dish I made a few days ago. I’m thinking of having it for tea.”

“Why? Have you been naughty?”

“Don’t be rude. I cook very well.”

“I know you do. You’re an amazing cook. It’s just that old pasta on your birthday is sad.” He stands up. “Come on. Get changed.”

I blink. “Why?”

“I’m taking you for dinner. You’re not eating that sh—” He pauses when he catches my eye. “That lovely pasta,” he finishes, and I suppress a smile. My heart is beating fast, and I feel anticipation run through my veins.

“Really?” I say breathlessly.

A slow smile spreads across his face, and it may be my imagination, but I'm sure he's standing closer to me. The air seems thick, and it's hard to breathe with the scent of him all around me.

"So, dinner, yes? Just me and you?" he says huskily.

I stare at him. He's so gorgeous. Full of life and vitality. A lovely, kind man. My thoughts stutter and stop with a sudden horrible jerk. And that's what he is doing now, I think with a sick realisation. He's being kind to his dead best friend's husband. Oh, I know I'm his friend too, but what on earth would he see in me? I'm sharp and thin and somewhat quirky-looking.

I'm well aware that my confidence has suffered from being with David and having him be unfaithful to me, but even in my best days when I was full of life, I would never have been able to compete with Tim. He's gorgeous.

At the thought of the man waiting at home for him, my heart sinks to my feet so fast I feel sick, and I know what I must say. "Oh—oh no, it's alright," I say faintly. "Let's not bother."

His eyes narrow. "What? Why do you sound like that? You were all for it twenty seconds ago."

I wave a dismissive hand. "You should go with Tim. I don't want to be in the way. Go and have a nice night with your lovely boyfriend. You need to pay attention to him."

He stares at me for a long second, his expression clouding, and then, without another word, he turns and leaves the house, shutting the door behind him with a final click.

I stand alone in my living room, my heartbeat pounding loud in my ears. "Shit," I say

softly. “Shit! Shit! Shit!”

## Page 5

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chapter

five

I put the phone down just as there's a gentle knock on the office door, and Joan pops her head around.

"All done?" she asks.

I nod and stretch my neck, which has developed a crick after being on the phone for an hour. "Accounts say they can't imagine why the payment wasn't made."

"Well, they would say that, wouldn't they," she says tartly.

"Anyway, they paid by bank transfer. Probably just to get me off the phone. I outstayed my welcome about twenty seconds into the call."

"Then they should pay on time." She wrinkles her nose. "Seeing as you're in the mood for putting out fires, there's one in the workshop that requires your attention."

"What? I hope it's not a literal one. My shoulders aren't equipped to carry all the firemen's gear."

"Well, luckily for your childlike shoulders, it's a symbolic fire. Con is shouting. A lot."

"What?" I say in amazement. "Con? Our Con is shouting?"

Her lip twitches. “So it would seem.”

“Why?”

“Well, dear, if I knew that, I could sort it out myself. But, as I don’t, the job falls on you.”

“Do I have to?” I say nervously. I haven’t seen him all morning, which is highly unusual. Usually, Con will pop in and have a coffee in my office before he starts work. It’s time I treasure because it’s just him and me sorting out our days and gossiping idly. Today, however, he didn’t come to see me, and I’ve got the distinct impression that he’s ignoring me. It’s suited me, though, because I’m rather nervous about seeing him, and obviously, I’m right to be if he’s in such a mood. I wonder if he’s still cross with me, and then I remember his argument with Tim at my birthday party.

I rub my bottom lip. “Maybe someone else could do it,” I say in a cowardly rush.

Joan shakes her head. “No, it’s just you. And you should pop through pretty sharpish before all the staff leave.”

“He can’t be that bad. It’s Con, for goodness’ sake.”

“Oh, so it must have been someone else who told Mandy that gossiping hadn’t become an Olympic sport.”

“He’s not wrong,” I mutter. “She spends that long on the phone talking to her mates I think she’s wearing the plastic off the receiver.”

“I’ll leave you with it,” she says in a voice of doom and exits the room.

I swivel in my chair and look down at the quiet car park. Was it only a few days ago that I'd been looking forward to seeing Con because he was my best friend and nothing else? Instead, it seems like years ago that he became something more to me—someone who makes my pulse race and my palms sweat.

I stand up. The more I think about it, the more my mind comes back to that argument at the party. Con's strange behaviour last night was probably because he'd carried on the argument with Tim when they got home.

I lean my head against the cold glass of the window. "I don't want to do this," I whisper. "I don't want to go in there and smooth his mood so he can make up with that wanker. I want them to split up so I can have my chance."

I still. But there's the rub. Or not, as the case may be. The painful realisation had come to me as I lay sleepless last night. Con will never be mine. He's never made a move on me, and he's had the years since David's death to do it, which rather points to his disinterest.

His type seems to be trendy musicians or pretty boys. I fit in neither category. However, the category I do sit in is as his best friend. That title means so much to me, as does Con, and I know I have to do the right thing, as painful as it may be. I have to walk in there and cheer him up and counsel him back towards Tim. He must feel something for him. He doesn't usually invite men to stay at his house.

It was his family home, and Con has guarded it like it's treasure since they died. It's very special to him. The fact that Tim is there speaks volumes to me, and it tells me to stop daydreaming before I end up ruining our friendship.

I straighten from the window. "Time to be his friend," I say grimly. "He's done so much for me. I can surely do this one thing for him." I sigh. "And then I can go home and eat chocolate and wonder why my timing with men is always so catastrophically

bad.” I leave my office in much the same way Charles I did on the morning of his execution. Although my dress sense is better than his.

As soon as I reach the corridor, I can hear Con’s raised voice, and I pick up the pace. Even so, I stick my head around the door cautiously.

He’s standing in the middle of the room, gesturing at a guitar. “It’s a piece of shit,” he proclaims. “I might as well go and work in a brothel for all the good I’m doing here. And while I’m at it, I’m going to live in one too. It’s got to be more fucking peaceful than around here. Phones ringing all the time, constant demands.” He stops abruptly when he sees me. He’s frowning heavily, an expression that’s completely alien to his usual easygoing self. When he sees me, his expression lightens for a second, but then the thunderclouds gather again.

“Goodness,” I say lightly. “That would be fine unless you ended up with someone like Lucy Scrimshaw as the madame. Then it would be all about lining up for inspection to see whose penis was the neatest.”

“What are you doing here, Frankie?” he says, turning back to his workbench. He looks at the guitar and kicks the bench in a disgusted fashion. He then immediately winces.

I eye George, who shakes his head with a smirk on his face.

I try a jaunty wink at Con. “Well, my day has really been missing a grumpy twat, so I thought I’d rush in to get my fix before you break your foot, Con.”

George chuckles, and Con sighs, scrubbing his hands through his hair. The brown-blond strands glint in the sunlight that’s pouring through the huge windows.

“Can I help you?” he says in a beleaguered fashion that shouldn’t make me want to

smile as much as I do. Con in a rare strop is an adorable sight.

I eye him and then make up my mind. “Yes, come on. I need you.”

“I hope it isn’t talking to Jimmy Fitch’s people.”

“Not likely. I do want them to put in an order rather than run and hide in an air raid shelter.”

He heaves a sigh that suggests I’m the most irritating person alive, so I make my smile extra wide.

“Come on. Chop chop.”

“Where are we going?” he asks, wandering towards me, reluctance written all over his body.

“Somewhere you desperately need to be.”

“The pub isn’t open yet.”

“No, but the lavender farm is.”

“Oh fuck ,” he groans. “No way. George needs me here.”

“I certainly do not,” George says. “I’m looking forward to some peace. I can listen to Pop Master without you jumping in with your ridiculous answers.”

“You know some people would say I might have a modicum of pop knowledge seeing as I was a genuine bona fide pop star myself.”

“Then those people didn’t hear you answer that Phil Collins played the tambourine in Genesis.”

“Even I know he played the recorder,” I say cheerfully. I look at Con. “Come on. That lavender won’t buy itself.”

“I wish it would,” he mutters. “I wish it would buy itself and move far away.”

I shake my head, opening the outside door and holding it for Con. Mandy cranes her head from the reception desk to see what we’re doing but then blanches and immediately looks industrious when Con turns.

“I’m so sorry, Mandy,” he calls to her. “Sorry for the mood this morning. It wasn’t your fault.”

“Well, some of it undoubtedly was,” I mumble, but he ignores me.

“Take the afternoon off, Mandy.”

I shake my head as she squeals in delight. “Therefore, shortening the workday in which she does no work, Con.”

He shrugs as we move out into the car park. The sun is bright and hot. “I shouldn’t have shouted.”

“I’m pretty sure someone should have done that ages ago. She’s terrible at her job. You doing it probably carried more weight.”

“Why?”

I stare at him over the roof of my car. “Because you so very rarely do, Con.” My eyes

narrow. He's still not looking properly at me and seems ill at ease. "You're the easiest-tempered man I know. So, what's happened?"

He looks up, and I frown in concern. His eyes are turbulent.

"Nothing," he finally says. "I just had to let go of something I never really thought I'd get in the first place."

"What is it?" I ask immediately. "I'll try and get it for you. I can—" I stop as a harsh laugh escapes him. There is no humour in the sound at all. "Con?" I ask.

"You're so bloody blind, Frankie. I—" He stops his outburst and looks over at the building intently. I look myself, but there's nothing to see. He turns to me, and the old familiar smile slides across his face, but this one seems to take a lot of effort, and his eyes don't echo it. Usually, they're full of laughter and light and warmth. Now they're shuttered like my windows when Lucy is outside.

"Never mind," he says lightly. But then, he suddenly seems to become aware that we're standing next to my car. "No," he immediately says. "Please, not the clown car. We can go in my truck."

I twirl the keys around my fingers, trying to find my own light tone of voice the way he is. If he wants lightness, I'll give him that. I'd give him anything if only he wanted something from me. Something more than friendship.

"Nope," I say. "I want to take Fabio out."

He shakes his head, looking down at my Fiat 500. It's bright red and gleams in the sunlight. "That's such a big name for Noddy's car."

I roll my eyes. "Fabio is a tricky thing. He looks like a little twink, but he tops from

the bottom.”

“Are we talking about you or the car?”

I bite my lip. “That would be telling,” I say in the flirtatious tone that usually raises a smile from him. But, instead, he stares at me, his eyes dark and mysterious, and I shift as the silence grows. Then he shakes himself and climbs into the car.

I watch, biting my lip. Con is six foot four, and my car is tiny. He squeezes himself in, and I bend down and look in the car and snort with laughter. He’s crushed into the corner with his knees high.

“It’s like watching Jason Momoa get into a toy car,” I say. “He’d never fit his hair in here either.”

“I’m going to need a chiropractor to get out of the car.”

“Either that or a winch.”

I climb in and start the engine, pulling off with a flurry of gravel. “Here we come, lavender farm,” I cry, and he shakes his head.

“You can make this sound as exciting as you like, but we are still going to sit in a field while you drink and eat things that have been inexplicably flavoured with lavender, and I will get hay fever.”

“Well, we definitely don’t need the sun today when we already have your cheerful disposition.”

He chuckles, and I feel the tension in him ease. Unfortunately, it transfers to me. I’ve been in this car many times with Con, and I wonder how I ever missed how tight the

confines are.

The road to the lavender farm is charming and one that I usually love. Honey-coloured dry stone walls bracket neat little fields while towering beech trees hang over the narrow winding road, sending dappled shadows over our faces. The windows are open, letting in a fresh, sweet smell. It usually makes my soul happy, but I can't focus on any of it today.

All I can feel is how my arm brushes his as I change gear. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see his hands on his knees. They're big hands with prominent veins and long, thin fingers, and I swallow as I imagine them on me, caressing and stroking. To my horror, I feel my cock stiffen, and I shift position in my seat, drawing in a bolstering breath. Unfortunately, all I can smell is the scent of his skin. It's a sweet smell, musky and warm and enhanced by the woodsy cologne that he's worn all the time I've known him. I tug at my shirt collar.

"You alright?" he asks.

"Oh yes ," I say forcefully. Far too forcefully because he jumps.

"It's like talking to a twenty-eight-year-old cheerleader."

"Well, be thankful I'm not because if I'd had my pom-poms, I might have smothered you with them this morning."

He chuckles, and the warm, infectious sound doesn't help my current condition. I hunch slightly over to hide my erection, and silence falls, but this time, it's easier. I knew it would be. Con finds it impossible to maintain a bad mood.

We zip down a lane that's so narrow in parts you could reach out and touch the hedgerow on either side.

“And this is why my car is better than your big truck,” I say as I pull into a passing place so a tractor can go by. “He’d have had to take a field out to get past you.”

The driver pauses as he comes level with the car. “Morning, Con. Morning, Frankie.”

“Hi, Mick,” I say, smiling at the young farmhand. “Beautiful morning.”

He tuts. “Rain’s on the way.”

I look at the blue sky. “Really?”

He nods, and there’s an ancient knowledge in his eyes. I suppose it comes from generations of farmers looking to the sky to determine their day. “Yep. It’s coming. Hope it holds off for the summer hop.”

I’d forgotten about that. The village has an end-of-summer party every year. It’s held in a huge marquee on one of Mick’s family’s fields that abuts the village. It’s usually a wild and brilliant night that fuels gossip over the winter months that follow.

Mick peers at Con. “You still playing?”

“You’re playing?” I say in surprise. “Why didn’t I know that?”

Con shrugs. “Didn’t think to mention it.”

I wonder whether he’s discussed it with Tim, and my stomach twists. It’s jealousy I’m feeling, and I can’t deny it any longer. Somewhere along the journey from becoming a widower in my early twenties and now, Con has become mine in my mind. I wonder how long I’ve been attracted to him. I think, looking back, it’s been building for a long time. I was just completely oblivious to it.

I become aware that they're both staring at me. "I can't wait," I say brightly.

Mick touches his fingers to his forehead in a salute. "See you there," he says and sets the tractor in motion.

"You okay?" Con says carefully to me. "You seem a bit—" He pauses.

"A bit what?" I say, staring hard at the hedge to the side of the car. It's very quiet here at the passing place. Not much traffic takes these narrow roads, and all I can hear is birdsong as the sun warms the inside of the car, bringing the scent of wildflowers and grass.

"A bit frazzled," he finally says. I can feel his gaze on the side of my head like a heat-seeking missile. "You're a bit like a swan." That's sufficiently odd to make me twist to look at him, and then I'm held by his eyes. They're full of some emotion.

"What do you mean?" I ask huskily.

"Well, you're all serene and peaceful on the surface like normal, but I'm getting the sense that a lot is going on under the surface."

I bite my lip, and his eyes drop to them, where his gaze stays.

"Con," I say, my voice throaty, and he shudders.

His hand comes up, and then the moment is abruptly broken by the sound of a car horn.

I jump and look behind me, my pulse hammering, aware that Con seems to be breathing heavily.

A man in a huge SUV is waiting behind us, and as I watch, he applies the horn again. “Any time today,” he bellows.

I stick my head out of the window. “Really?” I call sweetly. “Okay then.”

Then I sit back. The silence grows, and I can feel the man’s confusion as he waits for me to move the car.

Con bites his lip, his beautiful eyes sparkling with humour again. “Frankie,” he warns.

“Really?” He nods, and I grimace. Finally, I pop my head out of the window. “Okay, I’m ready now.”

“You’re a twat,” comes the informed response, so I stick out my middle finger before setting off again, zipping along the roads until we come to the turn for the farm.

I sigh happily as I park the car in the gravelled car park. “Smell that, Con.”

He sniffs. “Exhaust and someone’s Marlboro Lights.”

I roll my eyes. “Inhale the lavender. It’s got soothing properties.”

“Maybe we should get some for that SUV driver, then. I think you managed to raise his blood pressure several notches above healthy.”

“Pah!” I say, getting out of the car. “Little man in a big car. He was just overcompensating.”

He laughs and falls into step beside me as we walk towards the kiosk. “No,” I say as he puts his hand in his pocket. “My treat. I dragged you here.”

He looks around as I pay and take the tickets that the man hands me, and we walk off the path and into the vast open expanse. The sky is as blue as a cornflower. The farmhouse is a low-slung series of buildings, but my attention is immediately drawn to the lavender fields. They stretch ahead as far as the eye can see in an ocean of purple. Butterflies dip in and out of the flowers, and there's a constant buzzing from the bees that are feeding happily. The breeze plays with the fields, sending ripples over the surface and gifting us with a heavenly scent.

"You might have dragged me, but I'm glad you did," Con says, drawing in an appreciative breath. "God, it smells lovely. Like your lounge."

I nod. "I get the dried lavender in the big bowl on my coffee table from here. It's quiet in the mornings too. I always come at this time. The tourists aren't out yet, so I get the place to myself."

"You're sharing it with me today."

"I'd share it with you any day," I say without thinking, but I'm glad I did as a warm smile crosses his handsome face.

"Me too," he says softly.

I smile at him. His brown eyes are very clear in the sunlight, and his angular face is peaceful as he looks out over the fields. I nudge him. "Let's get a cup of tea."

We wander to the kiosk that sells hot drinks, food, and more lavender products than you can shake a stick at.

"I'll have a lavender tea," I say to the girl and look at Con. "Do you want one?"

"About as much as I want a circumcision with a knitting needle," he mutters. "I'll

have a coffee,” he says in a louder voice to the girl, who smiles at him and flutters her eyelashes.

“We’ll also have a couple of bacon sandwiches,” I say. I lean forwards. “He’s rather hangry this morning.”

“I am not,” he protests.

I nod. “Point proven.” I look at the shelves behind her. “And I’ll have a bag of the dried lavender and some of the honey, please.”

She hands me a bag and the honey, and after giving us our drinks, she promises to bring our food over.

We wander off. Dotted about the fields of lavender are old wooden benches, and I settle down at one, feeling the heat of the sun on my face. I take a big breath, smelling the lavender and feeling peace steal over me. When I look up, he’s watching me.

“This is my haven,” I say. “I love it here.”

“Do you come a lot?”

“When I’m feeling stressed. It has a very serene feel to it.”

He looks around as a breeze blows his golden-brown hair about his face. “I can see that.” He looks back at me, a crooked smile on his face. “Thanks for bringing me here.”

“Has it worked?” He nods. “Want to talk about it to me?”

He shakes his head immediately. “No, I really don’t,” he says with a funny intensity that makes me frown.

“Okay,” I finally say and smile at the girl as she brings us our food.

“Just like that?” he says.

I shrug, opening my sandwich and taking a bite. “Just like that,” I say after swallowing. “You’ll talk when you’re ready.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I know you.” I reach over and tap his sandwich. “Eat your food. You’ll feel better after it.”

We eat our sandwiches, making idle conversation about work and watching the people moving about the fields.

When we’ve finished, we sit back and sip our drinks.

“That was good,” he says. “You were right.”

“I’m always right.”

“And usually irritating with it.”

I laugh. “You don’t mean that.”

He watches me, his eyes hidden by the sunglasses he slid on a few minutes ago. “No, I don’t.” A silence falls that’s not at all easy until he shifts and looks around. “How did you find this place? Did David bring you on a date?”

I snort tea out of my nose. “Shit,” I say, grabbing a serviette and glaring at him. “Stop being funny when I’m drinking.”

“I wasn’t aware I was being funny.”

“Can you imagine David bringing me here on a date? It’d be like John Mayer staying at a nunnery.” I pause to consider. “I don’t think I ever went on a date with David.”

He jerks. “What? Why not?”

I shrug. “We fell into bed within hours of meeting each other, and he married me after a month. I think he assumed he didn’t have to bother after that.”

He shakes his head. “I loved the man, but he could be an unmitigated twat.”

I laugh. “Sometimes.”

“No, really. He had you, and all he did was fuck you and then leave you here alone while he jetted off being the big I am. I could never understand that.”

I stare at him, struck for words because he isn’t wrong.

“Maybe I’m not dating material,” I finally say. “I can’t say I’ve been on that many.”

“You’re totally dating material,” he says briskly, balling up his serviette and placing it under his cutlery so it doesn’t blow away.

“What do you consider a date, then?”

He shrugs, and I wish I could see his eyes. “There isn’t one generic date. It depends on the people involved.”

I lean my elbows on the bench. “So, how would you date me?”

The question is slightly breathier than I’d like, and he studies me. I wonder what he sees. A thin, dark-haired man wearing pinstriped trousers, a black T-shirt, and red braces. I probably cut a ridiculous figure with my outfit and my hair escaping from its bun.

“I would pretend we were house-hunting so you could look inside all those big old houses that you pore over in the property pages. Then we’d order food from that fancy restaurant in Chipping Norton you like and eat it as a picnic at home while watching *Made in Chelsea* .”

I stare at him agog. “Bloody hell, that sounds wonderful . You’ve managed to cater to my extreme nosiness, greed, and love of posh trashy television in one date.”

He shrugs. “I know you. It’s easy.”

“I can’t imagine knowing me is easy at all,” I say lightly, but he shakes his head.

“Well, that’s where you’re wrong. Knowing you is the easiest thing that’s ever happened to me in my life. You were my best friend between one breath and the next.”

I’m struck dumb, held in a spell consisting of the blue sky, the scent of lavender, and Con at the centre, his golden-brown hair lifting in the breeze and his attention on me. The way it always is. I want it to last forever but know it can’t.

I open my mouth, unsure of what to say but knowing I have to break the moment. This is a dangerous time for our friendship. I’ve discovered I have feelings for him right when he’s become involved with another man. One wrong step and I could lose the person who means the most in the world to me.

Luckily, my phone rings and breaks the moment. I pull it from my back pocket and look at the screen. “Joan,” I say to Con, who says nothing, still watching me with that funny intent regard.

I click to answer. “Hey,” I say. “What’s up?”

“I’ve had Jimmy Fitch’s people on the phone,” she says. “Are you and Con still together?”

“Hang on.” I look around. We aren’t near anyone who the call could irritate. Everyone is off in the next field. “I’ll pop you on speaker, Joan.” I look up at Con. “Jimmy Fitch’s people have rung.”

He stares at me for another long second and then seems to jerk back into life. “What’s up, Joan?” he says.

“Jimmy wants to have a personal meeting, but he’s had to schedule some rehearsals for a new pop video, so he wondered if you’d go to him.”

“Where is he?” he asks.

“In Taunton, Somerset.”

I look at Con and shrug. “You’ve done it before.”

He rubs the back of his neck. “But it’s usually with real musicians,” he starts to say, and I blow a raspberry.

“Oh, dear. Here comes the music snobbery. Brace yourself, Joan.”

Joan laughs, and Con shakes his head.

“It’s not funny. I have no fucking idea what to say to him. He’s not interested in the music so much as the money. I can’t talk music the way I would with other people. And every time I meet him, he goes on about something on Twitter that I have no idea of what he’s talking about. Last time he went on about Love Island , and I thought it was a relationship counselling holiday.” I laugh, and he gestures at me. “You know what he’s talking about?”

“Of course I do. But that’s because I don’t live under a rock formed of old back copies of Melody Maker .”

I chuckle at his face, but my jollity dies away with Joan’s following words.

“And that’s why you should go too, Frankie.”

“ What ?” I say, and Con laughs.

“Not so funny now, is it, Frankie?”

“Why have I got to go, Joan? It’s about the guitars. We won’t be discussing money or arrangements at this point.”

“Well, you can kill two birds with one stone,” she says. “Jimmy asked whether you were going anyway. He seemed very insistent that you do.”

“Why?”

“He didn’t say, but it makes sense to me. You always put Con at ease, and you’ll do the same with him. You speak his language.”

“The language of the pop twink,” Con says triumphantly.

“Then it’s sorted,” Joan says. “I’ll book your accommodation.”

“Okay,” I say and then jerk. “Wait. What accommodation?”

“Well, it’s a bit far away, and I know pop stars. He’ll keep you there talking about himself for hours.”

“This just gets better and better,” Con says, but Joan continues undeterred.

“I’ll book you a hotel,” she says with that steely cheerfulness that older women seem to be genetically blessed with. It’s nature’s way of getting them what they want. “Then you won’t be driving late at night.”

I breathe in sharply. A night away with Con. Shit. I’m not equipped for this at the moment. “You’d better book with three people in mind,” I say huskily.

“Three, dear?” Joan says.

“Yes, for Con to take Tim.” Con stares at me, and I tumble into words. “You can’t leave him at home on his own.”

“Perfect place for him,” Joan says.

“It would be rude,” I say, quickly talking over her.

Con eyes me for a long, fraught second. “I’m not taking Tim,” he says firmly. “It’s just you and me.”

I’m pretty sure everyone in the lavender field can hear my gulp for air.

“Excellent,” Joan says with far too much satisfaction.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:02 am*

chapter

six

That afternoon, I walk down to Con's house. The village is very busy, and I watch as two coaches pull up, unloading their store of pensioners onto the street.

Con's house is set at the end of the village behind two huge black iron gates that today are wide open. Dodging two old ladies who are peering inquisitively in, I make my way up the rutted drive.

It's a bit like walking into a jungle. Plants overhang the path as if trying to take it over, and I can't see the brick walls that form the property's perimeter. I often wonder if Tarzan is here lost and wandering amongst the hollyhocks while Jane is shopping at the deli in the village.

The drive widens, and the house comes into view. It's huge and one of the oldest buildings in the village. It's built of Cotswold stone and is a rambling old house that's utterly charming. However, in keeping with the wild look, it's seen better days, and those were years ago. Window frames are rotting, and the woodwork definitely needs new paint. Some tiles are missing from the roof.

I shake my head as I climb the stone steps to the huge front door. Even this shows its age, the paint pitted and peeling away.

I press the doorbell, and when that doesn't work, I give up and open the door. "It's me," I call. "Con?"

Nobody answers, so I wander into the huge foyer from which an ornately carved wooden staircase rises to the upper storey. I put my overnight bag down and take a right by the staircase. Traipsing down a stone-flagged corridor, I stick my head around the kitchen door. This is a huge room that runs the length of the house, big enough to house a dining table and chairs if he had one. Instead, there's a wide-open space in which is set a lonely packing case, on top of which is a mountain of unopened post. The sight makes me twitch.

The kitchen units are so old they were probably fashionable when Prince Charles was a child. Some of them have been torn out, leaving gaps like teeth in the run of units. It's also missing a work surface as he's torn out half of it, and it lies on the floor.

I look around. Despite the building site air of the house, I still envy Con. If this were mine, I'd have opened up skylights in the kitchen and put in bi-folding doors to take advantage of the uninterrupted view over the fields beyond the house.

"Awful, isn't it?" Tim's voice makes me jump, and I twist to find him leaning against the door to the dining room and watching me.

"What's awful?" I ask reluctantly.

He gestures with the hand holding a cup, and liquid slops onto the floor that he makes no attempt to clean up. It rankles, but I suppose I can see his point in this mess.

"This place. I couldn't believe it when Con drove up. I mean the size of it. It must be worth a fortune, and look at it. It's falling apart."

"He has his reasons," I say steadily.

This was Con's parents' house. From what I've heard from him and stories that David told me, they bought the house with a view to doing it up. Con's father was

something big in finance at the time, but he had a wild hair and decided to do it himself. As he was away so much, this took a long time, and they lived in a state of perpetual chaos. However, from what Con says, they were very happy, and his parents found the whole thing endlessly entertaining.

However, on their anniversary, they took a weekend away by themselves to celebrate, only to die when their plane crashed. Now, Con lives here alone, held in chains by a house he can't leave but doesn't want to restore because then he'll lose the last final memories of his parents.

"I hope they're good reasons," Tim sniffs. "Because I can't put up with this. It's a shithole."

"Then go home," I snap. "His reasons are good, and it's up to him what he does. No one else has a say in it. Least of all you."

"What do you mean by that?"

I sigh, wanting out of this conversation with him so badly that I itch. "I mean that you've only known him properly for a few days. If he gets round to telling you about the house, you need to listen to him and not try to force through your agenda. He needs someone to be with him as he is and not as you think he should be."

"Is that what you did with your husband? It didn't seem to work very well."

I stare at him, unbothered by his barbs. "No," I finally say. "I didn't do that with my husband. He wasn't Con."

"What's going on here?"

Con's voice makes us jump, and I turn to face him. "Just talking," I say quickly.

“So it seems.”

Tim huffs and walks out of the room without saying another word.

“Trouble in paradise?” I say sweetly.

Con scrubs his hand over his neck. “Hardly paradise. More a huge misjudgement on my behalf that’s currently landed me in purgatory,” he mutters. He looks at me. “You ready to go?”

I gesture to my outfit of black skinny trousers and a pink filmy shirt. “Does this not look ready? Does this not scream I am prepared to talk pop culture while Con sighs and languishes in an artistic sulk because no one knows what a treble clef is?”

He snorts. “Any sharper and you’ll cut yourself.”

“Better other people than myself,” I say, looking after where Tim vanished.

Con shakes his head. “Come on. The motorway’s going to be hell if we don’t get a move on.”

“Shall we take my car?”

“Only if you want me to stay crunched over like a human sausage roll. Otherwise, we’ll take mine.”

“Someone got out of bed the wrong side this morning,” I observe.

“Only if we’re counting bed as being the floor in the lounge.”

My heart sings at the fact that he’s not sleeping with Tim, but I make myself sniff

disapprovingly. “Musicians are wild,” I observe and follow him out.

It’s late afternoon by the time Con flicks the indicator and turns down a gravelled drive between two stone posts. The drive curves upwards and out of sight.

“Blimey. Matching your musical instruments to your pants is certainly lucrative,” I observe, breaking the silence that fell a while back.

I tried my best on the drive to fill the usual comfortable silence with chatter, but even I was forced to give up when all I got was monosyllabic grunts. All my work in the lavender field to get him to relax appears to have been useless, and it’s been like travelling with a grumpy caveman. So, half an hour ago, I gave up and read a book on my phone.

Con looks around and huffs. “I’m not looking forward to this.”

“Neither am I,” I say, finally losing hold of my patience. “But it’s got to be done. Just smile and think of the money, for fuck’s sake.”

“You should have that written on a T-shirt.”

“I will, and if Jimmy wants a guitar to match it, you are going to do what?”

He rolls his eyes. “I’m going to make it.”

“Good.”

“For that cultural desert of a man,” he adds.

“I can’t hear you,” I state. “My ears are still ringing from your enthusiastic agreement to my little lecture.”

“ Little lecture? You are to little lectures what Bluebeard was to female emancipation.”

I can't help my snort of laughter, but it dies as we come out onto a circular drive.

“Jesus Christ,” I breathe.

The house is an old manor house that is positioned next to a river. The last rays of the sun caress the old bricks and dance on the windows.

Con switches off the engine, and I grab his sleeve. “If he wants thirty guitars, Con, what are you going to do?”

“I am making thirty guitars,” he says in an obedient voice that is slightly spoiled by the robotic tone of his following comment. “Whatever my lord and master wants, I will obey.”

“Good,” I say. “I'll charge him accordingly. Our prices just went up for custom stuff.”

“Ruthless,” he says admiringly.

We both watch as the front door swings open, and the figure of Jimmy appears.

He's an ex-boy band member who went solo and struck a chord with his sunny personality and perfect face. He's made a series of chirpy upbeat records that you can't help humming along to and then feel deeply ashamed. I guess they paid for this house. That means I must own a roof tile or two. Not that I have any intention of telling Con.

Jimmy is in his early twenties and has a lithe frame, probably from all his dancing on

stage. His blond hair is artfully tousled, and he's wearing jeans that are so tight they might cut off his circulation and a sleeveless shirt that shows off two sleeves of colourful tattoos that he had done as soon as he walked out of the band. He's also leaning heavily on a walking stick.

"Do you think we should branch out into making designer crutches?" I say consideringly—Con's head swings around, displaying a face of thunder. "Okay, maybe not," I say quickly.

I throw my door open. "Mr Fitch," I say. "Hello. Hope you're okay."

He grins at me, and I blink at the powerful smile displaying teeth that are whiter than Lucy's geraniums in the village show.

"Frankie," he says. He looks down at his stick. "Oh, this," he says carelessly. "I sprained my ankle in rehearsals." He eyes me. "It's lovely to see you again."

"We've met?" I realise it sounds rude, so I modify my tone. "Oh, of course," I say vaguely. "Nice to see you again."

Con comes up next to me and stares as Jimmy gives me the most thorough up and down I've had in years. I'm not kidding. He probably knows how many fillings I've got.

"It certainly is nice to see you," Jimmy says, drifting closer to me. I consider hiding behind Con, who has a thunderous look on his face. "Can I just say that the photo on your website does not do you justice, Frankie. You look better in real life, which of course, I already knew."

"Well, I was having a bad hair day," I say faintly, ignoring the second part because I have no fucking idea of where I've met him before. I gesture at Con. "This is Con."

He's the creative artist behind the business and the man who'll be making your guitars."

To my consternation, he gives Con a dismissive smile and turns back to me. "I've laid on some dinner. Would you like to eat with me, Frankie?"

"Oh, erm." I think of the order and the money for the business. "Yes, of course," I say briskly. "We'd love to." Con makes a sound that suggests he's not falling in line with this, so I add quickly, "Maybe we can discuss your order during it?"

"Lovely," Jimmy says cheerfully. "Come on in."

We follow his halting progress into a foyer with a black-and-white tiled floor. The ceiling rises high above us, lit by a huge chandelier. Doors are open off the foyer, and as we follow our host, I glimpse a big lounge, a music room filled with instruments, including a grand piano and with walls lined with gold discs, and a games room.

Con pulls me back. "How the fuck do you know him?" he whispers.

"I don't know," I say. "I don't mind admitting I'm completely mystified."

"This way," Jimmy calls back, and we hasten to catch up as he shows us into a library. It's lined on three walls with floor-to-ceiling bookcases. Bi-folding doors offer a view of an immaculate lawn that stretches down to the river.

"Lucy would be thrilled with this garden," I whisper.

Jimmy settles onto a large sofa that's shaped like a pair of lips and gestures Con and me to a couple of carved iron chairs that look like they were last pressed into service during the Spanish Inquisition. I lower myself gingerly into one and watch as Con settles his much taller frame onto the other. It creaks loudly, and we share alarmed

looks. Business deals can falter when you break the customer's furniture. I hold my breath as Con sits back safely and then snort as he shoots me a beleaguered glance.

I turn it into a cough and turn back to Jimmy. "What a lovely room. So many books."

"Oh, they're going," he says carelessly. "I can't stand them. I only moved in a few weeks ago. The builders are due to start work next week. I'm putting in a retro arcade where the bookcases are, and the other wall will be knocked out so I can put in a bowling lane that'll run into the old dining room."

"Lovely," I say faintly. "Well, you never know when you're going to be struck with the need to bowl. And who needs to sit down and eat anyway?"

Con coughs as if he's got something stuck in his throat, and I shoot a glare at him. Luckily, Jimmy seems to be made of sunshine and rainbows because he laughs.

"You're just as I remember you, Frankie."

I blink. "And we've met, have we?" I say tentatively, aware of Con leaning forwards and listening intently.

"I don't expect you'd remember," Jimmy says. "I was with my first band. We were called Tension. We were all only sixteen and at an industry party for the first time. It was at Bob Mitchell's house. Do you remember him?"

I exchange a confused look with Con and turn back to Jimmy.

"Yes, of course, I remember him. He was Con's band manager for a while before he went to work for the record company. He ended up running the UK division."

He was also a wanker, but I'm not mentioning that. I shoot Con a quelling look, and

he rolls his eyes.

“So, you were at the party too,” I say wonderingly. “It’s a small world.”

“Yes. You probably don’t recognise me because I had long dark hair then and fewer tattoos.”

I stare at him, and a faint memory stirs. “I do remember you.” I turn to Con. “Con, it was Bob’s summer party. Do you remember?”

He nods, and Jimmy leans forward. “You were very kind to us all at the party, Frankie.”

“I was? That doesn’t sound like me.”

“It sounds exactly like you,” Con says firmly.

Jimmy shrugs. “You talked to us normally. We were all wearing the same clothes. Our manager insisted on it because who doesn’t want a load of young men who appear to bulk buy at H&M.” I laugh, and he smiles. “When someone was rude about it, you told him to fuck off and that it hadn’t done the Von Trapp family any harm.” He furrows his brow. “I always meant to ask. Were they a group in your day?”

“My day?” I say blankly, and Con can’t help his laughter this time.

Jimmy nods. “Well, you must be in your late thirties now.”

“I’m twenty-eight,” I say, outraged. “I’m hardly ready for my pension.”

He pats my arm. “I like an older man,” he says with an enthusiastic leer.

“Which is fine if you’re talking about Tom Selleck but not me.”

“Who’s Tom Selleck? Is he in the music business?”

“My grandmother was very keen on him. He acted and had a moustache,” I say airily.  
“I think it was the moustache that did the acting.”

He smiles at me. It’s powerfully bright and happy. “Anyway, I always wanted to say thank you. I fancied you right away, but you had a wedding ring on.”

“Yes, I was married at the time. We were all at the party.”

“I remember you too from the party,” he says, staring at Con. “ You were in a band?”

“Yes, he was,” I say. “They were very famous. Probably before you were born,” I say pettily, getting one back at Con for laughing earlier.

“Wow,” he says. “So, you know the music business, then?”

“I do,” Con says with too much of a query in his voice.

“He knows it very well,” I say firmly. “But he’s a brilliant craftsman. You’d be lucky to have him make something for you.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Jimmy leans forwards. “So, was your husband at the party?” He pauses. “Wait. I thought Con was your husband. He stood by you all night.”

“Well, no,” I say awkwardly. “Con’s my best friend. My husband, David, was the dark-haired singer.”

“Not the man who surfed on a tray through Bob’s new patio doors and ended up in

the pool?”

I wince. “That was him,” I say. “He was always the life of the party.”

“That’s epic,” he says, cocking his head on one side. “So, where is he?”

“He’s dead,” Con snaps.

“Con,” I gasp. “There are ways to say it.” Then I look at Jimmy. He seems genetically incapable of taking offence. Instead, he’s smiling at me.

“You’re not in a relationship, then? Lovely.” He pauses. “Sorry for your loss.”

I blink. “Thank you, and no, I’m not in a relationship,” I finally say warily. “Why?”

“Because you’re well fit, mate. Maybe you should stay around when Con goes. We could go to a party. There’s one at Cliff Samuel’s house.” He winks. “I promise you there won’t be four other men dressed the same as me.” He winks. “Especially if we get naked.”

I open my mouth, but at that moment, Con stands up. It’s an abrupt motion, and it sets his torture chair wobbling. “He won’t be doing that,” he snaps.

“Con,” I whisper, staring open-mouthed at him. His face is set and cold, but his eyes are tumultuous.

Jimmy stares at him. “Oh, okay, man,” he says in his easygoing manner. “Whatever you say.”

“I do say.” Con’s voice is cold and even. “Now, Frankie and I have a job to do, so how about we go about matching these guitars to your shoes, and then we can fuck

off home.”

“Oh my god,” I whisper. “Con.”

Jimmy widens his eyes and stares at Con in wonder as if he’s witnessing the second coming. “That’s a genius idea, man. I’ve got a new line with Nike. Let’s do that. I bet you fifty grand it trends on Twitter the first time I do it.”

“Let’s hope so,” I say faintly, but my admirer has deserted me. In awe at Con’s genius, which actually was acute sarcasm, he leads Con out of the room, and for the next two hours, he talks happily and extensively to Con.

I sit watching them in Jimmy’s studio. Con is running his fingers along a guitar he picked up as soon as we walked into the room. He’s talking knowledgeably, and Jimmy is hanging on his every word.

How is it that I can say something sarcastic and get told off by Joan for an hour, and Con can vomit snark all over this client and be treated as if he’s the next messiah?

My musing dies abruptly when Con looks up at me. His eyes are dark and mysterious, and despite his easy demeanour, I know he’s still cross at Jimmy. I sigh. I can’t see why. Jimmy is hardly Casanova. He’d never have had that many conquests if he called his partners old before he even got his tongue in their mouths.

I look at Con. He’s bent back over the guitar, and the sun picks out the gold gleams in his hair and shows the vulnerable back of his neck. I feel a sad ache in my belly, a yearning for something I’m never going to have. Because the truth is that Con’s never going to see me as anything other than his best friend’s husband. His ire at Jimmy mentioning David and making a pass makes that very clear. I wonder if I’d met him in some other way, would he have made a pass at me? What would my life be like if I’d gone home with Con that night and not David?

I sigh. I'm never going to know that because the truth is that it was through David that Con met me, and no matter how close I am to him, it will always be through my dead husband.

I look back at the two men. Jimmy has moved closer to Con while I've been mired in thought. He's now practically in Con's lap, and it's my turn to frown at the flirtatious twink as he laughs up at Con. Con is watching him, his eyes wickedly amused, and I feel rage run through me. Con chuckles at something Jimmy says, and I've abruptly had enough.

"You might want to sit down, Jimmy," I snap. "We can't have you straining any more muscles, can we?"

Con looks up at me with a jerk, examining my face intently. Jimmy eyes me and looks puzzled, so I try a smile. Unfortunately, it's more strained than I'd like. "If you don't mind, you should sit in your own chair," I say in what is considered my most charming voice. Unfortunately, it appears to alarm Jimmy, who sits back as quickly as if Con is hosting the Black Death.

My eyes snap to Con, and I blink. All his previous bad temper is gone, and instead, he's grinning widely. It's like the sun coming out after all the months of thunderclouds on his face.

I look at him and shake my head in consternation. I will never understand men ,I think sadly.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:02 am*

chapter

seven

It's late when we draw up to the car park of the hotel that Joan booked for us. I unfasten my seat belt and stretch.

"I am so fucking glad this day is nearly over," I say fervently.

Con snorts. "Oh, dear, the plight of being the teenage pop star's pin-up."

His good humour has carried on through my extricating us from the pop twink's clutches that were rather like a little blond octopus.

"That is not a thing at all. Besides, he soon forgot me when you unveiled your musical master plan."

He sighs tiredly. "If you can't beat them, you should just give in and fucking join them. Maybe I should forget about musical artistry."

"Or maybe stop referring to it as musical artistry, you snob."

He laughs and climbs out of his truck, stretching, and I hastily drag my eyes away from the width of his chest and the length of his legs. They're shown off to great effect in a pair of old jeans that cling to him and a faded blue T-shirt. It's so typical of Con, I think affectionately. He has no idea what impact he has on people.

I dismiss my thoughts and grab my bag and follow him into the reception of the hotel. The place is an old coaching inn, and the owners have kept the exposed brick walls in the reception area and mingled it with a lot of tartan furniture for some odd reason. It's also completely deserted. After a few minutes, I crane my head over the desk.

"What are you looking for?" Con asks.

"Some sort of bell to say we're here."

I lean further and then feel him grab my belt and drag me backwards.

"Are you trying to give me a wedgie?" I gasp.

"If I were trying, I'd manage it."

I regain my feet. "Just so you know, big-headedness isn't hot."

He smiles at me. It's slow, sensual, and so completely unlike the Con I've known for years that I gape at him. He bops me on the nose. "So why are you drooling?"

"I am not," I say crossly. Then, footsteps sound, and a receptionist appears. As Con turns to her, I wipe my mouth to double-check.

I suddenly become aware that Con and the woman have stopped talking, and they're both staring at me.

"What?" I say.

The woman seems worried, but Con just looks as if he's trying not to laugh. "We have a little problem," he says.

“There are antibiotics for that,” I mutter.

“Sorry?” the receptionist says.

I smile at her. “What seems to be the problem?”

“We only have one room reserved for you,” she says anxiously.

I gape at her. “What?” I finally say.

“We only have one room,” she says, giving me a worried glance and talking slower.

Con gives a soft snort, and I shoot him a glare before turning back to the lady.

“Yes, I thought that was what you said. But how?”

“Joan only booked one room,” Con informs me, and when I look over at him, he puts both hands to his face like a piss-taking version of The Scream painting.

I bite my lip to stop myself smiling at the idiot and turn back to the woman. “Well, that’s our secretary’s fault,” I say briskly. “But surely there must be another room available?” She shakes her head slowly. “What? Not one? It’s midweek.” My voice is gaining a slightly shrill edge, and I breathe in to modulate it. “Maybe a tiny room. I can sleep anywhere. Even a broom cupboard,” I add desperately.

“No, sir,” she says solemnly. “We have a cheesemaker convention in the hotel.”

“Well, can’t they share? That sounds like a very friendly profession.”

“There are one hundred and fifty of them, sir.”

Con chuckles and leans down to grab our bags. “We’ll be fine,” he informs her. “It’s only one night.”

I stare as she smiles at him in relief and bustles about giving him the key and the breakfast and Wi-Fi information like he’s a tattooed knight in shining armour. Finally done, she gives us directions to our room and hotfoots it out of the room before I can speak and object.

“She’s moving fast,” I observe with my brilliant deduction skills.

“Probably scared that you’ll try and sleep on her desk.”

“Shut up,” I say and follow him up the stairs. “Oh well. It’s just us. I’m sure we’ve slept together before.”

I stop abruptly on the stairs as he turns and bends down to me. “If we had slept together, you’d have remembered it,” he says throatily.

I stand with my mouth open like a fish before realising that he’s turned and is moving upstairs again. “You’re a gigantic boaster,” I say. He chuckles, and I shake my head. “You’re very good-humoured about this.”

“Sometimes life has a way of rewarding us for years of toil.”

“You won’t be saying that when you realise how long I take in the shower.”

I follow him down a long hallway with very creaky floorboards until he pauses outside a huge oak door.

“Ready?” he says with a dramatic flourish as he opens the door.

I glare at him and sweep past, only to come to a stop. “Jesus,” I say.

The room is papered in a pale aqua-green silk wallpaper and stuffed with antique furniture. However, my attention is grabbed by the four-poster bed. It’s absolutely massive, with ornately carved bedposts from which hang jade patterned silk curtains. They echo the silk bedspread, and the fluffy white pillows and sheets complete the ostentatious look.

I gaze at the huge expanse of the bed, whose surface is covered with red petals.

“What the fuck?” I breathe. “Has Joan booked us into the fucking honeymoon suite?” He starts to laugh, and I shake my head. “The woman is a bloody menace. Well, I’ve got a good mind to sack her. See how she likes feeding Hank Marvin on water biscuits then.”

He runs his hand along the bed and presses the mattress. “Firm,” he says approvingly.

What for? Fucking me into it? For a wild second, I almost think I’ve said it, but fortunately, it was in my head, and I watch as he moves around, unpacking his bags and looking in cupboards and doors. As much as I’m panicking at sharing with him and maybe letting my guard down and showing him how I feel, a large part of me wants to smile. Con has this joy in life and knowledge. Everything is interesting to him, and it’s very endearing.

I become aware that I’m staring at him and immediately jerk into action, grabbing my bag. “I’ll have the first shower,” I say huskily. I pause, looking at him. He has his hand on the door of an oak wardrobe in the corner of the room. It’s carved with fantastical animals and stands easily six feet high.

“It looks like you could find Narnia in here,” he observes.

“Don’t go in, then, for fuck’s sake,” I say sourly. “We can’t share the room with any more people.”

“I don’t know,” he says, eyeing me. “Mr Tumnus looks a lot less grumpy than you at the moment.”

“You could play the fiddle together and leave me out of your smart-arse remarks.” He laughs, and I shake my head. “I’m having a shower,” I state firmly. “I will likely be in there for a very long time.”

“I’m trying to imagine what you can think of to do in there,” he says in a thoughtful voice.

“Try and spend the time instead examining your sudden good mood and the fact that you’re being rather flirtatious.”

He shuts the wardrobe door and suddenly seems a lot closer than he was. “Really? You don’t know why I’m in a good mood?” he says huskily.

“Shower,” I squeak, and grabbing my stuff, I shut myself in the bathroom.

The bathroom is very luxurious as well, and I wonder why Joan decided to splash the cash. Normally, when we’re away, we stay in the cheapest hotels she can find. The shower cubicle is enormous, and I spend a while in there enjoying the hot water and the fantastic pressure. I use the time to talk myself around, so by the time I emerge, I feel put together and serene.

I let myself into the bedroom. Con has removed the rose petals and is lying on the bed, his bare feet crossed and his hands behind his head, watching the football on the TV. I eye his long feet and the fact that his arms are bunched up, showing his big biceps, and feel my inner serenity immediately starting to retreat.

“Bathroom is yours,” I say briskly.

He looks over at me, and his eyes move up and down steadily, taking in my silk dressing gown. It’s citron-coloured with small violets embroidered over it, and it falls to my feet.

“What?” I snap.

“You look lovely,” he says, and the sincerity in his voice floors me.

I rub my finger over the silk, feeling its softness. “Really?” I ask. He nods fervently, and I bite my lip. “It was my nan’s. I suppose you think that’s weird. My grandad bought it for her from China years ago when he was in the navy. She kept it in this box in tissue paper and never wore it, but she’d let me open it and look at it when I was little. I kept it when she died because the sight of it has always made me happy, and I wear it because we should never let anything stay in tissue paper.”

His eyes are soft and warm and almost admiring. “I wasn’t going to say it’s weird,” he says steadily. “I was going to say I love it because it’s just like you.”

“A bit flamboyant?” I say doubtfully.

“No. Bold and bright.”

He runs his eyes over me again, and by the time he reaches my eyes, I feel hot and flushed.

“Bathroom,” I snap, and he bites his lip to hide a smile. Unfortunately, he’s not entirely successful, and I glare at him.

He rises and walks past me. His arm brushes mine, and my skin tingles as if he gave

me an electric shock. I continue staring after him long after the door has shut. Then I give myself a shake and take out my clothes from my bag, hanging them up in the wardrobe and plugging our phones in to charge. I dump my dirty clothes in my bag and set them neatly in the wardrobe. I close the door and turn as the bathroom door opens.

I once watched a film called Backdraft , where Billy Baldwin was always silhouetted enticingly against a backdrop of smoke. Con's background is the more innocuous steam from his shower, but Billy's got nothing on him. He's shirtless and clad in just a pair of boxers, and my gaze clings and skips along his big chest. He's impressively put together, which has got to be genetic because he hardly does any exercise. I frown as I see the line of ink down his right side. "What does that say?" I ask before I can pull myself together.

"What, this little thing?" he says, eyeing me and tracing one long finger down his side. The tattoo runs down his lean side and disappears along the groove of his pelvis and under his underwear. His finger comes to a stop at the cotton barrier, and I become aware that I'm gaping at him.

I take a breath. "I didn't know you had a tattoo there," I say in what I hope is a conversational tone, although even I recognise it's far too breathy.

He smiles. "It says, 'Friendship is a slow ripening fruit.'"

I stare at him. "Who said that?"

He makes a production of looking around. "I think I just did."

"You're such a twat."

He laughs. "It was Aristotle."

“And that’s for David,” I say confidently.

“Nope,” he says. “It’s for you.”

He moves past me and pulls the sheets back. He climbs into the bed and gives a sigh of happiness. “Oh, that’s lovely. Cold, fresh sheets.”

I glare at him.

“Getting in?” he says. When my glare intensifies, he grins. “You’re blocking the view of the footie on the TV.”

My mouth drops open in outrage, and he breaks into peals of laughter.

Shaking my head, I pull the sheets back and then look at the bed in dismay. It’s enormous, the mattress hitting me at chest height. “How high is this fucking bed?” I squeak. His laughter gets louder. “No, really. Did medieval people carry ladders around with them when they fancied a kip?”

“Want a hand up?”

“Only if you fancy losing some digits,” I snap. I lift my leg, considering the height. “Good heavens, this is like Mount Everest,” I say faintly. He starts laughing again, and I shake my head. “Did they bring George Mallory here to do his training?”

“Knowing his set of friends, they’d have found other uses for the bed.”

“What a scandalous set. All those young men photographed in the nude and historians are still trying to persuade us that it was just high jinks between manly young men.”

I try another hopeful hop, and he shakes his head. “There’s a stool under the bed.”

“What?” I glare at him. “When were you going to tell me?”

He chuckles and lies back. “I was aiming for another five minutes, but you were starting to look a little plaintive.”

“Wanker,” I say succinctly, prompting another burst of laughter. I retrieve the stool and climb into the bed, falling onto the sheets as if I’ve just completed a hike up a mountain and I’m about to plant a flag. I look over to find him biting his lip and smack his arm.

“Shut up,” I say, and he makes a performance about zipping his lips.

I kneel up and pull off my robe, and there’s an instant hush. “Shit, Frankie,” he mutters.

I look over my shoulder at him and smile. “Not so lippy now, are you?”

“Those are the skimpiest pair of briefs I have ever seen.”

“Oh, these old things,” I say airily, running my finger along the edge of my black briefs. He makes a choked sound, and I laugh. “You’re so easy.”

“I must be.”

“I sleep naked,” I inform him climbing under the sheets. “So, you should be glad I’m wearing anything at all.”

“Why the hell should I be glad about that? Are you daft?”

I laugh and nestle back into the bed. The sheets are cool and soft against my skin, and the duvet has just the right kind of crinkly expensiveness to please me. The pillows

are the perfect shape and consistency to cradle my head. The only problem is the size of the bed. Seen from the floor, the bed looked the size of a football field. Now, however, sharing it with Con, it seems to have shrunk. His scent of freshly washed skin and sweet shampoo appears to weave a spell around me, and every time he moves, he brushes against me.

As if on cue, he shifts, and I feel his hairy leg against me.

“Sorry,” he says meekly as I tut. “These beds aren’t made for men my size.”

“You’re six foot four. Not the Hulk,” I say pettily, and he snorts.

“Shall I put a pillow between us on the bed?”

I gape at him. “No, because I’m not Doris Day.”

“Definitely not. I bet she was infinitely sweeter-tempered.”

I can’t help the twitch of my mouth and turn my back on him. He laughs. The sound is sexy right next to me, and I wonder how I can have sat in a room with him for years and never noticed. Now, it’s all I can focus on. That and his smell of warm skin. I feel my lids lowering and my breath coming short, and I immediately take evasive action.

“Ooh, football,” I cry, looking at the TV. “How exciting. Who are we watching?”

“I wasn’t aware that you liked football, Frankie.” There’s a suspicious sound of laughter in his voice, but when I look at him, his face is innocent.

“Oh yes,” I say. “My grandad supported—” I rack my brains. “Some football club. Was it Tottenham Harris?”

There's a short pause. Then, "Do you mean Tottenham Hotspur?"

"Yes, that's the one. They're my favourite too." He bites his lip, and I send him a warning glare. "So, are they playing?"

"No, because this is the Scottish League."

"Ah." I nod wisely. "And Tottenham is a London team."

"And English."

I watch the screen. "So, it's two-nought, then?"

There's a stifled snort from my bed partner. "You could say that," he says in a choked voice.

"And those names under the team names. Are they players who've been naughty?"

I shoot around and glare at him as he howls with laughter. "What is so funny?" I gasp.

"You pretending to like football." He stops laughing at me and looks up earnestly. "Your virtue is safe, Frankie."

"I don't think I've had that since I was sixteen," I whisper, staring down into his eyes. The brown is so clear in the lamplight it looks like the brook that runs beside the village.

I become aware that he's staring back at me and wonder awkwardly what he sees. Nobody like his current bed partner, that's for sure. I'm not a patch on Tim. At the memory that someone is waiting at home for him, I draw back. Something that looks

like disappointment crosses his face, and then it clears, and he lifts a hand and brushes my hair back from my face.

“Go to sleep,” he says, and there’s such a wealth of warmth in his voice that it brings tears to my eyes. I nod and turn on my side. I stiffen when he cuddles up to me, but he’s lovely and warm in the cold sheets, and he sets the remote control on my ribs. “You’re like a little table,” he says. “I could rest my cup of tea on your ribs.”

“I can see why you get so much cock,” I observe. He laughs, and I let loose with a huge yawn.

“Go to sleep,” he commands, and astonishingly, I do. Usually, I need perfect room temperature, a face mask, and my Spotify rainy weather sounds playlist to get to sleep, but tonight I drift off accompanied by the soft sound of the football and his warm presence behind me.

I come awake with a start. The room is dark, and the high street outside is quiet. I’m warm and snug, mainly because Con sleeps behind me with one long arm curled over my waist. His breaths are soft and even against my nape, and for a few seconds, I rest there, savouring the feel of him. I’ll probably never get this again, and I sigh softly, nestling into him for a precious few minutes.

A quick glance at my watch tells me it’s three in the morning. I’m desperately thirsty, and I start to ease out of bed to get a drink. I pause on the edge as Con utters a grumbly sound and turns to his back. He’s lit by a shaft of moonlight that’s slipped through a gap in the curtains, and it highlights him as if he’s on stage. His hair is messy, his eyes closed, and his face peaceful. It’s so strange to see him like this as he’s normally constantly on the move. To see him peaceful makes me feel protective of him, and I pull the sheets more over him as the air conditioning has made the room a little chilly.

I slip into the bathroom, running the tap until the water is cold and filling a toothglass. I drink thirstily. Once I've finished, I rest my hands on the sink and stare at myself in the mirror. I look the same as ever—messy dark hair, thin face, and slender body. I watch myself shake my head and then make my way back into the bedroom. I shut the door behind me, and the click must wake Con because he sits bolt upright.

“Frankie?” he says sleepily.

“Here,” I whisper, and he rolls to face me, but unfortunately, he moves too far, and he rolls right out of bed, falling to the floor with a crash.

There's a startled silence that I break, rushing over to him.

“Are you okay?” I gasp. “That was quite a way to fall.”

He rolls over and looks up at me with a disgruntled expression.

“Are you okay?” I start to say again but choke in the middle. He glares at me as I break into peals of laughter.

“I'm so sorry,” I try to say but then spoil it by laughing until I'm fighting for breath and clutching my ribs. Finally, I calm, but when I look at him, he's watching me with one eyebrow raised, and it starts me off again. “Sorry,” I choke out. “So sorry.”

“You don't sound it,” he observes, but that just sets me off again.

“You fell.” I wave my hand. “Such a bang,” I manage and then start to laugh again.

Eventually, I calm and look down at him. “Are you alright?” I say, trying for sincerity.

“You know you sound so caring, Frankie, and yet inside, you’re still laughing at me.”

“Well, it’ll teach you not to take the piss out of me with the high bed. What on earth happened?”

“It’s your fault. You spoke to me, and I turned. In my bed, there’d be space. Not so much with this fucker.”

I snort and manfully stop myself. “And have you hurt yourself?”

My voice wavers, and he shakes his head. “Never consider a career in the nursing profession. Never .”

“I’ve got the hands of a surgeon.”

“And the sense of humour of a five-year-old. It’s a lethal combination.”

That sets me off again, and when I stop this time, I find myself hovering far too close to him. My hand is down beside his head, my fingers brushing his hair. My laughter dies, and before I can think better of it, my fingers move, twining in his hair and feeling the softness slip over my skin.

I still when I find him watching me, his eyes dark in the moonlight.

“Con,” I whisper and gasp as he raises his hands. For a long moment, he stares at me as if contemplating one of the great mysteries of the world, and then, grabbing my face gently, he brings me into him and takes my lips with a soft groan.

For a second, we rest against each other, both stunned by the evening’s development, and then the feel of his lips against mine overrides all the voices screaming caution at me, and I open my mouth, sending my tongue out to tangle with his.

He tastes of mint, and his lips are soft and pillowy, and the kiss seems to spark from there as we go from zero to a hundred in seconds, twisting and turning to get closer while our mouths eat at each other.

He moans in the back of his throat, one hand holding my skull between his big hands and keeping my lips against his. Time seems to slow down as we kiss until my lips feel sore, and my dick is throbbing hard. Con moans and grabs my arse, urging me to straddle him. I lift and obey him. I only have my briefs on, and they're barely managing to contain my cock, and I groan as my dick rubs against the hard length in his boxers.

He sucks on my tongue gently, and I push down against him. The pressure feels right, but it's not enough, so I pull back. "Take them off," I say wildly as he thumbs the band of my underwear. He groans, staring at me through slitted eyes, and then his fingers move, caressing my skin as he pushes the briefs below my arse. I sit up into a crouch and tear them off, throwing them over my shoulder.

"You too," I pant, fisting my cock in a tight grip to avoid going off like a rocket as he pushes his boxers down. I can't help staring at the body he reveals. He has a tight stomach that leads down to a V line. Brown hair runs from his belly button downwards like an arrow pointing to his cock. I gulp. His huge cock.

"Jesus," I whisper, and he gives a choked chuckle.

"Don't stare."

"I can't help it, Connie. That's fucking massive. It's the Titanic of cocks."

"Didn't that sink?"

"It's never going to happen to you with that buoyancy aid between your legs."

I stare down at it and slide my finger along the silky skin. The skin is stretched tight over his cock, with a prominent vein standing out darkly.

I tighten my grip on my cock, and he stares at my hand. "Touch yourself," he says. "I want to see."

For a wild second, I want to do it, but then I hesitate, feeling suddenly and inexplicably shy. A flush stains my cheeks, and I bite my lip. "Con?" I say, suddenly uncertain, and he sits up, his stomach muscles tightening in a very distracting way.

"No," he says, kissing the side of my mouth. "Don't start thinking, Frankie." He kisses the side of my mouth again, and then again. Teasing kisses that come close but never connect with my waiting mouth, and all the while, his big hand clutches my skull tenderly, his fingers caught in the waves of my hair. I feel the tension ease out of me, and I chase his mouth almost drunkenly, my eyes drifting closed.

"Con," I say, barely able to recognise the dazed sound of my own voice.

"Yes," he says and kisses me properly, his tongue tangling with mine, and within seconds, I'm lost again, all my senses narrowing to the feel of him naked against me. My Con, who smells of soap and has his big hands on me, caressing my skin while he eats at my mouth with urgent little sounds.

Before I know it, I've pushed him to his back and climbed onto him, straddling him. My cock rubs against his, and I cry out, thrusting my hips to get the pressure again and again.

"Like this," he whispers and raises his hand to me. Immediately guessing what he wants, I lick his palm and fingers, getting them sloppily wet before taking one finger into my mouth and sucking on it lazily. He puts another finger against my lips, stretching the lines of my mouth, and shudders wildly when I take that in too, taking

them to the back of my throat with ease and getting them slippery and wet.

He pulls them out of my mouth with a wet plop, and I cry out as he encircles our cocks in his hand. I add my own on top of it, bridging the gap and squeezing his fingers. Beginning to cant my hips, I shuttle my dick through the tight grip. I can smell the tang of precome in the air and feel it moistening our shafts and making the slide incredible. I groan, and leaving him to hold our dicks, I rest my hands on his huge shoulders, digging in my fingernails and rubbing against him in a vigorous motion like the tide.

“Kiss me,” he pleads, and I bend to take his mouth. My hair falls around us, hiding us behind a silky black curtain, and he lets go of our cocks to clutch my head close to him, his fingers tugging on the strands. I press my head into his hands and rub against him, the motion lubricated by precome and sweat. I rear back and watch him as I writhe, digging my fingers into his big chest and brushing his nipple.

He throws his head back, all the cords in his neck standing out. “Frankie,” he says hoarsely, and I rub frantically, digging my knees into the side of his thigh and feeling the telltale tingle in my balls.

It comes on me in a rush. I have no time to prepare. One minute we’re rutting furiously, so melded together I can’t tell his body from mine, and the next, I’m coming with a wild shout spurting over his cock and balls. He grabs my arse, pulling me in tight, and then gives a low, tortured groan. I feel his semen hot on my skin, and I fall onto him, knocking the breath from him, but his arms tighten to keep me there.

I’ve never felt anything like that, and I let that recognition settle into my mind, where it will undoubtedly ferment into outright worry. For now, though, I just lie savouring the warmth and feel of his big body and feeling his breaths strike the side of my face and the occasional nuzzling warmth of his kiss against my temple.

After a long moment, I roll off, and we lie on our backs, staring up at the ceiling, the room full of the sounds of our slowly steadying breathing. Semen is growing cold on my skin, and consciousness starts to seep back. Consciousness and concern.

“Jesus,” I finally say. “What the hell just happened?”

“Frankie, look at me.”

I slowly do as he asks. I’d do mostly anything he asked of me, maybe even hide a body, but somehow this is harder than that. He’s watching me, his eyes mysterious in the moonlight. I stare at him. Is he going to say he regrets it? I become aware that I’m holding my breath, and I let it out unobtrusively.

“What?” I finally ask. My voice is hoarse and soft. “What was that, Con?”

He watches me for another second, but then incredibly, he smiles, and it’s a smile unlike any he’s ever directed at me. It’s full and warm and lights up his face.

“It was simple and easy,” he finally says. He rolls to his side and runs his finger down my face, tracing my cheekbones and ending at the corner of my lips. I compound my foolishness by kissing it, and he smiles again. “And yet it was everything too, if you know what I mean. Does that sound silly?”

“Not at all,” I say, and we exchange slightly shy smiles.

I open my mouth finally to try and clarify what just happened. My senses are reeling. That was simultaneously the hottest event of my life with the person who, up until two months ago, I’d never looked at like this. How has this happened?

However, Con sits up and scatters my thoughts. “Come on, Frankie,” he says, his voice low and tender. “The middle of the night isn’t the time to analyse stuff, and I

can see your brain starting to rumble.” The latter is said with an air of wild tenderness that makes my heart beat faster.

“So, what is the middle of the night for?” I ask, letting him clean us off with his T-shirt and push me into the bed. He slides up next to me, pulling the covers over us and slinging his arm around me so his warmth and scent envelop me. It seems funny to inhale that familiar scent now it’s cut through with a trace of spunk.

“It’s time for sleep,” he says. “Sleep with me, Frankie. Close and warm.”

And I do. I drop off so fast it’s like free jumping off a cliff.

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chapter

eight

I come awake slowly the next morning. I'm warm amongst the sheets. The room is cool, a breeze blowing through the curtains. I stretch, and memory returns all of a sudden as my foot encounters a hairy leg.

I twist around before I can stop myself. Con is lying there amongst the rumpled sheets, the white of the cotton showing off the tanned length of his body and the wideness of his chest. His chin is roughened by brown-blond stubble, and his eyes are bleary. He's never looked better.

He's also awake, watching me with eyes that betray nothing.

We stare at each other for a long few seconds, and then I can't help it. I smile at him and watch as his eyes close as if in relief.

"Con," I whisper.

He opens his eyes, and I gasp as he grabs me close in the tightest hug.

"Can't breathe," I gasp. He lets up a little and presses a warm kiss to my temple, lingering there and inhaling as if taking in my scent. I feel tears pressing against my eyes. "Con?"

He pulls back. "Frankie," he says softly, his eyes smiling.

“Con, I—” I come to a stop as my phone rings. “What the fuck?” I say instead. I check my watch. “It’s six in the bloody morning.”

He reaches over and grabs my phone, seeming to take every chance at rubbing his body along me. By the time he’s finished, I’m pretty sure my cheeks are cherry red, and it takes two tries before my eyes clear enough to see the name on display.

“George,” I mouth at Con, who frowns.

“Hello,” I say. “Everything okay, George?”

“Not really, Frankie. Joan had a little accident last night.”

“What?” I say shrilly, struggling up and losing the phone. Con retrieves it and puts it on speaker.

“George, you’ve got Con too,” he says. “What’s up?”

There’s a brief startled silence, and I know George is wondering why we’re together this early in the morning. I feel a blush on my cheeks, and Con reaches out and caresses the hot skin with his thumb.

“Joan fell last night. She’s in hospital.”

“Oh my god, is she okay?”

“She’s fine,” he says immediately. “She’s broken her wrist, but they kept her in because she banged her head.”

I slump. “Thank god,” I breathe.

“We’re coming back today anyway,” Con says.

“Can it be as soon as possible, Con? We’ve got the Palmers coming in to pick up their order, and I’ve got to be at the hospital to pick up Joan.”

“No problem.”

I stand up and slide off the bed. Con gives me an impossibly hot look as I stand naked for a second and then focuses back on the phone.

“What time are they coming in?” he asks.

“Nine.”

He checks his watch. “We should be able to make it.”

I throw my clothes on. “I’ll go and pay the bill,” I whisper and leave him talking to George about the last-minute arrangements for the order.

When I get back to the room, he’s in the shower.

“I’ll pack for you,” I say into the bathroom, trying to ignore the way the water flows in rivulets down that marvellous body.

He removes his toothbrush from his mouth, where he’s currently multitasking. “We need to talk,” he says through a mouthful of foam.

I pause, feeling my stomach dip. “Yes?” I say nervously.

He puts up a hand and rests it on the glass enclosure. “Yes, but nothing bad. Promise, Frankie.”

“Okay then.” I nod nervously. “I’ll pack your stuff.”

However, we’re obviously doomed not to talk because my phone rings just as we get into his truck. I look down and groan. “It’s Mr Simpson.”

“No,” he says crossly. “We need to talk.”

“Will we be paying several thousand pounds for the privilege?”

He slumps. “No.”

“I’m sure he won’t be long. He’s a windbag, but even he can’t talk for the entire journey.”

A couple of hours later, we pull up outside work. I finally say goodbye and massage my ear.

“Okay,” I say, seeing Con’s wry look. “I was wrong. He can talk for the entire journey. If I’m honest, I think he could go all day.” I smile nervously at him. “Sorry,” I say.

He reaches over and kisses me, and my predominant emotion is surprise because it’s as easy and natural as if he’s been doing it for years.

“It’ll keep,” he says. A car pulls into the car park, and he looks at his watch and curses. “They’re here early. I’ve got to go.”

I give him a push. “Go. I’m off to see Joan and check how she is. George can come and help you then.”

He nods and opens the door and then reaches back and grabs my wrist. “It’s the

summer hop today,” he says. “I’m playing, and I can’t get out of it.”

“It’s fine,” I say, and he smiles almost nervously.

“Will you come?”

“Where? To the dance?”

He nods. “Please. I’m playing, but you know everyone.” He pauses. “I’d like to see you there,” he says in an almost formal fashion that shouldn’t make my fingers tremble as much as they do.

“Okay,” I say breathlessly, and he smiles, dropping a kiss on my fingers.

“Con,” a voice says from behind him, and he salutes me with two fingers and a whimsical expression before turning to face the customer as his genial self.

I watch them walk into the building, laughing together, and then stir myself. I grab my bag from the back of the truck, and fumbling for my keys, I chuck it into my car. I lock Con’s truck and head into the building. Mandy is on the phone, probably doing her first gossip update of the day, so avoiding her curious look, I leave the keys with her with a note to give them to Con. Then I flee the building.

Joan’s cottage is a few minutes’ walk away, but I take in the air and the peace gratefully. I can’t quite work out what is happening with Con and me. I know we came on each other in the most erotic encounter I’ve ever had, and I know he’s looking at me with a new look in his eyes today, but what does it mean? Are we together? Would he even like that? And what about Tim?

My heart sinks. I’m ashamed to admit I forgot all about him last night. I’ve never been a cheater because it’s been done to me, and I’m horrified that I’ve now done it

to someone else. I wouldn't have put it at Con's door either. At first, I'd believed David when he told me what a player Con was, but instead, it was my husband who turned out to be the player. Con is very different. He's steadfast and loyal, and it's somewhat ironic that it was my husband who introduced me to someone who has become my whole world since I met him.

I shake my head of my thoughts when I come to Joan's home. It's a small cottage with casement windows that gleam in the sunlight. I put my hand up to knock on the door, but George opens it before I can complete the gesture.

"How is she?" I ask immediately.

He smiles, and I relax. "She's fine, Frankie. A bit sore, but you know how hard-headed she is."

"I heard that," comes Joan's irate voice from the lounge, and I grin.

I look at him, carrying his jacket. "You going straight into work?"

He nods. "Con will need me there, so I'll go in if you're here to watch her."

"I don't need watching," she calls, and I shake my head.

"I see it's my misfortune to have drawn the short straw of watching her while she's conscious."

George breaks into loud laughter that nearly but not entirely covers up Joan's indignant squark.

He claps me gently on the back and sets off down the street. I watch him go for a second before closing the door and heading into the lounge.

I find Joan lying on her sofa, a blanket over her feet. She's pale with a bandage over her forehead and a cast on her wrist, but her eyes are as sharp as ever, and I smile at her in relief.

I throw my pinstripe jacket on the chair. "Can I sign your plaster?"

"Only if you write down the full story of what happened with you and Con."

I inhale and choke on my spit. "What?" I croak.

She leans back against her pillows. "Get talking," she commands me. "We've just got time before David Dickinson's Real Deal starts."

"It's nice to know I come before him. Is that because if he visited you, his spray tan might camouflage him against the mahogany furniture?"

"Such a handsome man," she says dreamily. "That mane of hair."

I shudder. "And those teeth."

I settle down in the chair and take a look at her. She has a small table drawn next to the sofa that has a carafe of iced water on it along with some chocolates and a packet of expensive biscuits, both from the deli down the road.

"Someone's looking after you," I observe and stare at her as she blushes. "Joan?" I say questioningly.

She waves a hand at me. "Oh hush," she says. "It was just George looking after me."

Hank Marvin flutters into the room and greets me with a chirp. "Oh, George," he intones in a falsetto voice. "You're so handsome."

“Hank Marvin,” Joan gasps, going bright red.

I look between her and the bird and then start to laugh. “Oh my god,” I snort. “Busted by a parrot.” I straighten up and fold my arms. “And how long has this been going on between you two, young lady?” I say in a stern voice. “I think it’s time I had a little chat with young George about his intentions.”

She gives me a distinctly unimpressed look, and I start laughing again.

When I’ve sobered, I look up at her. “When did that start?” I hold up a hand. “And don’t even try to deny it.”

“This weekend,” she finally says. “He took me for a walk and kissed me behind the church.”

“Is that a euphemism?” I dodge the pillow she chucks at me and smile at her. “I’m really pleased. I’ve been saying for ages that he’s sweet on you, and now look at me. I hope you listen a lot more to me, Joan. I am obviously a dating sage.”

“You’re about as much of a dating sage as Peter Stringfellow.”

“Ouch.”

“How can you be?” she continues. “When you’ve been in love with your best friend for years and never realised it.”

That stops me dead. “That’s so silly,” I say heartily. I look around for a diversion. “Oh, look,” I cry. “David Dickinson is on. Wait. Joan, what are you doing?” I stare at her as she clicks the TV off.

“Desperate times call for no David Dickinson,” she says solemnly. “Now, tell me

what's going on because I know something's happened. George says he was with you this morning."

"You're a couple of gossips." She raises one eyebrow, and I bite my lip. "Okay, something did happen." I pause. "And I have no idea why I'm whispering."

"Because it's important." I look at her, and she shrugs. "Of course it's important. It's Con. He's the most important person in your life."

I sigh and run my fingers through my hair. "He is. Why didn't I see it?"

"Because you weren't ready," she says steadily.

"Do you think it's wrong?" I whisper.

Her look of incredulity reassures me immediately. "No. What a silly thing to say. Why would it be wrong?"

"Because he's with Tim."

She snorts. "He's as much with Tim as I am with Robert Redford."

I jerk. "What?"

"I admit it's not for want of Tim trying, but Con has his sights fully set on someone else." She shakes her head. "Frankie, I sometimes wonder if you have eyes in your head."

"I have," I say huffily. "All the better to see Lucy Scrimshaw coming."

"What's really bothering you?"

“He’s my dead husband’s best friend. It’s not loyal.”

She smiles sadly at me. “Frankie, the only person who wasn’t loyal was David.” She leans forward. “I loved him. We all did. We always will. But I believe in being honest, and David wasn’t built for long-lasting relationships. He was wild and the best fun you could ask for.”

“He certainly was that,” I say, and she shakes her head.

“But he wasn’t a loyal man or someone you could rely on. Having fun was everything to him, and he’d do anything to get it. So, people fell by the wayside because there was always someone else around the corner who’d be more fun.” She looks softly at me. “I’ll never know what possessed him that month he met and married you, but I would kiss him every day for it if I could, Frankie, because he brought us you, and you’re absolutely wonderful.”

I blink my hot eyes, and she smiles. “But you need to listen to me now, darling. Some people pass through our lives and make an impact, but the best type of people are the ones who stick, and Con is that for you. David was a stop along the way, and the best thing he ever did in his life was to give you to Con. He had a wonderful wild impact on your life like a comet falling, but Con will be the one to share that life. He’s the one for you, and everyone can see it except you.” She smiles. “Well, up until now anyway. Better late than never.”

“What about Con? Does he know it?”

She reaches over and pats my hand. “That’s a lover’s secret and not for me to tell. Con’s got a voice, and it’s his place to tell you those things.”

“He wants me to go to the summer hop.”

She sits back. “Well then, you need to make a move, young man. It’s your time to do that. Con’s been dancing around you for far too long. Now it’s time for you to take some of the steps yourself.”

I stare at her, biting my lip. “What if we’re wrong?”

She smiles. “But what if we’re right ? What happens then?”

I stare at her for a second and then nod, feeling surety running through me like a visible pulse for the first time since I met a wild man at a concert and embarked on an adventure that brought me to the shores of the one man who’s meant for me.

“You’re right,” I say.

She nods serenely, and Hank Marvin sidles along the back of the sofa. “Garrotted with a clothes line,” he says sadly.

“Shut up, Hank Marvin,” we say in unison.

Later that afternoon, I step outside my cottage and reach back to lock the door. I gaze up at the sky. The bright cornflower blue from the last few months has gone, and it’s full of yellowish clouds. It looks like the promised storm is arriving sooner than expected. I hope it keeps off for the party.

The party is being held in a field on the outskirts of the village, and I wander down the narrow lane towards it. Trees hang over my head, making a green canopy over me, and the high hedgerows are full of hawthorn that wafts its sweet scent to me. It’s the scent of summer and new adventures, and my heart skips and flutters.

I can hear the music before I see the marquee. It’s a wild beat that makes your pulse skip and your feet tap. It’s the recognisable sound of Con’s old band. I only got to see

them a handful of times when I was first with David. After the band finished, they concentrated on the business. They were amazing together. David was a charismatic frontman, but Con, who was the still centre on the stage, had always held my attention. Wrapped in music and oblivious to the audience, he was nevertheless a compelling figure. I shake my head and laugh. How the hell did I miss my feelings for him all these years?

I pick up speed, feeling excitement running under my skin like I've caught hold of a downed power cable. I haven't felt this way in a long time—this combination of excitement and nerves makes me feel alive.

I step into the field and immediately see Mandy. She's standing outside the marquee, talking to a thin young man.

"Frankie," she calls. She looks me up and down. "Ooh, you look terrific," she says, not quite managing to hide her astonishment. I look down at my outfit. She didn't know me before David died, so she's never seen my old clothes. I suppose she's so used to seeing me in dull outfits that this must still come as a surprise. I'm wearing a sky-blue shirt, skinny black-and-blue checked ankle-length trousers with red braces, and my patent black leather brogues. My hair is down and wavy, and I'm about as good as I get.

"You too," I say. I gesture to the tent. "I'm just going to get a drink and see the band."

"They're amazing," she says excitedly. "Con's so good. I always forget what a brilliant musician he is."

I smile and make my way into the tent, pausing as I'm hit with a wave of noise and heat. Everyone from the village appears to be here, and over half of them seem to be three sheets to the wind. I look over at Lucy Scrimshaw. Wearing a red dress, she's

bright-eyed with excitement. This event usually provides her with enough fodder for six months of gossip. It's free booze and food and goes on until the early hours, so someone's marriage will invariably break up, affairs will be started, and there's usually a punch-up at some point.

She looks up, and I hastily duck behind a local farmer. Then I edge along to the bar and grab a cider from the counter. Taking a sip, I look over at the stage at the end of the room. It's set next to a large wooden dance floor that's packed with people whirling and laughing, but Con immediately draws my attention.

He's sitting on the right of the singer, beating a bodhran, the beat mesmerising. Wearing jeans and one of his band's old concert T-shirts, his booted feet are tapping out the beat, and he looks bloody fantastic. I watch him, enjoying the freedom to observe him without any of the worries of the last few months. I've come to a realisation between leaving Joan and coming here that whatever happens between us, we will always be in each other's life. We're too important to each other. So, to me, it's worth stepping out on the ledge and taking that final step. I watch his blond-brown hair falling over his forehead and his dreamy eyes.

As if sensing my regard, he looks up, and his eyes find me immediately. They're suddenly fierce with some feeling, and for a long second, we stare at each other as his fingers move on the drum. Then he smiles. It's wide and warm and intimate, and there's so much joy in that brown gaze at seeing me that it makes a lump appear in my throat. I smile back at him, and he nods as if saluting me before going back to his playing.

I see a few people look over at me and offer them a genial smile and a wave before edging to the side where I can watch. It's rare to see Con on a stage anymore, so I want to savour it. It's doubly hot now I know what he looks like when he comes and how his naked skin feels against my own.

My pleasant thoughts are interrupted when someone moves to stand next to me. I look up with a smile that dies as soon as I see Tim watching me.

“Enjoying yourself?” he says in a snide voice.

I gape at him and then recover. “I am, thank you.”

My pulse is thrumming. He’s here watching Con. For some reason, I thought he’d have gone. To see him here is a huge shock.

He looks up at Con and smiles fondly. “He’s good, isn’t he?” he says in a much friendlier voice than he’s used towards me so far.

I open my mouth but can’t think of a single thing to say apart from an insane desire to shout, “I had this man’s boyfriend’s penis in my hand last night. I’m a homewrecker .”

He looks sideways at me. “I know about you two,” he says, and I jerk.

“What ?”

He leans closer, talking into my ear because it’s so loud. “I know you got off with each other.” He shrugs. “And that you’re in love with him.” I swallow hard, and he gives me a coaxing smile. “It doesn’t matter to me. You can shag each other as much as you like. Con and I are open. But a word of warning. We will still be together at the end, so you might want to get rid of your feelings as they won’t do you any good.” He gives me a sympathetic look that doesn’t quite manage to conceal his glee.

I stare at him. The thing is, I’m pretty sure he’s lying or embellishing, but I’m blindsided because this whole conversation has an awful echo of the one I’d had at another concert. It was how I found out about David being unfaithful when the bloke

appeared and told me all about them.

And for a second, I waver. After all, David warned me about Con. He said he was a huge player. I remember him laughing about it. “Don’t fall for that good old village boy act,” he’d said one night in the pub when Con and I had sat talking all evening. “He’s a player through and through. You wouldn’t believe how much arse he gets. The boys love a brown-eyed charmer, but that’s all they’ll ever get.”

I look up, and the crowd clears, and Con looks straight over at us. There’s a frozen pause as he sees Tim standing close to me, and then he stands up, putting the bodhran down with a thud. There’s a brief startled pause before the singer laughs. “I think Con’s ready for a break, folks,” he says. “We’ll take five.”

But Con isn’t listening to him. He comes to the edge of the stage and vaults down. He strides towards us, but he’s held back by the crowd patting him on the back. I look around to find a couple of people’s eyes on me and flush. When I look back, Con is closer now with a worried look on his face. One of the village lads grabs his arm to tell him something, and I seize the opportunity and slip out of the marquee.

I don’t get three steps before I hear Con say, “Frankie,” and his hand grabs me and pulls me into the shadows to the side of the entrance. The folds of the tent conceal us but provide enough light for me to see his face. He looks frantic.

“You left,” he says breathlessly.

“Yes.” I falter. “I wanted to get out of there,” I finally say, wanting to explain how much I hate having people stare at me with such avaricious eyes as they store up gossip. I had enough of that with David.

“What did he say to you?” he says fiercely. “I saw your face.”

“It was nothing,” I say, staring at the strong muscles of his throat. “Just shit about how he didn’t mind if we shagged, but he’s got a relationship with you, and I need to be aware of it.”

I look up, startled as Con groans. “He’s lying. He means nothing to me.” He shakes my arm. “Fucking nothing .”

“Why is he here?” I say, staring up at his impassioned face.

“I got home and told him it was time he left.”

“Oh shit,” I whisper. “I’ve become David.”

“Don’t be stupid,” he says sharply. “Tim and I weren’t ever together. We flirted with each other on tour, and when I said I was coming home, he asked to come too. He said he wanted to see the Cotswolds and could he stay for a few days. We’d kissed a few times on tour because I thought at the time that I needed to move on. I couldn’t see a reason to say no when he asked to stay, but he’s never been my boyfriend, and he never will be.”

“Move on from what?” I ask, but he’s still talking.

“I realised I couldn’t move on as soon as I saw you again. There was nothing for you to break up. Nothing . We never slept together. I slept on the airbed in the lounge while he had my bed.” He looks at me. “Tell me you believe me,” he says in a low voice. “I can’t bear it if I’ve stuffed this up just when I’ve finally got you.”

“Why did he say all that stuff to me tonight, then?”

“God knows. Although Gene warned me that he was a bitch and causes trouble wherever he goes. Tim wasn’t happy that I wouldn’t fuck him, and he could see the

way I am with you. Maybe he just wanted to stir the shit.” He sighs. “I know you think I’m a player. David said it often enough. He thought it was funny.”

“I don’t think that,” I say, and my voice is clear and firm. “I don’t,” I say again as he looks dubious. “Yes, David said that, and I sort of believed it at the time, but I know you now, Con.”

“You believed Tim tonight.”

“Only for a second. It just sent me reeling being accosted at a concert again.”

He groans and hangs his head. “Shit, I never thought of that. I thought we’d parted on good terms in the end. He packed his bags and was all smiles. He said he thought he’d meander along to see the party, and I didn’t see any harm in it.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I say, grabbing his hands. “Con, I?—”

“Con, we’re going back on.” Bill, the lead singer’s voice, breaks into our conversation. Con spins around, and Bill smiles when he sees me. “Hey, Frankie. I haven’t seen you in ages.”

Con shakes his head. “I’m not going back on.”

“Don’t be silly,” I say over Bill’s incredulous “What?”

Con turns to me. “I need to speak to you.”

“And you can,” I say. “Afterwards. I think I’m going to head home. I don’t feel like becoming the lead item on the village gossip sheet. I felt like Carrie at her prom, but luckily for them, I’m not on my period.”

He stares at me as Bill wanders back into the tent. “Okay, go home,” he says. “I’ll finish up as quick as I can. But wait for me. Don’t go anywhere.”

“Where would I go?”

He shrugs. “Who knows, and I’m not taking any chances. Go home and wait for me.”

He grabs me and gives me a hard kiss, and then he’s gone.

I stay still for a second, gaping after him. Then, above me, thunder rumbles and a breeze picks up from nowhere, bringing with it the first scattering of raindrops.

I take the cue and walk quickly back down the lane. The sky has that peculiar yellow light that it gets before a storm where everything seems cast into monochrome. More raindrops come down, bringing with it the sweet scent of petrichor from rain on dry earth, and the trees move and rustle in the increasing wind.

Two couples dart past me, the women’s laughter shrill on the air as they hold their jackets over their heads.

I pick up speed and make my way home to wait for Con.

chapter

nine

The bang comes on my front door sooner than I anticipated. I jerk and stand up, wiping my damp palms on my jeans. I showered and got changed into jeans and an old shirt when I got home as a way of filling up the time so I didn't go mad while waiting.

The knocking comes again, accompanied by a deafening call of "Frankie" by Con.

I race to the door and throw it open and gasp as the rain-filled wind gusts around me, the spray cool on my skin. Con is standing there, his fist raised to knock again. "You're soaking," I exclaim. His clothes are clinging to him, and rivulets of water drip over his face from his hair. Even as I speak, the thunder booms overhead and the rain increases.

"I couldn't wait," he says huskily.

"Come in, and we can—" I start to say, but before I can finish my sentence, he steps forward, his big hands seizing my shoulders to keep me still, and then he kisses me. It's a deep kiss, his tongue twining with mine, and he pushes me back against the door. I grunt as his cold, wet clothes press against me, but rather than shoving him away, I find my hands coming up to clutch at his broad shoulders and pull him into me.

All sense leaves me as well as the warning signs that say if there's anyone on the

street watching, we're going to be a gossip item for far longer than David's naked apology. Luckily, Con still has a smidgeon of sense because he pulls back, ignoring my plaintive whine, and pushes me into the house, following me in and slamming the door behind us.

For a few seconds, we stare at each other, the only sounds that of our fast breathing and the boom of the thunder, and then we fly at each other. I pull his head down to me, kissing him furiously as he cups my arse and lifts me. I twine my legs around him, rubbing my cock against the hard length I can feel in his wet jeans, still kissing him frantically.

He moves towards the stairs with me wrapped around him like the ivy that grows up his house, but I pull back and grab his T-shirt.

"Take this off," I say hoarsely and pull. He releases his hold on my arse one hand at a time to help me get it off, and I sigh in happiness when it's gone. I throw it somewhere over my shoulder and dimly register a crash behind me, but I dismiss it as I run my hands over his broad chest, rubbing my fingers into the sparse hair that grows there. And all the time we kiss.

When he pulls his face away, I chase it and then blink as he lowers me to the floor. Before I can say anything, he spins me around and leans me over the back of the sofa. I utter a hum of approval that turns into a groan as he kisses the back of my neck. His lips are warm and soft, and his breath makes me shiver.

"You like that?" he says in a calm voice.

I nod and arch into him as he sucks and licks on the back of my neck, sending shudders rippling through my body. One big hand spreads across my chest, thumbing at my nipple beneath the shirt.

“Take it off,” I say throatily, and within seconds, it’s gone and his hand is back rubbing my nipple and scratching it with his fingernail. The pleasure lights me up inside, and I fit my arse against the length in his jeans and rub.

He pulls away from my neck and groans, pushing himself against me. He feels hard and big, and my arse clenches in emptiness. His hand comes up and grabs my chin, twisting me gently so he can kiss me. Sliding his tongue in, he tangles it with mine before pulling back and suckling gently on it.

I grab his other hand and pull it towards my cock, and he gives an approving grunt before kissing me again. His hand works dexterously at the buttons on my jeans, and within a second, they gape open, and he reaches in and cups my balls. I cry out, the sound thin and tortured in the silent room, and he ruts against my arse, forcing me further into his hand.

“Please,” I say. “ Please , Con.”

Obeying my incoherent urging, he gives my balls one last caress and then lowers my briefs and slides his hand down the stiff length of my cock. His grip is perfectly firm, and his sliding movement makes stars burst behind my tightly closed eyelids.

One of my hands clutches the sofa, digging in my nails as the other grips the hand holding my dick. I break away from his mouth to lean forwards, panting and giving the occasional moan.

He scatters kisses down my spine, licking and sucking at the skin until it feels as if all my nerves have risen to the surface. Then he rises, letting go of my dick.

“I want to fuck you,” he whispers. “Is that something you’d do?”

“Oh god, yes ,” I say far too fervently, and his mouth twitches. Then he frowns.

“Do you have any lube or condoms?” he whispers. “I didn’t bring any.”

I lean against the sofa, panting and trying to get my brain in gear. “Upstairs in the bedside table,” I finally say. He pulls back, and I half turn, keeping one hand on the sofa for balance as my head is spinning. “Check the expiration date on the condoms. It’s been that long since I had sex. I think George the Sixth was on the throne.”

He shakes his head, his eyes shining. “Get naked,” he instructs and dashes up the stairs.

I wait, mentally counting down until I hear what I expected. “Ouch! Motherfucker.”

“I don’t know how many times you’ve done that,” I call. “When is it going to sink in that the ceiling is low there?”

“Tell me again after I’ve fucked you,” he shouts back. “I might pay attention then.”

I shake my head and take a deep breath. Are we doing this? Am I going to fuck my best friend, the man I’ve realised I’m in love with? I grin and tear my clothes off. You bet I fucking am.

Footsteps sound, and I turn to face him, leaning back against the sofa. He’s taken the time to take off his own clothes, and I watch him come towards me, feeling my breath coming short as my eyes eat him up. Con is a devastating sight naked. His shoulders and chest are a wide stretch leading down to narrow hips and long legs, all of it covered in olive skin. The tattoos on his arms and hands gleam in the light as he stands, watching me as he rolls the condom down his cock. I swallow hard. It’s huge. Easily the biggest I’ve ever had.

“Come here,” he says hoarsely, and I look up to find him smiling at me. He holds out his arms, and it’s as natural as breathing to walk into them. He bends and kisses me,

and my thoughts spin away, all my senses taken up with the feel of him naked against me, the sleekness of his skin, the calloused fingertips running over my body, and the scent of him around me. I feel safe and warm. And free. Completely free.

He walks me back, still kissing me, and his hands lower to my arse. He cups it, bringing me against him, and then spins me. “Bend over,” he growls, and I shudder and hasten to obey. Leaning over the sofa, I wait.

“Show me,” he says gutturally, and I grab my arse cheeks and pull them apart until he can see my hole. “So pretty,” he says, and I moan as he pets it. There’s a click of a cap, and then I feel his slippery finger run down my crevice. I sway, panting with my head lowered and staring blindly at the sofa, and then squeeze my eyes shut as he rubs my hole, sparking up the nerves before sliding the tip in.

“Oh god,” I whisper. “Go deep.”

“Not yet,” he says, his voice hoarse. “You’re really tight, Frankie.”

“I should imagine it’s sealed up tighter than a cave entrance after a rockfall,” I observe, and he chuckles, resting his face against my back for a second and kissing it.

“Have some patience,” he advises me. “I’m not hurting you.”

I crane my face around, wanting to see him suddenly. His face is flushed, his lips full, and his hair is sticking up everywhere from where my fingers have been in it. “Really?” I say, and he knows instantly that I’m not talking about sex.

“Never,” he says firmly. “Not ever, Frankie.”

I purse my lips, and he leans in, giving me the softest, sweetest kiss. It’s not anything I’ve had during sex before. In the past, sex has been fast and furious and all about

getting off, but this sweet kiss makes my breath catch and my emotions twist and rise to the surface. Then I pull away and groan as he slides his finger into me.

“Oh god,” I say, white-knuckling the sofa.

“Alright?” he whispers.

“So good,” I moan. “Keep going.” The latter refers to the fact that he’s sliding the pad of his finger over my prostate, making sparks dance behind my eyes and my body stiffen. “Oh god,” I gasp again.

It’s pretty much all I say for the next few minutes as he stretches me open. He’s slow and methodical, and it’s so good I’m pretty sure I’ll be drooling if he keeps it up.

I feel a tingle in my balls and look back at him. “Please,” I gasp. His eyes are blind, and there’s a sheen of sweat over his face and body.

He nods, and I gasp as he spins me around to face him. He cups my bum and lifts me up. Obeying his urging, I lean back against the sofa, spreading my arms over the back, letting it take my weight as he raises my arse and I open my legs wide. I rest my feet on the sharp bones of his hips and watch avidly as he fists his cock with one hand.

The condom is slippery with the extra lube application, and I try to keep my eyes open as he positions it against me and pushes inside, but the pressure is so much that my eyes slam shut. He’s huge, and I feel every inch as he fills me.

At one point, it feels like I can’t take any more of him. I shout out and hit his arm with my fist, but I don’t mean for him to stop. It’s just so much. He seems to sense that and just grits his teeth, holding my gaze as he carries on gently and inexorably filling me.

I cry out, and he groans loud and long as he bottoms out, and I wind my legs around him, making him my prisoner. Then we rest there for a second as he gives me a chance to get used to him.

“Shit,” I finally mutter. “Con, you’re so big.”

“Okay?” he asks through gritted teeth.

I nod furiously.

“I’ll go easy,” he promises and then cries out as I clench my arse around the length of his dick. He lowers his head and licks and sucks at my neck.

The whole room restricts to just him and me. Outside, the world goes on, but in here, our world is the sound of groans and grunts and flesh slapping. He pulls back, fumbling one-handed for the lube and drizzling more onto his cock before shoving back into me.

“Oh shit,” I groan. “Con.”

“Hold on,” he says, and then he really starts to fuck me, slamming into me, his big hands clenched so tight on my buttocks that I know he’ll leave marks. The feel of him is sublime, and I screw my eyes shut. “Mmm,” I gasp. “Oh god , keep doing that.” He’s hit my prostate, and I curl my fingers so tight into the sofa that they hurt. My cock bounces on my belly, and I screw myself down on him. “Don’t stop. Don’t stop,” I gasp. “I’m nearly there.”

“You’re going to come like this?” he whispers, and I nod.

“Don’t stop. Don’t stop,” I chant again, feeling my balls tighten and screwing myself on his cock harder. Then I clench my buttocks and shout as my cock pulses into the

air, shooting spunk in thick pulses over me.

“Frankie,” he shouts, and then I feel the sting of his fingernails as he holds me close and bucks into me. Then he slumps over me, panting, and I wrap my arms and legs around him, clutching him tight and kissing his shoulders.

We stay like that for a few minutes before his cock slips from my arse, and after he’s dealt with the condom, we stumble to the rug and collapse onto it together with chuckles and sighs. We end up lying with him on his back and me draped over him, my leg over his hairy calf.

There’s blissful silence for a while as his hand strokes my hair back, and he presses kisses into my hair. A breeze blows through the kitchen window, bringing with it the scent of earth and flowers. The rain has stopped, and the storm moved on. Finally, he stirs. “Frankie,” he says.

I raise my head from his chest and look up at him, almost afraid to see his face. But, unfortunately, at that point, a shadow crosses the window, and I hear a half-stifled shriek of outrage and the sound of hurried footsteps.

There’s a startled silence. “Oh my god,” he sighs. “Tell me a tourist didn’t just see my cock?”

I bite my lip. “If we’d stayed on the back of the sofa, they wouldn’t have, but you insisted on spreading out on the rug like a particularly sexy exhibitionist.”

“Shit,” he says morosely.

“Anyway, while I’d like to tell you it was just a complete stranger, I think it actually might have been Lucy Scrimshaw.”

He swallows hard. “Oh my god,” he says again faintly.

I lay my head back down on his chest. “Serves her right,” I say callously. “And really, we’ve done her a favour.”

“How do you work that out?”

“Well, you’re a lot prettier than my garden.”

“Which would be a compliment if I didn’t know the state of your garden.”

“Look on the bright side. We’re probably going to be the only topic of gossip for either the next week or the next millennium. It depends if Molly Saunders is having any more cosmetic work done.”

“And how is that the bright side?”

“I have a sneaking suspicion that Lucy won’t be paying me any more unscheduled inspection visits.”

“Well, aren’t you Mr Blue Sky today.”

I chuckle and look up at him. His face is soft, his eyes dark brown in the half-light. His big hand pushes my tumble of hair back. I feel curiously shy, but I plough on. “How could I be anything but cheerful when I’m here with you like this?” I say softly.

His hand jerks, a finger catching a strand of hair, and I wince as his movement pulls at it.

“Do you mean that?” he says harshly.

I nod. "Of course I do," I say and gasp as he grabs me close, burying his face in my neck. "Con?" I say.

"I love you," he says fiercely. "And I'm so tired of holding it in. I've loved you since the first moment David brought you home."

I gasp. "What?"

He nods. "That very first minute you looked at me and smiled and said something that I forget now but was probably sharp. And boom! I fell, and I've never managed to stop. All the other men I tried, but they just weren't you."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"How could I?" he says, and there's a simple dignity touched with pain in his voice. "You were David's, and I loved him like a brother, and then later, when you weren't his, you still couldn't be mine. I thought about telling you when you threw him out but?—"

"But then he died." He shrugs, and I touch his face. "Even if he hadn't died, it would never have lasted, Con. After that, I couldn't trust him anymore. I don't really think there was a point when I ever fully trusted him."

"I know. But he did die, and I couldn't ever tell you about my feelings then. You were grieving and needed me to be your friend."

"You've always been that. You've always been everything to me."

"I thought I could be happy with you just as my friend, but it got harder and harder as we got closer. I tried to be with other men, but it was a waste of time because I usually picked them because they reminded me in some way of you."

“I’m not sure that’s entirely a compliment considering Tim.”

He chuckles and strokes my hair back. “I’d see you next to them, and I’d realise that it was useless. Tim was the result of me thinking I didn’t stand a chance with you. I was getting cross and heartsore because I realised you would never reciprocate my feelings, and then I went on tour, and he was flirting with me, and I thought, ‘Why not?’ I couldn’t have you, but maybe I could be happy. And the longer I stayed away, the more I thought I could do it. I could see you again and just think of you as my friend, but it was useless because as soon as we got back, you walked into the reception, and I knew all my feelings were still there and getting stronger. Not weaker. And I was so angry with myself because you’d never feel the same way, and I was a fool.”

“You have never been a fool in your bloody life, Con,” I say. I shake my head. “You were so wrong,” I burst out.

“What?”

I pause, and my next words tumble out in my haste to make him understand. “Because I love you too.”

He jerks. “What?”

“I love you,” I say steadily, my heart twisting at the look of hope in his eyes. “I think I always have in some form or another. I’ve been thinking a lot about it lately, and I think that I was always meant for you. All along, you’ve been the perfect person for me. You were always there right under my nose.”

“But what about David?”

“I loved him,” I say, looking at him to check this is okay. He nods, his eyes warm and

bright and glowing with so much love that it warms me through and through. “But it was a young man’s love, and the clock was ticking down on our relationship from the moment we met. It was always counting towards the end. If he hadn’t died, we’d have ended, I think we’d have stayed friends, but I never really knew him, and he didn’t know me. But you— you’re different. I know you inside out. I know that you hate chewing gum and people who litter, and prefer autumn to summer. I know that your favourite holiday is Christmas and that Christmas films make you cry, and I love you as a man with everything in me. I’ll love you until the day I die, Con.”

His eyes gleam wetly, and he clutches me tight and buries his head in my neck for a second. I kiss his hair, inhaling the scent of his shampoo and feeling the cool, sweet-smelling breeze drifting over us. When he looks up again, he’s smiling, but it’s unlike any other smile I’ve seen from him. It’s big and impossibly wide, and I feel a wave of dizziness that I made this happen.

“Forever, then?” he says.

I nod solemnly. “I wouldn’t have it any other way, Connie.”

epilogue

Two Years LATER

I wake up to an empty bed. The sunshine is warm on my face, the birds are singing through the open window, and the sweet scent of the wildflowers Con picked for me on the way home from the pub last night drifts from the bedside table. I'd popped them in a jar before shagging him to say thank you.

I smile at the flowers tenderly. He's so romantic. Then I look a little closer. And then closer still. They don't look like wildflowers now I'm not under the influence of a bottle of red wine. They actually look like?—

“Oh my god, Con,” I shout.

“What?” comes the shout from downstairs. I can hear the radio playing faintly and pots banging in the kitchen. I hope he's making breakfast. The condemned man should always have a last meal.

“Can you come up here, please?”

There's a silence and then the sound of his footsteps coming up the stairs. They echo because we still don't have a carpet. But looking on the bright side, we do have a new staircase now that doesn't threaten to send you plummeting down through the hole in the treads to the cellar below.

The door swings open, and Con pokes his head round it. I smile at him. I can't help it.

Just the sight of his lovely, handsome face has me grinning.

“Good morning,” he says, coming over. He sits on the bed and leans in to kiss me. It’s soft at first, his full lips just resting on mine. I put up my hand to curve around his cheek, feeling the sharp bones under the skin. It makes me feel tender and warm, and I pull him closer, murmuring silly words of love. Within seconds, he has me flat on my back, his tongue tangling with mine as he works to get me out from under the rumpled sheets.

I open my legs, feeling the rough denim of his jeans on the soft skin of my inner thighs and my cock. His hands push under me, cupping my arse and squeezing the cheeks while we kiss languidly.

I grumble when he pulls away, and he grins at me. The smile is big and wide, and his eyes are as soft and warm as a cup of hot chocolate. “We’re getting married today,” he whispers.

I smile helplessly. “I know.”

He leans down and rubs his nose against mine. “I can’t wait to make you mine.”

I cup his face in my palms. “Con, I have always been yours, and I always will be.” His eyes flare, and I raise my eyebrows. “Do you think there’s time for a shag before?”

“There is always time for a shag,” he says fervently and reaches towards the bedside table, fumbling in the drawer for the lube.

However, unfortunately for my cock, it’s going to have to wait as Con’s abrupt movement makes the jar of flowers shake, and my mind comes back online.

“Where did you get those flowers from?”

“Hmm?” He stares at me as he lubes his big cock, and I almost forget what we’re supposed to be talking about. “What flowers?” he asks.

“The flowers you picked for me last night.”

He pauses in his lube application. “Why are you whispering?”

“In case Lucy hears us.”

He blinks. “Lucy Scrimshaw? Why are you bothered about her?” I slowly raise my eyebrow. “Okay, why are you worried other than the main reason of her personality? Surely she hasn’t taken to hiding in villagers’ bedrooms?”

“I would put nothing past that woman.”

His cock is now wilting slightly as he casts an anxious look at the blooms. “I think they were growing wild.”

“Think again, Fagin.” I shake my head, wanting to laugh. “You half inched a bouquet for me. That’s so romantic.”

“I did what?” He looks at the flowers. “Oh my god,” he whispers. “Are those Lucy’s dahlias?” I bite my lip. “The rare-colour dahlias that Lucy Scrimshaw has been cultivating and growing in her greenhouse? The flowers that she’s hoping to win first prize for at the garden show next week?” I nod, and he falls back onto the mattress. “Oh my god, I’m a dead man,” he says faintly.

His cock has now deflated completely, and I snuggle up next to him. His arm automatically comes up, drawing me closer while he stares at the ceiling, probably contemplating his demise. I snuggle in resting my head on his shoulder and inhaling the warm scent of his skin.

“Maybe we could stick them back in the tub?” I offer.

He turns his head slowly to look at me. “What?”

I shrug. “She’s got loads of them, so she might not even notice some are missing. We can glue them back in, and then Bob’s your uncle?”

“Where did that expression actually come from?”

I smirk. “Are you interested in the answer to that, or should we pay attention to your last wishes before Lucy Scrimshaw murders you?”

He closes his eyes and groans. “Don’t say her full name again. It’ll be three times, then, and she’ll pop up, running her fingers along the cupboards and telling me she knows the name of a good cleaner.”

I start to laugh. “I still can’t believe she did that at the housewarming.”

We’d thrown a party when I’d moved in with him, figuring that we might as well celebrate while the house was still a shell. Most of the village had attended, as well as sundry musicians that Con knows. It had been a fantastic night full of music and laughter, which is appropriate because that’s the way our life is together.

“I’ll find the superglue,” he says, and I start to laugh and then put out a hand to stop him as he rolls out of bed. “Whoa, there. Don’t be hasty. Didn’t you have something to do first?”

He arches an eyebrow. “Well, I do have a long list of tasks this morning. It turns out that getting married creates a lot of additional jobs.”

“Is shagging me on that list?”

His smile is slow and very sexy. “You’re at the top of the list, babe.”

I snort with laughter as he pounces on me. “That’s not as complimentary as it sounds. You’ve probably got grouting and sandpapering the fence on there too.”

He rolls his eyes. “Perhaps you should stop talking.”

“Your suggestion is my command.”

I draw him down to me amongst the sheets that smell of us, and the only sounds for the next half an hour are moans and heated whispers.

Later, I smile as we lie back, panting. “That is the way to start married life.”

“Hot and sweaty?” I raise my fist, and he bumps it with his own. “Boom.”

I hover at the kitchen window, looking out on the garden where the marquee is being erected. It’s a hive of activity out there, with banging, hammering, and occasional laughter drifting in through the window.

After the wedding, we’re having a party. Con’s old band is playing, and our favourite restaurant in the village is catering for more than a hundred guests. It’s still a marvel to me that we have a garden capable of housing all that. Two years ago, it was a wilderness, but once Con had proposed to me and we decided to hold the party here, he’d swung into action, hiring a company to come in and bring it into order. They’ve done a wonderful job and the lawn is now a stretch of lush green, with beds full of plants and shrubs that smell wonderful because Con knows my love of scent.

A familiar laugh draws my attention. Con is outside with the men because he’s incapable of not joining in with anything physical. He’s currently holding a flapping end of the canvas while laughing with the owner of the marquee company. I smile at him affectionally and feel warm all over. He’s going to be my husband. It’s hard to

believe.

I turn my back to the window and look around our kitchen. I always knew this would be a lovely room, even when it was empty of everything other than a camping stove and a packing case and with holes in the walls. It was actually the first room that Con tackled when I said I'd move in with him because he knew how much I liked the kitchen in my old cottage. Now, it's an airy room with stripped beams, a central island, and a huge oven.

The cupboards are a light oak that Con and George had built in his workshop. I step closer to the end cupboard and run my finger over the beautiful vine carved along the edge. Hidden amongst the leaves are our names encircling a heart. No one else notices it, and I love that it's our little secret. It's the first place my eye travels to whenever I come into the room.

The rest of the house is slowly coming together, but we're taking our time and enjoying making it into a home for both of us. Con had delayed so long in finishing the house that I'd been amazed at how quickly he jumped into it with me. His reply had been that he felt ready now I was with him. I can't say I've been of much practical use, but I've cheered him on so much I should have had my own pom-poms. I'd also offered lots of advice, which turned out to be wildly impractical, according to Con, but he'd still listened patiently.

I look at the photo of David that Con had set on the windowsill. He smiles serenely, his eyes twinkling with naughtiness, and I reach out and tap his face.

"Morning," I say softly. "I'm getting married to Con today." I shake my head. "I know wherever you are, you're laughing your arse off, babe, but I like to think you'd be pleased too. You always did say that Con and I were like two peas in a pod. I love him so much," I confide. "I promise you that I'll make him happy, and you know he'll do the same for me."

I stare at him, forever young and handsome. “Wish you were here,” I add. “I know that eventually, we’d have been friends again, and the spot at Con’s side as best man would have been taken by you.” I smirk. “My two husbands. You’d have loved cementing our slightly scandalous reputation in the village. That would definitely have made you fucking smile.”

A breeze picks up, and for a wild second, I think I smell his cologne. I blink. Maybe it’s the lavender pots growing by the back door. I look at his photo. Or maybe it’s him. It’s a nice thought.

“I’ll raise a glass to you, babe,” I finish softly.

The doorbell rings, making me jump, and I head into the hall to answer it. When I swing the door open, Joan is there. She’s wearing a yellow dress with a hat perched jauntily on her head.

“You look lovely.” I look around warily. “Where’s that parrot?”

She rolls her eyes. “And a big hello to you too. George has got him. He’s bringing him to the service with him.”

“And is there a reason why Hank Marvin has got to attend my wedding?”

She gapes at me. “Frankie, he’s part of the family.”

“I have made some very odd choices in my life, but that’s got to be number one.”

She steps past me and heads towards the kitchen. “No, I think that was when you decided to sunbathe in the nude while the open gardens event was on.”

“Oh god, please don’t remind me. I do pay better attention to the entries in my diary now, but that doesn’t help the old couple who got a bit of an eyeful. I never knew the

human voice could go that high until she screamed.”

She wanders into the kitchen. “I’ve called in at the hotel, and everything is ready.”

We’re having a civil ceremony at the hotel in the village. I swallow hard, feeling nerves suddenly flutter in my stomach like baby birds. “Oh shit. I’m getting married,” I whisper.

A smile tugs at her mouth. “Not the most romantic tone I’ve ever heard to go with those words.” She flicks the kettle on. “I’ll make some tea, and you can drown your anxiety in that.”

I collapse into a chair at the long oak table. It seats ten people, and we’d found it at a reclamation yard near Stow-on-the-Wold. Con had lovingly restored it, and now it gleams with a soft shine, and I catch the faint scent of the lavender beeswax he polishes the wood with. “Joan, what if I don’t make him happy? This is such a big deal. I need Con to never regret doing this.”

She turns to me, and her face is warm. “Frankie, you’ve been making that man happy since the day you met him.”

“Really?”

She nods, her face earnest. “I can’t think of a single soul who could make him happier. These last two years, he’s blossomed now he has you. His smiles are bigger, and his laughs are louder. It’s a joy to watch him. And he’s done the same for you. You’re finally easy in yourself because you’ve found the slot where you fit.” I raise my eyebrow, and she snorts. “Try not to be rude. It is your wedding day.”

“Shouldn’t that be the day when I’m completely myself?”

“The world isn’t ready for that yet.” She smiles. “Your marriage is going to be long

and happy. You've both found the person who completely fits who you really are. It's a blessing, sweetheart. Otherwise, you could end up like George Joseph Smith, who killed several of his wives to get hold of their money. There was a man who didn't embrace the concept of conjugal harmony."

I roll my eyes. "There's got to be something between marital happiness and large-scale uxoricide, Joan."

She eyes me as I let out a long breath. "Okay now?"

I nod. "Thank you for putting it all into perspective. Con is thankfully not a Victorian serial killer. It's not setting the marital bar particularly high, but it has calmed my nerves."

She pats my hand. "You're welcome."

Footsteps sound, and Con walks in. There's a streak of dirt across one cheekbone, and his nose is red from the sun. "Joan," he says in delight, coming over to give her a hug.

She pats his cheek, her face full of affection. "I do hope you're washing your face before you get married."

He grins. "Have you said that to Frankie too?"

She sniffs. "It's not his face he needs to wash. It's his soul."

Con bursts into laughter and leans down to hug me. He presses a kiss to my forehead. "You look amazing, babe."

I look down at my grey suit. "Is it okay?"

He leans in and whispers in my ear, “You’re perfect.”

“Isn’t it bad luck to see the groom?” Joan asks, getting up to make tea.

“I went enough years without seeing his face when I woke up. I’m not starting my married life doing the same,” Con says steadily, and her eyes are soft when she smiles at him.

“I like the way we’re doing it,” I add. “We didn’t want lots of fuss, so just walking to the hotel together and getting married sounds perfect to me. Our marriage is just him and me, so it seems right to start that way.”

Con pets my hair and walks out of the kitchen, calling back that he’s going to jump in the shower.

My nerves have settled now, so I grin at Joan as she sets my tea in front of me and then opens the box she was carrying. Inside are our two corsages, each containing a white rose, a purple rosebud, and a sprig of lavender. Their scent is gentle, and water still clings to the delicate petals.

“Con loved that you’d represented his parents with the white rose.”

“His mum’s rose bushes are blooming beautifully this year in the garden.” I offer her a smile. “Almost like they know what’s happening.”

“They’d have loved you.”

“Con said that.”

“What’s the lavender for?”

“The lavender farm. It’s where we went just before we got together. I’ll never forget

that day.” I touch the purple rosebud. “This is for David. It was his favourite scent.”

She pats my shoulder, her face kind. “Con said you both wanted him represented.”

“We wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for him. Our marriage might not have lasted, but our friendship would have.”

“He’d have thoroughly approved of this marriage.”

“I think so too.”

“He’d have been so happy. He told me once that he thought you and Con would end up together.”

“He said what?”

She shrugs. “He was joking after you’d both hauled him over the coals over that hotel bill, but there was a truth behind his words I didn’t understand at the time. I think he knew what would happen.”

I feel suddenly emotional, so I change the subject. “Oh my god, I remember that bill. The head of a small country would have spent less. I thought he’d bought the bloody building, not spent the night.”

She chuckles. “I do miss his accounting. He was so creative.”

“Like the time he claimed that an evening in a sex club could be classed as hospitality.”

We both laugh, and she kisses her fingers and places them over David’s picture for a second. “I’ll raise a glass knowing he’d be sitting there laughing and loving you both.”

“Me too.”

She hugs me, then walks away. “I’ll see you at the wedding,” she calls.

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I’m standing at the french doors in the lounge when Con finds me half an hour later.

“The marquee is done. The lads said everything is ready, and the caterers have just arrived,” I say, hearing his footsteps and reaching out to lock the doors.

“So, it’s just you and me, then?”

I turn around, and my breath catches. “Oh, you do look lovely.”

He’s wearing a grey three-piece suit that clings to his wide shoulders and long legs. His tie is the same colour as the lavender in his corsage, and his hair is pushed back from his tanned forehead. His eyes are brown and very clear as he looks at me.

I cross over to him. “This is wonky,” I say, adjusting his corsage.

He hums, sending his finger over my hand. “Still nervous?”

I look up at him and grin. “Not anymore. Steady as a rock.” He raises an eyebrow, and I snort. “Maybe a bit, but never about marrying you. I can’t wait to be your husband. I’m just scared of doing something wrong during the ceremony.”

He shrugs, playing with the ends of my hair, which is hanging loose at his request. “You can’t do anything wrong.” He pauses. “Apart from running off and leaving me at the altar.”

“Have you seen my running? I wouldn’t get far.”

He snorts. “Forrest Gump was more graceful.” He strokes over my eyebrow, his fingers gentle. “And if you do anything silly, it’ll just be another funny story we’ll tell.” He kisses me, and his lips are soft and warm, and his scent fills me, calming me. “I love you, Frankie. It’s always been you. It always will be you.”

I pull back. “I love you too. You don’t know how much,” I whisper and kiss him again. “Ready to get married?” I say against his lips. He nods, and I hand him my tie.

“You do it. Otherwise, I’ll end up looking like Matty Healy.”

“Is that what normally happens with your ties? I thought you were deliberately aiming for the look of a rumpled undertaker.”

I laugh and watch his face avidly as he ties my tie. When he looks up, I wink at him. “Got your plant superglue, Monty Don?”

“You are not funny,” he warns me as we leave the house, and he pauses to lock the front door.

“You know very well I am. Stop trying to deny it.”

The village street looks beautiful, with cottage windows twinkling, and the mellow golden stone of the buildings glowing in the afternoon sunshine. The street is already busy with tourists.

Signs are everywhere for the garden show, and we pause by a beautiful display of purple flowers. They look rather straggly at the front, and I’m sure I can see the gaps in the arrangement.

“Oh god,” Con whispers.

I snort. “Do you want to smoke a last cigarette?”

He groans. “Stop laughing. What am I going to do?”

“Relax, the show’s not until next week. The other flowers will have bushed out by then.”

“And your knowledge of gardening has come from where, Frankie?”

I nudge him. “Mr Samuels from next door. I always make him a cup of tea. His persistence in thinking that I could even raise a cactus is quite heart-warming.”

“It wouldn’t be quite as heart-warming if he knew you were the antichrist of the garden world.”

“Good morning.”

The bright voice behind us makes me jump, and Con instantly spreads out his arms, hoping to hide the crime scene behind him.

“L-Lucy,” he stutters, and I bite my lip hard to conceal a laugh.

“Con and Frankie. I’m looking forward to the wedding celebration very much. I thought I’d check on my flowers before I get changed for the party.”

Con gives a groan as if he’s tired and stretches his arms out even more to shield the damage. “I do like a good stretch, don’t you, Lucy?” She stares at him, and he carries on quickly, “You know, I’m sure I heard that Don wants to talk to you about the appropriate paint for the doors and windows on his shop.”

“Does he?” She gazes down the high street towards the innocent shop owner, who’s currently arranging a tray of strawberries, unaware of the carnage that Con has just brought down on him. He glances up, and Lucy waves. A look of terror crosses his face, and he offers something that looks like a wave but is more akin to raising a

white flag and scurries back into his shop.

I shake my head at Con in disapproval, and he shrugs. “What?” he whispers. “It’s my wedding day. Someone else can take the pain today.”

Lucy turns back to us. “I’ll go and see him now. I’m sure I have a paint chart in my bag.” She looks us up and down. “You look very nice.” She tuts. “Your suit is a little creased though, Frankie, and Con, your corsage is looking rather thirsty.”

“Like its owner,” I offer helpfully. “I think Con might be laying off the booze though, Lucy. It makes him do foolish things.”

Con makes a hissing noise that makes me want to laugh, and I offer her a very wide smile instead. She stares at us suspiciously for a few seconds and then obviously dismisses our strange behaviour. “Well, that is good to hear, Con. No one likes silly behaviour, after all.”

“No,” I say in an angelic tone of voice. “I’m training him. We’ll get there eventually.”

She nods approvingly, and with a final dubious look at us, she moves away down the high street. I hear her say, “Dorothy, may I have a word about the state of your shop window, please?” and I lose the battle against laughter.

Con shoves me, making me laugh harder, and then sniffs. “Twat,” he says, and taking my hand, he steers me down the street.

When we get to the stone steps leading to the hotel’s front door, we pause to talk to the crowd of close friends who are attending the wedding. They’re wearing bright clothes, the dresses and hats fluttering in the summer breeze.

I look up at the hotel. It’s a huge old coaching inn from the seventeenth century and

immaculately kept. We've spent a lot of happy evenings eating and drinking here, so it felt like the perfect place to get married. I love that whenever I walk past it I'll be able to remember our wedding.

I open my mouth to greet George, who's waiting for us at the door, but then I'm blinded by a haze of pink and yellow confetti. "Fucking hell," I mutter as I pick the tiny bits of paper out of my mouth. "Warn a bloke, George."

He chuckles. "I'm starting as I mean to go on. I love weddings. Congratulations, boys."

I grin. "Looking spiffy." He's wearing a navy blue suit with a bright pink tie. I eye the parrot on his shoulder warily. "I'm not sure about your accessorising though. You look like a rather smart pirate."

"Pirate," Hank Marvin croaks, lifting his head up as though scenting blood—my blood, probably. "Pieces of eight. Ahoy ahoy, you fucking pirate."

"Oh my god, George," I groan. "Is Joan really insistent on that bird being at our wedding ceremony?"

He nods. "She says he'd be sad if we left him out."

"I'm sure he'd get on with his life eventually." Con and George stare at me, and I sigh. "What a wonderful thought, George."

He grins and grabs Con in a hug. Hank Marvin instantly slides along his shoulder, cooing and rubbing his head against Con. The bird starts to hum "The Lightning Tree," and I give up.

Spying Max and Felix, I edge through the crowd, stopping every few seconds to accept hugs. Our group's voices are loud on the air.

I finally come up next to them. They're leaning against the old brick wall of the hotel, both dressed in navy suits. Max's arm is slung over Felix's shoulder, and he's saying something that is making the younger man laugh.

They look up at me. "Congratulations, babe," Felix says.

"Thank you."

I accept a hug from him and then his boyfriend. I pat Max's cheek affectionately. I love my old neighbour, and I miss him now he lives in London, but we see them regularly, and a night on their boat is always interesting. Last time we stopped over, Con turned left rather than right and ended up going for an unscheduled swim.

"Where's my present, Max?" I ask, and he snorts with laughter, his high-boned face wearing its usual naughty grin.

"It's nice to meet a couple who know that the marital bond is the important part of the day."

"Tell it to the next couple." I click my fingers. "Where's my present?"

Felix winks at me. "Max wanted to give you a poem that he wrote."

I gape at him. "What? You were making my present?"

Max huffs. "I am a very famous author, you know. It might have been worth something in years to come."

"I'd rather have something that's worth a lot now."

Felix bursts into laughter. "We settled for a toaster because the poem became very rude, and Max couldn't think of anything to rhyme with testicle. He gave up in the

end.”

Con comes up next to us, hugging the two men, his face full of affection. He turns to me. “We’re going in now. Ready?”

I stare at him. The sunshine is playing over his handsome face, and the wind ruffles his thick hair. “I’ve never been more ready for anything,” I say, and he grins.

“How about the Harvey Nicks sale when you made me buy a tent to sleep in the line so you wouldn’t miss out on getting that suitcase?”

I roll my eyes. “Why are you so cynical?”

The wedding is held in a room at the back of the hotel. The walls are painted green, and it has bifolding doors that let in lots of light. They open onto a flagged patio, where we’ll take the photos afterwards.

The service itself seems to pass in a dream. The only things I can focus on are Con’s warm eyes and the strength of his grasp on my hand.

“Are there any objections to this wedding?” the registrar finally says, offering us a wink. “I always like this part,” she whispers. “Sends a frisson of danger through me.”

The grin drops off her face as a gloomy voice intones, “He drowned her in the bathtub.”

There’s a stunned silence in the room. “I beg your pardon?” the registrar exclaims.

I look around wildly, finding the culprit sitting on Joan’s shoulder, preening. “Oh, it’s the bird. The parrot,” I say urgently. “There he is. He’s obsessed with true crime programmes.”

The registrar blinks and says weakly, “Silly me. I thought it was someone informing me that one of the grooms is a murderer.”

“What? No.” I give a little laugh. “Of course not. Do we look like murderers?” She gives me a wary look. “Well, maybe I do, but you have no idea the stress of planning a wedding. Okay, you do, but I’m very stressed, and I just want to be married to Con and?—”

“For the love of god, stop talking ,” Con breathes, a strange expression on his face. Is he going to faint?

I look at him closer. He’s trying not to laugh. “Idiot,” I breathe.

Unfortunately, it’s too loud.

“I beg your pardon?” the registrar exclaims again.

“Oh, not you,” I say quickly. “No, no, no. Of course not you. You are not an idiot.” I jerk my thumb at Con. “He is.”

“Would you like to object?” she asks Con hopefully, but he just grins.

“Not on your life.”

“Anyway, it was Hank Marvin who said those very silly words,” I say. “Come on, Hank Marvin. Give us another of your cute little facts.”

Everyone stares at him, and the bird gives a soft squark and buries his head under his wing as if suddenly shy.

“No, come on. Let’s hear it,” I urge. “What about Haigh and his victims. That sounds like suitable wedding conversation.” I catch a look at the registrar’s horrified face.

“Or maybe not. Come on, Hank Marvin. Anything.”

Silence.

“Look at the little sweetie,” I say through gritted teeth. “He doesn’t want to speak because he doesn’t want to upset Uncle Frankie’s wedding.” I turn back to the registrar. “Anyway, let’s get on with it,” I say briskly.

Con goggles at me, and I hear my own words. “I mean, let’s get us married. Because that’s what I want more than anything. Marriage.”

“I’m writing this down,” I hear Max say in a low voice that somehow carries. “I think I can put it in a book, but I’m almost sure my editor will dismiss it as being too unrealistic.”

Felix shushes him, and I grab Con’s hand. “Well?” I prompt the registrar.

She jerks. “If you’re sure it was the parrot?”

“Oh, it was. Most definitely. And surely birds don’t count legally in wedding objections? I mean, how could they? Most of them can’t talk.” I shoot a glare at Hank Marvin. “The nice ones, anyway.”

“He shot her with a cannon,” he intones, and an intake of relieved air goes around the room like a breathy Mexican wave.

“Oh, how charming,” the registrar breathes.

“Yes. Let’s get on.”

The rest of the wedding ceremony is conducted with me holding tightly to Con’s hands. I’m not sure whether I’m letting him prop me up or attempting to thwart any

escape plans he might be hatching. But he stays there, his gaze soft and warm on my face and his hands gentle as he slides on the ring.

His fingers shake a little, and so much love wells up inside me for this wonderful man who I've been lucky enough to find.

I clutch his fingers when he's finished, and when he looks up, I reach to kiss him.

The registrar chuckles. "Not quite yet, young man."

People catcall, and Con chuckles, but the laughter stays inside me as I say the words I never thought I'd say with such conviction and belief. It bubbles along my veins like champagne or sunbeams until the registrar pronounces us husband and husband, and then it comes out as Con reaches to kiss me.

He cocks his head. "And you're laughing now?" he says with great affection.

I shake my head and kiss him as confetti explodes over us, raining silver and gold paper down. When I pull away, I smile at him, and I know it's as big and beaming as the smile on his own face. It echoes the boldness in my heart when I look at him. "I'm smiling because you make me happier than anyone ever has, and I know you always will do, and I'm laughing because our friendship group is completely barmy, and I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Well, when you put it like that," he says and draws me close, dipping me and kissing me to the sound of cheers. I wrap my hands around his neck and cling on to the man who's the love of my life.